

CELEBRITY TONGUES

By Hla Myat Saw

As part of the Chinese New Year celebrations this year LCTA lecturer, tutor and Clinic Supervisor Hla Myat Saw was a guest on Granada Television's 'This Morning' with presenters Phil Schofield and Fern Britten. The theme was tongue diagnosis which Granada first heard about from an article in the 'Daily Mail'.

"My first contact with Granada was when they telephoned me on a Monday. There were several calls before the producer rang and 'interviewed' me. Before I knew it, I had said 'yes' to appearing on TV on the Wednesday! To be safe I made an agreement that there should be nothing contentious about Chinese medicine on the programme. My experience as president of Register for Chinese Herbal Medicine led me to a natural caution in this area.

But I relaxed as soon as I began to see what would be expected of me: in the post I received some pictures of celebrity tongues! Britney Spears, Kate Moss, Caprice, Jude Law and Ozzy Osbourne arrived by email and I was asked to talk about their innermost secrets!

On the day I was whisked into makeup and hair and given endless supply of tea, croissants and attention. Pretty soon I was beginning to think this was a life I could get used to. Then I was introduced to Phil and Fern whose tongues I was going to read live and I was tutored on the ways of the camera. When I was left alone, I was practising what I was going to say like a mantra, but the cameraman spotted this and told me to relax and pretend I was in a sitting room and just talk as I would normally. "OK, free fall" I thought.

Phil and Fern walked towards my sofa when my turn arrived and began to ask "why the tongue?". This was my cue. I had been practising this. I explained that tongue diagnosis is a central part of the Chinese medicine diagnostic system. It enables the skilled practitioner to read the condition of the body like a map, interpreting the tongue's shape, size, geographical landmarks (cracks, teethmarks, etc), colour and moisture to arrive at a detailed diagnosis of the patient. So accurate and revealing is this system that, used alongside pulse diagnosis, a practitioner of Chinese medicine can often create a startlingly precise picture of the patient's state of health before even asking a single question. (Maciocia, 1995)

From the pictures of Ozzy Osbourne, Jude Law, Kate Moss and Britney Spears' tongues, I already knew a lot about them. Ozzy's tongue was red with yellow coating at the back while Jude's was pale and wet. As Phil commented, what Ozzy has too much of, Jude doesn't have enough! Kate Moss' tongue was also red and pointed - a party goer's tongue. But Britney, in the light the photo was taken, has a perfectly normal tongue, a pink rosy tongue with a thin coating. I explained the vagaries of lighting on the tongue colour, and the distortion of colour stemming from the celebrities' tendency to stick their tongues out forcefully.

Phil and Fern have a very positive approach to Chinese Medicine. And although I had feared sensationalising tongue reading by taking it out of context, they gave me time to explain the system and the holistic approach that underpins the whole of Chinese medicine. We joked about whether Phil should give up alcohol judging from his greasy tongue and whether Fern should be putting her feet up more with her swollen tongue! I did my best to put into context a system that to the modern westerner seems highly unusual.

The whole interview flew by in six minutes and there were a few telephone calls after the programme from viewers who rang to say they were looking at their tongues and themselves in a different way. I find interpreting some of the medical knowledge into everyday language particularly satisfying and rewarding. Tongue diagnosis intrigues people and is an interesting way into Chinese medicine for those who are looking at it for the first time. It has been one of my special aspirations that Chinese philosophy and medicine would be more integrated in the everyday culture of the west. It was all worth it just for that!

References:

Maciocia, G, (1995), Tongue Diagnosis in Chinese Medicine, Eastland Press