

Traditional Medicines healing economies

by Amanda Gcabashe, Acting Executive: Testing

Fifty billion dollars is an incredible sum of money and this is the market value of Traditional Chinese Medicine services to China's economy annually according to Professor Shen Yuandong, the Vice-Chairperson of ISO/TC 249 Traditional Chinese Medicine. Reading this from the comfort of your suburban home, you may shrug and attribute this to something exceptional about the Chinese, however these services are based on the indigenous knowledge and heritage of the Chinese which they continue to invest in for the health and economic benefits it provides.

Global exports of traditional medicines were worth 1.9 trillion US dollars in 2014. Global imports were 608 billion US dollars. This trade is dominated by Europe and America, with both these countries occupying top spots in both imports and exports of traditional medicines. South Africa, recognised as the 3rd most biodiverse country with only 2% of the world's land area, it has at least 10% of the world's plants. Coupled with this is a rich and vibrant living heritage of traditional medicine usage, you would expect that we would feature highly when it comes to a ranking of countries that trade in and produce traditional medicines. Sadly, we don't. South Africa is ranked 53rd in terms of exports and 43rd in terms of imports of traditional medicine. The top ten countries in terms of imports and exports are in Europe with Japan rounding out the exporters.

The Chinese government is spearheading the globalisation drive around Traditional Chinese Medicines. Headed by the Vice Minister of Health, the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicines is collaborating with the Chinese national standards body (SAC) to lead globalisation efforts through international standardisation on the platform of the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO). In its 8th year of existence, the international technical committee (ISO/TC249) has membership from 37 member countries. Participants include standards bodies from Europe, America, China, Japan and South Korea.

Participating on this technical committee has been instructive and eye opening especially learning the extent to which traditional medicine is supported through policies and funding by the governments of the East and the

global acceptance of this giant healthcare alternative called TCM. On the international stage, for the past eight years, Korea and Japan have been engaged in on-going battles for the right to own the name (and probably the brand recognition) of the technical committee. This fight culminated in a vote last year at which the name "Traditional Chinese Medicines" was chosen in a tightly contested voting process. The argument presented by the Chinese to the delegates was that TCM is globally recognised whereas Kampo (Japanese traditional medicines) and TKM (Traditional Korean Medicine) are known and recognised only in their home countries.

China is in its 13th five year plan for traditional medicines and has explicitly identified the globalisation of TCM as one of the key pillars of growth. Amongst the countries targeted in their globalisation efforts is South Africa. China recognises that through the development of international standards, penetration of new markets is easier. Research has shown that where TCM enters a country, the indigenous medicines in that area tends to disappear.

What lessons are we willing to learn and leverage from this global effort or are we going to continue to ignore the opportunities presented by our traditional remedies as we embrace the single narrative about the value of our traditional heritage to the country? China, India, South Korea and Japan can teach us a lot about investing in our Indigenous Knowledge Systems for the benefit of our country.

In closing, a lesson from how Germany continues to benefit from integrating science with South African indigenous knowledge. Pelargonium Sidoides (Ishaqa in isiZulu) is harvested mainly in the wild and exported to Germany. It is processed and made into one of the most well researched natural remedies which is marketed for healthy sinus, nasal and bronchial function. This product, called Umckaloaba, is based on an ancient recipe taken from the Eastern Cape in the 1800s. South African harvesters, mainly rural women, are paid minimum amounts per kg for the roots of this plant. You can purchase this medicine online, paying US\$13 for 30ml. You do the maths!