

SHULAN CLINIC – ACUPUNCTURE • CHINESE HERBAL MEDICINE

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Post Natal Care in China & the West

– by Prof. Shulan Tang

I had my son in China in 1989. This year I had twin girls in Manchester. It has been interesting to experience first hand the differences in the way the east and west look after the mother following labour.

Traditionally, women in China have to stay in bed for a whole month after delivering a child. This is called 'Zuo Yue Zi' literally meaning 'sit month'. She is not allowed to have a shower or bath, or to wash her hair, nor is she allowed to brush her teeth.

Her head and feet are wrapped to keep her warm and windows and doors are kept closed. She is expected to sit cosy in bed. The fear is that wind may attack the body. The Chinese believe that blood vessels are empty after labour, making a woman vulnerable to illness such as arthritis, backache and migraines, for example.

Chinese tradition dictates that during the postnatal month, the mother must eat very rich food to tonify the body. She will try to eat fish, soup, eggs and chicken soup everyday. When relatives and friends visit her they often bring gifts of these foods and ginseng. The new mother must never eat cold food.

The final part of this ritual is an event to publicly celebrate the child's arrival. It is called the full moon party. In China this is a very important social tradition for mother and baby.

When you have a baby in the West, the care you receive is quite different.

Firstly the nurse or midwife will insist you have a shower the next day and you are encouraged to walk as soon as possible. No particular attention is paid to keeping warm beyond what is normal. Women can walk around the hospital barefoot. They can even drink cold water. There are no gifts of fish soup. Instead, traditional gifts for new mothers in the UK are flowers, cards, celebration balloons, baby clothes and teddybears.

Overall, the Chinese way looks at the postpartum mother as a seriously weak person, and the western way views her more normally, and treats her more naturally. I felt even weaker from being bedridden.

It can also make you prone to retaining weight gained during pregnancy. The western way enables you to gain energy back relatively quickly because you get up and move around, which also encourages your weight to return to normal.

When I had my son in China twelve years ago, after four weeks I still felt weak when I climbed stairs. I even felt weak when I tried to write.

However, this time after having my girls, even though I had a caesarean for the second twin, I managed to write a long article in the hospital for a book in China which I didn't find time to do before the birth. If you have a caesarean in China you must lie still in bed.

A full week later you will feel a lot of pain when you move or turn over.

In a western hospital you are encouraged to walk within a couple of days. There is a tendency to walk bent for fear of stretching the wound, but you are told to walk straight and the pain eases very soon. By the end of the week walking feels quite normal.

Perhaps the Chinese could review their methods of postnatal care for the mother. I think the tradition is better suited to a thousand years ago when people more frequently suffered from hunger and cold and lack of nutrients generally. No wonder that after labour they would need a lot of rest and warmth, with tonic food for a change! Nowadays lifestyles have changed and generally body constitutions are stronger, so I think the western way may be a better way in this case.

Anyway, whether you receive western or eastern care Chinese herbal medicine is needed after labour to tonify the Qi and Blood in order to strengthen the body and promote blood circulation. Also, it will remove Blood stasis and stop the bleeding quickly as well as brightening the complexion.

Effective formulas are *Nu Bao* for a cold body constitution and *Tai Tai Kou Fu Ye* for a hot body constitution. Many of my patients take these after labour. These nurturing herbs mean sleepless nights with baby won't affect their health as much as it might. In fact these mothers return to my practice looking younger and happier.

