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CHINESE MEDICINE DOLLS

HOWARD DITTRICK

Most medical dolls are fashioned after a uniform pattern and are usually made of ivory. They represent a reclining Chinese woman whose surface anatomy served a special medical purpose. I have conferred with authorities regarding the relation of these figures to customs in the Far East, and have consulted the literature concerning Chinese sculpture and social conditions among Chinese women. The objective in this study has been to point out the medical significance of these manikins.

Several specimens have been donated or loaned to our Museum in recent years, but my attention was first called to these exotic figures at a meeting of the American Association of the History of Medicine held in Kansas City in 1941. At that time Logan Clendening proudly displayed a nude figure which had been given to him by a colleague after a visit to the Orient. It is now in the Library of the Department of Medical History in Kansas City.

These medicine dolls vary in length from 75 to 155 mm. They portray a nude Chinese woman in recumbent position on either the right or left side, with one hand supporting the head and the other extended over the breast, epigastrium, umbilicus or hip. In some specimens a flat ivory base is incorporated with the figure.

Although these dolls represent the woman resting on one side, an example in the Hough collection (1) shows her in a semiprone posture leaning partly on the right side. The hips are raised on the left knee and are supported by an additional cushion on the couch. A scarf is draped about the waist. The feet are bandaged and sandals are worn.

In executing the carving the sculptor pays minimum attention to the lower extremities. They are disproportionately short and the feet are almost vestigial. In models before 1910, the feet may be deformed and constricting bandages may be represented. The great toe may be overextended or shoes may be worn. Rarely a scarf is draped about the body. Early figures and some that are modern have no added color, but a few show slight polychrome with black lacquer on the hair. Many figures, such as figure 1 loaned by A. H. Robnett of Cleveland, have artistic arrangement of the hair, characteristic of the Orient. In some the hair is held in place by a jewel. In one graceful carving, belonging to E. F. Kiser of Indianapolis, the woman is holding a flower of several colors.

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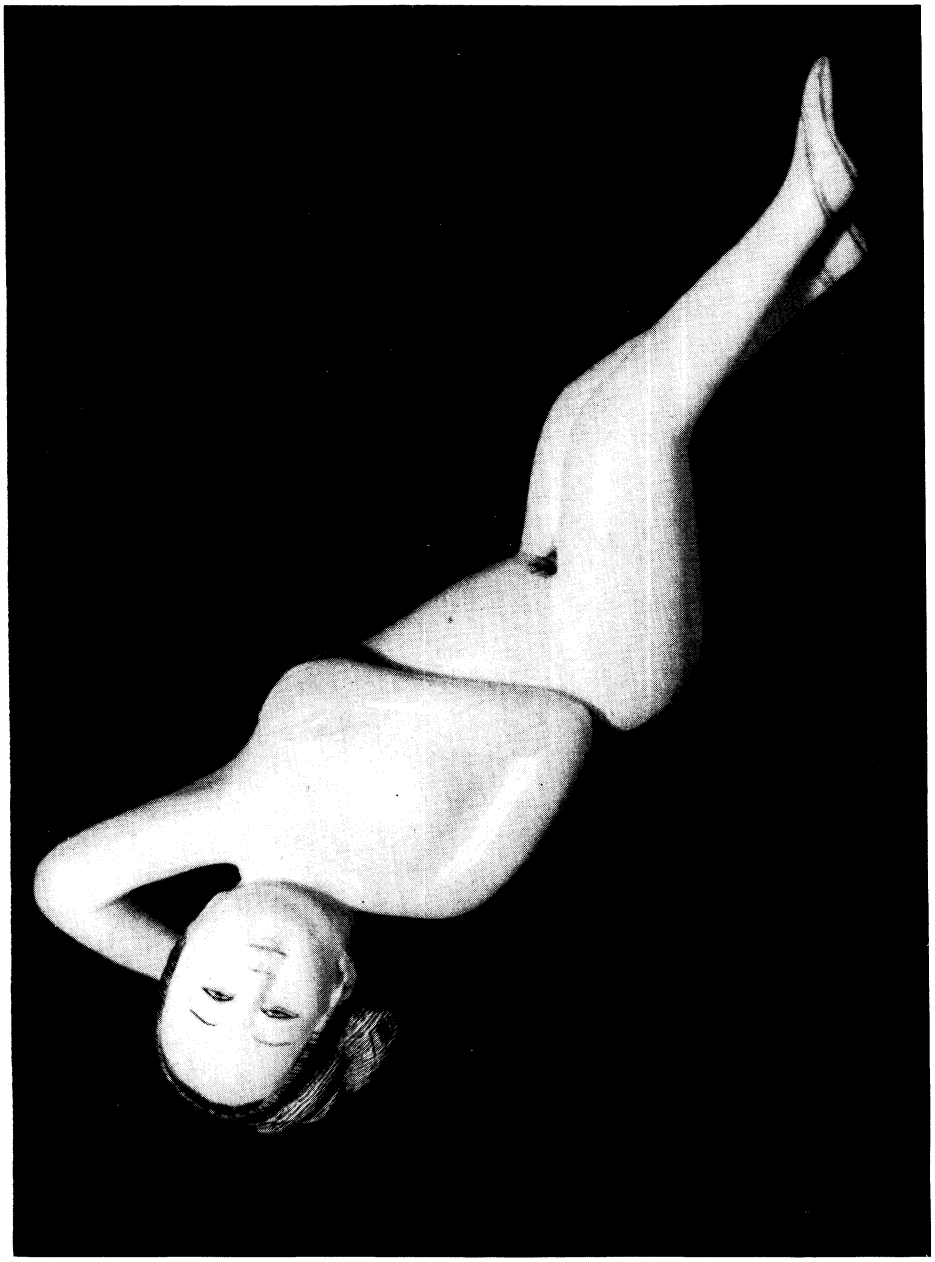

FIG. 1

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Figure 2, also loaned by Dr. Robnett, has obstetric import. The woman is recumbent, but her shoulders are raised on her arms. Drapery about her body and feet is grasped by a trailing baby. A few irregular patches of red are seen on the baby's back.

Materials used for carving the dolls are of passing interest. Figure 3, a rosewood carving, was donated to the Museum by Dr. Kiser. Soapstone has also been used, but this yields a duller appearance than ivory. "Dragon's teeth" (2) were really derived from prehistoric animals entrapped in crevasses. This was another source of dentine available for carvings. This material was supposed to have an effect on the liver and a general sedative influence. The value of these sculptured ivories was enhanced because ivory itself combatted poisons and reduced swellings. Fish tooth, mammoth or walrus ivory was used for amulets to arrest bleeding. Figure 4 from our Museum, a white jade carving on a flat base, 75 mm. long, was donated by O. B. Pomeroy. Jade has been employed in making amulets and objects for burial with the dead, because it was believed to bring immortality and to prevent body decay. These figures may occasionally be obtained in shops where oriental objects are sold.

A figure in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto is marked by simplicity in form, and the ivory shows color changes indicative of age. The posture, with head raised and supported by the arm, corresponds with dolls of the Ming period (1368-1644). The Toronto authorities have classified it as belonging to the eighteenth century.

Lion of Shanghai (3) has described his collection of 33 medical nudes, probably the most noted in existence. One of these is of obstetric significance, similar to the Robnett model. In this report where illustrations are shown, in one figure the left hand is grasping the right breast. It is a graceful portrayal accentuating movement. Traces of polychrome are seen in a second in which the hair is ornamented by a jewel. In a third, with pleasing pose, the figure, 155 mm. long, is extended on the left side, resting on the left arm with the right drawn back over the hip. A fourth figure, 120 mm. long, is extended on the left side, with head supported by the arm and turned slightly backward. A long scarf is held by the right hand and draped over the body. Traces of lacquer are seen in the hair. Lion believes the medical nudes date from the Ming period. "The Ming ivory sculptors are alleged to have certain imagination in the execution of these pieces, destined for the same usage and which differ, never the less, one from the other. Some among them have very agreeable artistry."

The ivories were made for a special purpose. Custom decreed that (4) "a woman who (unless she is a witch) conceals harmful and debilitating

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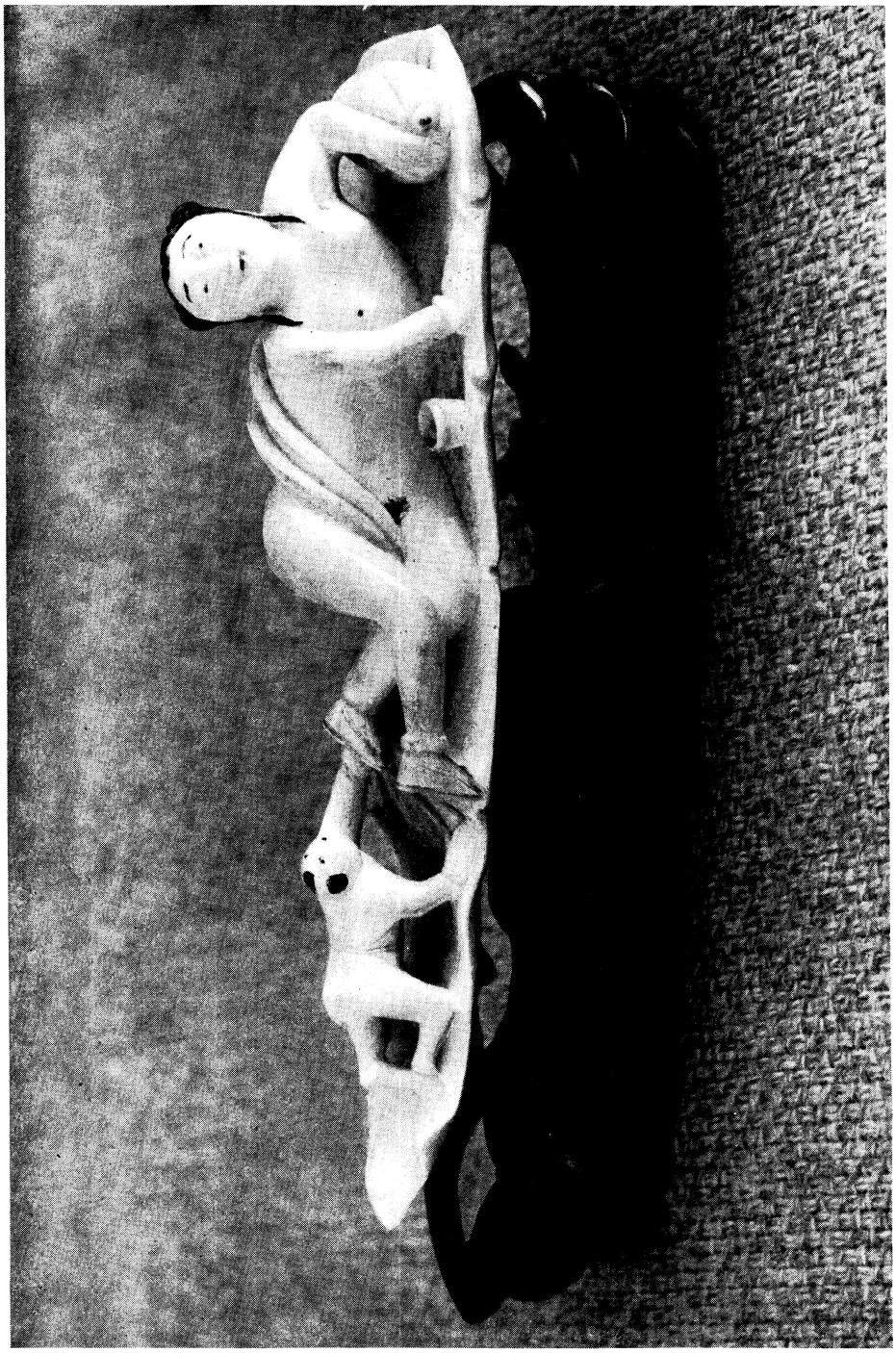

FIG. 2

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charms in her body (*nii*—a feminine virtue) will never show herself naked." The oriental woman would not mention parts of her body to a physician, and for centuries a physical examination was taboo. These little figures were therefore devised to avoid such an investigation, and yet to aid the physician in making a probable diagnosis and in prescribing a suitable remedy.

In the comprehensive work of Lavastine (5), there is an illustration of a figurine used by women to indicate to the doctors the part of the body in which discomfort was present, because tradition forbade women to undress for an examination. R. C. Rudolph (6), of the School of Chinese

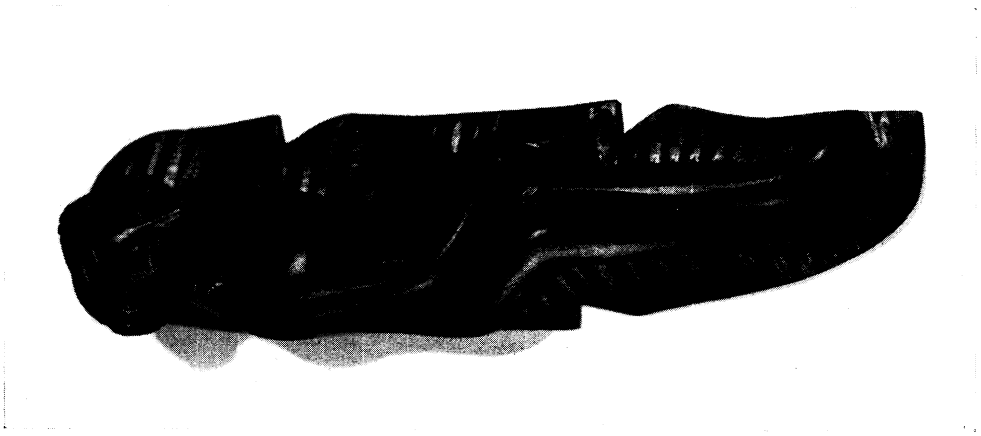

FIG. 3

Studies at the University of Toronto, was of the opinion that the medicine dolls " were used by the old Chinese physician who was prohibited by the rules of propriety from examining the body of female patients. The latter would indicate the location of her complaint by pointing to the corresponding spot on the figure. This plus the complicated Chinese examination of the pulse, was the basis for his diagnosis."

Another authority consulted was somewhat conservative in his statement. S. Y. Teng (7), Assistant Professor of Chinese History and Language at the University of Chicago, was born and educated in China and spent much time in the Palace Museum in Peiping. " I am still inclined to think," he writes, " that nude statue was particularly made after the seventeenth century to suit the taste of Western customers." Homer H. Dubs (8), Professor of Chinese, University College, Oxford, who was educated in Chinia, wrote me: " Your belief that these ivory figures were used in consultation is probably correct." Sowerby (1), who had lived many years in China, writing in the *China Journal* for September, 1936,

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FIG. 4

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stated: "nude figures of women are to be found, but for the most part they have been carved for a special purpose." He then described the appearance and use of the figures as already discussed.

A Chinese nurse, who had been engaged in military nursing and was thereby enabled to observe customs in many parts of China, commented on the medicine dolls in our Museum. She stated that such dolls formed a regular part of the doctor's equipment. If a messenger did not bring a doll, the doctor would supply one from his office. Anwar El Mofty (9), of the Department of Medicine in the University of Cairo, related that Turkish women, before the revolution, used an ordinary doll for the same purpose, and would take or send it by messenger to the doctor's office. Even Albrecht Dürer (10) made a sketch of his own body with a finger pointing to the painful area over the spleen, and sent the sketch to his physician with hope of relief for the abdominal pain.

The technique for using the dolls differed. In some instances the physician carried them with him to the bedside. The patient extended her hand through the curtain screening her from the physician, for the customary observation of the pulse, and then indicated on the figure the location of her discomfort. Or the patient sent the doll by a relative or maid who pointed out on the ivory the seat of the trouble. The physician was then expected to provide appropriate medication.

The tradition that women should be portrayed in art fully clad (11) extends into early Chinese civilization and is based on religious grounds. From the beginning sculptured figures of women appear draped. From India (12) came the influence of voluptuous curves and loose-hipped models. The coastal cities were subjected to contacts with Western culture. In spite of these influences, early attempts in portrayal of the female form were primitive because, as Siren suggests (13), this was the least familiar of subjects.

Inhibition of Chinese women (14) to undergo physical examination is in keeping with their former status. They were denied almost everything. They were even affected by the ancient principle of the *yang* and the *yin*. *Yang* denoting good fortune and attending desirabilities was associated with man, and *yin* indicating darkness and evil was imputed to woman. She occupied a lower station in society; she had no property of her own; her duties were bearing and rearing of children, caring for the home, and even toiling in the fields.

With the introduction of political and commercial forces from the West, there came contact with conditions that emphasized equality of woman with man. Western forms of amusement, such as dancing, were no longer

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considered immoral. The young people decided to manage their own love affairs and womankind began to seek modern medical aid when it was available.

The Western influence affected especially the coastal cities and in one of these, Canton, a thriving industry of ivory carving developed. Aware of a necessity on the part of native women and cognizant of the art of other nations, these craftsmen refused longer to bow to former restraints, and offered for sale objects made from rhinoceros horn, to meet a popular demand. Among the objects produced were these medicine dolls which evidently appealed to both Oriental and Occidental customers (15).

Some critics (2) contend that these pieces lack the feeling of creative artistry. Be that as it may, these delicate ivory carvings have probably served a useful purpose for many a Chinese lady.

Religion and sculpture portrayed women in graceful dignified draperies. Custom forbade the informative physical examination. Use of the medical doll would seem to be a logical development in overcoming the barrier of traditional modesty. Since it was indelicate for the patient to mention any part of her body to the physician, use of the ivory figures would at least afford some inkling of the cause of her infirmity. Such a device would, therefore, prove some slight advance in the healing art.

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