

A Personal Account

**China Diary April 2011:
Visiting Mayway in Anguo**
by Rebecca Clarke, MBAC, MRCHM

The following is an excerpt from a travel diary written by Rebecca Clarke, published in the magazine of the Register of Chinese Herbal



Medicine (RCHM) the governing organization for Chinese herbal medicine in the UK. Rebecca sent the following report and photos by iPhone, following her visit, as part of a group, to the Mayway Hebei herb processing facility in Anguo. The visit was in response to an invitation by

Mayay UK to the RCHM. It was part-funded by the company.

Day 1: My first week in China, before our visit to Anguo, I stayed in a Hutong, an alley or backstreet in a traditional guesthouse and hired a proper Beijing bike. The day of the tour to Anguo I checked out, dropped off my bike and headed from the hot, dusty, chaotic yang of Beijing to the cool, calm, clean yin of the Sheraton.

We all reported dressed in our finest for the welcome dinner. A fine occasion with an amazing traditional performer whose changing mask face we could not fathom. Yvonne Lau, the president of Mayway, introduced the key players: the Mayway Hebei and Lanzhou Foci staff, as well as Ken Lloyd for Mayway UK. Many key USA employees were also introduced. Yvonne raved about each one as they were



Mayway staff at the arch over the entrance to Anguo

introduced, rightly so as I learned, because they were a fabulously friendly, smart and conscientious crew.

Day 2: Great day to be on a bus, it is overcast and there has even been a little rain. The first day since I have been in China where blue skies have not presided. We were honking our way along the highways to Anguo, the Medicine Capitol of China since the Song dynasty 1,000 years ago.



Hua Yuan hotel: Skye Sturgeon demonstrates stuffing a sesame bun with pickled vegetables.

A well-received rest was taken at the Hua Yuan Hotel restaurant whose inauspicious looking exterior was belied by the wonderful lunch we received inside. Here we were treated to

the first of our Chinese Herbal Dietary Therapy meals. Oh such delights....Hong Zao and deer tendon; Mai Men Dong and shrimp; Tian Ma and fish; Shan Yao and black wood ear fungus to name just a few. Delicious and informative, each dish came with a description of its therapeutic uses.

We arrived at the Mayway Hebei factory in Anguo and had an informative talk by Yvonne Lau, President of Mayway USA, and the General Manager of the facility, Mr. Wang Yang Jun. We went through a little of Mayway's history; how Yvonne's father had set up the plant in 1995 as a joint venture with Mr. Wang. They talked about the aims of that enterprise and some strategies for achieving them. They wanted to provide safe, authentic, scientifically sound and environmentally friendly Chinese herbs.

The first big challenge they faced was the common practice of sulfuring herbs--not one they wished to follow. It is unsafe for a small proportion of herbal recipients, but unsafe for all those involved in the processing of the herbs and for the environment.



Yvonne Lau and Wang Yang Jun

They systematically addressed problems of preserving different herbs without sulfur through the formation of a research committee. This year they received an innovation award for their work with un sulphured Shan Yao.

They address the use of pesticide residues and heavy metals by training growers in Good Agricultural Practices. This was explained in much greater detail on the last day a translation of a report by a consultant to Mayway who is government trained. More on that later.

Their herbs are chosen from the most clean and pollution free areas. There is also attention to the sustainability of gathering these herbs. Only the right herbs based on the Chinese pharmacopoeia are sourced, without substitution. Di Dao Cao, that are herbs grown in the area best suited to them and empirically considered the best for medicinal value are used.

Looking to the future the next goal is organic herbs but this is very difficult at present. A wonderful example given by Yvonne was that of ginseng. She talked to a ginseng farmer and asked if he would grow organically to which he replied if you pay for the crop yield I would get with conventional means I will grow it for you organically. Asked how much the yield might be he replied he did not know but maybe 10%. Yield drops of that scale with increasing demand for a very valuable crop is not a desirable outcome. In truth the benefits/downfalls of the use of the different pesticides are as yet not wholly resolved. Some are BAD. Some are not. Most lie on the continuum. That is a whole big subject!

Following the theory we got to the exciting bit, the factory, the production of herbs. Very surprisingly manual. Machine assisted enormous human effort; never will a bag of herbs look the same again. Willy Wonka style, it was a chocolate factory delight, seeing, smelling and smiling. But people were manually moving boxes, shoveling herbs, washing, slicing... Ze Xie, Yu Jin, Sang Bai Pi were all being processed. Some were being chopped by machine, fed in by hand. Jie Geng was being hand sliced, two people sitting together grating much like shaving parmesan on a large and rootish scale.

It is mind boggling to think of processing herbs this way, to think of working this way. Human rights is ever an issue with China and surely these are repetitious tasks but it seems Mayway is a good employer. They pay good wages, the working conditions are excellent, and they have regular breaks, lunch provided and an 8 hour working day.



One of the clean areas of herb production

On from washing, cleaning and slicing was frying and dry frying which allows the herbs to be processed as is appropriate. From receiving the herb to vacuum sealing and nitrogen bagging an herb should be 3-4 days. The drying process depends on the herb, it can be dried on a conveyor from 20-90 minutes. Herbs can be dried in a heat cabinet or if the microbial testing suggests a high load they will be "super dried" at a high heat to reduce the microbes. There is further processing and sorting. It may be fan sorting or machine sorting or, as we saw, individual workers hand sorting Bai Zi Ren, for example rejecting individual grains based on colour and shape.

Next for raw herbs is packaging. People with machines work to weigh each bag, seal it, then remove the air, double seal in nitrogen and box up for transportation to the UK. Another stream of herbs is for domestic distribution and another for internal processing into raw herbs, raw powders, concentrated powders and granules. The packaging we saw was into 10g bags of Dang Gui for distribution in domestic hospitals.

After the factory tour we headed out to the fields. Growing in Anguo we saw green, grassy shoots of Fu Xiao Mai, She Gan iris with laterally flattened leaves, Zhi Mu's new flower heads appearing, Chuan Xiong with coriander like leaves and Tian Hua Fen roots being dug from deep in loamy clay one by one.



She Gan

Anguo is famous for eight herbs: Ju Hua, Shan Yao, Sha Shen, Bai Zhi, Mu Xiang, Shan Yao, Zi Hua Di Ding, and Zi Wan.



Digging Tian Hua Fen

Because facilities in Anguo were not up to accommodating a tour of our size, we travelled about an hour back towards Beijing to Baoding for accommodation in the solar capital of China to an entirely solar run, stunning hotel. We ate well, drank a little and rested our weary well-filled minds.

Day 3: A highlight for us all I think, a trauma for the diligent Mayway staff trying to keep us the visitors, or them the locals all safe....whichever! At this herb market over the course of a year they sell 2300 different herbs, perhaps 1000 at any one time. Downstairs were the plant herbs but upstairs was to be the grotto of grotesque. Actually it was fine.



Dong Fang Herb Market

There were ants, worms, scorpions, sea horses and some very very cool 'shrooms. There were some I am not sure what, one amongst those was the penis and testicles of deer. Suffice to say we all had a ball; people appearing at the end of our time in there with cinnabar and pearls... all of us heeding the warning that customs would not look



Herb market stall

Antlers

kindly on any indiscretion of the animal/plant type.

On we went to the museum of TCM which, unsurprisingly, was more informative to the few who read Chinese but of interest to us all. Who can resist the bronze points man?

Next was the Medicine God Temple. A place to pray: to help us heal those we treat; to give thanks for the tools we have; for knowledge; for compassion? And who knows what everyone else asked for. Apparently a military healer healed a princess and so when he died the father of the princess, an Emperor, gave him god status and this is his temple. It was a beautiful and peaceful place, a wonderful contrast to the bustle of the market.

After a medicinally delicious lunch with Gou Qi Zi, Sheng Di Huang, and Bai Guo to name my favorites, we went back to the factory and toured the quality control and extract powder making facilities. Skye Sturgeon the Quality Control manager took us through the labs showing us the various stages of testing for everything from bacteria, pesticides and heavy metals to identification, using a range of tools predominately referring back to the most current Peoples Republic of China Pharmacopoeia. Testing includes on-farm organoleptic testing through HPLC to atomic absorption tests.

Into the clean area... not just super clean booties and masks but whole slippery suits and HEPA filters to visit the powder making. Through double doors and chambers to an inner sanctum where microbial levels are, well, 1,000th of something if the colony is producing units per million. Rare anyway. Few of us were allowed at a time, to ensure the load did not get high enough to necessitate a shutdown of production and delays in getting your herbs out to you. We saw the whole process from adding raw herb to water for decoction through to spray drying and powders being bottled, heat sealed and labeled. It was a fascinating combination of the simple and the technological.

Food and sleep and food again; bus delayed until later in the day for our return to Beijing we continued our education. More formal, lectures, but so inspiring. Our own, and by that I mean UK, Ken Lloyd talked about herbal substitution.

He made the US practitioners feel privileged in their access to the materia medica but demonstrated clearly that this art has been needed from the time of the warring states to any foreseeable future as, from government to supply chain to extinction; we may be required to implement these skills.

Skye talked about powders and the distinction between a powder concentrate and concentrated powders. Would need a whole article in itself to do justice, but he explained misconceptions on labeling and dosage. As with all good lectures determined to pursue knowledge, he ended with the lines expressing how much more we need to know.

Yvonne finished up with taking us through Good Agricultural Practices as it is implemented in China. A government trained inspector who consults for Mayway wrote a report that Yvonne shared. The details transmitted dealt with the minutiae of how an herb is planted, cut, shaded or harvested. What fertilizer should be used and when and how it should be watered. Research is in place to produce evidence based best practice.

Pest management was the most surprising aspect. A committee is formed who evaluate the threat of different species and come up with a national plan and educate the farmers as to what action should be taken at what time to combat the pests. This may be pesticides but it could be encouraging birds, introducing fungus or using light or sound. I must honor Teo Potts from Mayway USA, who at the end of this lecture, in response to a beautifully evocative question about the heart of Chinese medicine had us all near tears. He expressed how much being here with the people who grow and manufacture the herbs had meant to him and how they show the heart of the medicine in how much love they have for what they do.

I suspect I speak for us all when I say how magical an experience this has been for all of us. From the amazing place, to the uniquely privileged experience



Mayway Hebei staff bidding farewell

of being welcomed with open hearts and doors to see the inner workings of the products we place our trust in. It seems they are entitled to that trust. This is a company who does act with heart and is willing to show and share, not afraid to recognize weakness but demonstrates such strength and belief that you are convinced. They do what is within their power to make the product all we could want it to be and about 20 times more than we know it should be. They have earned a lot of respect from me with regard to Mayway USA and China. I bought from them anyway but that wasn't how I got to be a part of this trip. Whether it be as practitioner, dispenser or council member I was impressed. It is a hard business and good intentions do not always lead to positive outcomes; but I do believe that their intentions and efforts deserve our support.

Thanks to all the amazing people who were on the trip as well, I am privileged to have been among such an inspired, educated and passionate group of people.

BIO: Rebecca is a practicing herbalist and acupuncturist working at the London Acupuncture Clinic. She runs an herbal dispensary at the Kailash Centre in St John's Wood and is a council member of the Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine.