

THE *Review* South China Morning Post

SATURDAY, MARCH 7, 1998

LIFE AFTER THE LAST EMPEROR

A brother-in-law of the child Emperor Puyi is alive and well and rides around the streets of Beijing on a motor bike. He talks to Lijia MacLeod.

On a glorious winter day, Duke Gobro Runqi, the last brother-in-law of the last emperor, revisits their former playground, the imposing Forbidden City at the centre of Beijing. Moving excitedly, in a manner befitting his age, Runqi leads a group of friends through his former residence, Chuxiugong Hall, in the Imperial Palace.

"What a wonderful place to ride around," he cries, pointing to the spacious courtyard where he played as a 10-year-old after his sister, Wan Rong, married Aisingoro Puyi and became empress.



aches to menstrual problems, Runqi is best known for relieving women suffering from "menopause depression". But one wonders how much of a role "faith healing" plays, particularly in a country where ancient remedies still hold considerable sway.

"Give it the benefit of doubt," says Erika Johnson, a long-time German student of Chinese medicine.

"The method is not that original, but it may work for some. The difficulty is trying to explain his Chinese practices with Western medical terms, for the two systems are so fundamentally different."

Runqi charges token fees, but only if the patient can afford it. And even though he obviously takes pleasure in healing, he says he regrets not having studied something more useful. "I always thought I would be a good engineer," he says. "But I could not ask more from life."

Pausing for thought, he adds: "I would be happier if I could find an affordable place to rent as my clinic. Then, I could receive more patients than my little flat allows."

Before beginning his medical practice, Runqi added to his professional credentials with a decade-long stint as a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), China's "House of Lords".

"It was not just an honour, but a duty," he says. "And I did my best."

Having seen erosion caused by deforestation in China, for example, he joined colleagues in proposing legal protection

Life after the last emperor: profile of the last emperor's brother-in-law

On a glorious sunny winter day, Gobro Runqi, the last-brother-in-law of the last emperor, revisits his former playground, the imposing Forbidden City at the heart of Beijing. Looking through the thick glass into Yangxindian Hall, he explains to his friends, "This was the place the emperor had his meals. So many lavish dishes, but I didn't even like them." He lets out a typically hearty laugh. With his square face, prominent nose and long black coat, he commands a certain majestic air. Indeed, he is from a once rich and powerful Daur family, an ethnic group from Northeast China, related by marriage to the imperial Aisingoro family from Manchuria. By the time he was born in Beijing in the summer of 1912, the Revolution of the previous year had overthrown the Qing Dynasty and founded the Republic. Yet despite the dramatic changes outside, it was agreed that the emperor and his family would continue to live their luxury life within the walls of the Imperial Palace.

Leading the way, jumping up and down in a manner to belie his 85 years, he takes the group via Chuxiugong Hall, his former residence. Pointing to the spacious courtyard, he cries "What a wonderful place to ride around." Duke Runqi is actually a double brother-in-law: both a 'Guojiu' - a brother of the empress and 'Fuma' - husband of the emperor's sister. After his sister Wan Rong became empress to the last emperor, Aisingoro Puyi, Runqi, a lively and fun-loving 10 year-old, introduced his bike to the palace. For a while, bike riding became the most popular pastime among the young masters. In order to bike around freely, the emperor, himself barely an adult, ordered the removal all the thick wooden thresholds from Yangxindian Hall through to the imperial garden! Runqi himself soon became Puyi's favourite playmate, for others were too conscious of his imperial status. In many way, earning the emperor's favour and trust changed Runqi's life forever - hoping to restore the ousted Qing Dynasty, he sent Runqi aged 16 and his brother Pujie to Japan for military training.

“Looking back, I feel embarrassed and shamed,” says the old man, shaking his head slightly. “It was wrong and it was simply impossible. But we were only taught to be loyal to him, not to question him.” During his a quarter of century in Japan (apart from short breaks in China), he studied many kinds of military related skills and later also ??? supposedly served as military attache of ‘Manchukuo’, the Qing state Puyi set up in Northeast China, but effectively, Japan’s puppet. During which time, Runqi married the emperor’s younger sister, the beautiful and good-natured princess Yunying and they produced three children. “Of course, it was arranged. But marrying her was the best thing that ever happened in my life!” They went through thick and thin together till cancer took her life in 1992.

In 1944, amid the turbulence of the Japanese occupation of China, Runqi returned to his motherland with his lifelong friend Pujie, (for Japan version, add: ... lifelong friend Pujie and their families. Pujie’s marriage to the daughter of a wealthy Japanese businessman was arranged by the Japanese who sought better control of of the last emperor’s family.) expecting to set up an elite royal troop to fight for the glory of the Qing empire. Despite being on the verge of collapse, the Japanese military was still reluctant to give the puppet emperor any potential power. Runqi, by now a lieutenant, was therefore assigned a teaching post at a military college in Manchuria. In retrospect, this non-combatant status was spared him being tried as a war criminal by the victorious Chinese Communists.

Runqi now works as a private doctor, and he is as happy and vigorous as an 80-something could possibly be. Although he talks a great deal about the past, as elderly people often do, there is no trace of bitterness. “It is true that personally I have less money than I used to; but society has progressed greatly. Also, that was not a real life before.” He mentions a joke. Before sailing to Japan, he went out to shop himself for the first time. Handing a big note to the sales assistant, he did not know what to say: “You swap money with me.” The assistant laughed: “OK, I give you change.” “I do not want to go back. I am in the best stage of my life. I make a living, with my own hands and these cups.” he declares proudly. “Moreover, I feel I am useful to society.”

He took up cupping, an ancient Chinese way of curing, in recent years. It is the major part of his “Gobro Style Therapy” that he created himself. After briefly heating the glass cups, he positions the open ends on various parts of the body, depending on the patient’s condition. Often, he inserts acupuncture needles at points near the cups. “The look of my method often puts foreigners off,” he can’t help laughing at the thought. “Actually, cupping is painless, though it leaves a dreadful red ring on the skin temporarily. And the pain caused by acupuncture is very limited. But maybe foreigners’ pain threshold is lower than Chinese.” All kinds of patients turn to him, including those suffering from high blood pressure, headache to endocrinopathy. One of his specialities is to treat menopause. Madam Ao Surong, a 50 year-old dancing teacher claimed he prolonged her youth. After treatment, her period miraculously returned and she became slimmer. “I feel much younger and more energetic.”

Runqi summarizes his “Gobro Style Therapy” as ‘western theory, Chinese method.’ “The key to success is to adjust one’s autonomic nerve system, as it has to be spot on.” he explains. Few understand it in practical terms, but countless pennants and thank you letters from grateful clients fill his flat in a modern apartment block in eastern Beijing where he lives and works with his assistant. He charges symbolic fees if the patient can afford it. “I take more pleasure in healing.” *[In the introduction to his ‘Gobro Style therapy’, Runqi stresses the importance of the vegetative nerve system, or autonomic nerve system. Disorder in the system can cause just about all diseases, for example endocrinopathy which is perhaps Gobro’s speciality. His method is actually a kind of sympathotherapy, using cupping and acupuncture to stimulate and balance the sympathetic nervous system, which is part of the autonomic nervous system. A doctor I consulted, who had not heard of Gobro Therapy, said so far there is no confirmed scientific proof that acupuncture or cupping can effect nerve systems, or at least to the degree many traditional doctors claim. I do not know how much you want to get into this.]*

He began his medical career rather unexpectedly during the Cultural Revolution, when Runqi was sent down to Mentougou, in the remote western outskirts of Beijing, to be re-educated by peasants. Since there were few medical facilities there he would sometimes treat villagers, applying knowledge picked up years earlier in Japan. Limited by resources, he turned to cupping and acupuncture and found them very effective. His healing power became legendary after peasants saw him talking to the cow he was assigned to look after. Soon the cow obeyed him like a dog, sitting down on his order. Recalling his country experience, he says: “I did not choose to go. But I can’t say I suffered badly.

Both the peasants and the cow treated me kindly.” Inspired by his medical practice, he studied both Chinese and western medicine properly after his retirement back to the city. And at age of 80, he obtained a licence to practise from the medical authorities.

It was again his royal past and Japan connection that got himself into trouble during the political turmoil years. Puyi once appologized to his brother-in-law: “I am sorry. I nearly ruined your life because of my silly dream of restoring Qing.” But Runqi is not a man of self-pity. “There is no point moaning the past. My motto is: to live a day, to make the most out of it.” His positive nature got him through the darkest days. He even managed to find lots of fun inside War Criminal Detention Centre in Fushun, in north China. They formed a drama group which staged political plays. Runqi and three Mongolians wrote the script of a play about a Mongolian family rose to fight against the Japanese. The beautiful heroine was played by Runqi. The ‘female’ star, colourfully dressed, dancing and singing away on the stage, roused a big stir in the bleak, male-only prison. Apart from Runqi, there were Puyi and his closest associates, including his brother and nephews and assistants. Before being transfered to Fushun, the gang was captured by the Red Army of the Soviets when trying to escape to Japan after its surrender in 1945. They were detained for 5 years till the newly founded People’s Republic of China took them over.

Finally Runqi walked free after a dozen years in prison. He did whatever he could, mostly petty manual work. It was due to the premier Zhou Enlai’s interference that he was given a decent job as a researcher and translator at China Academy of Social Science, from where he still gets his pension. In his late years, he added the list of his profession by becoming a member of China’s Political Consultative Conference. “It was not just a honour, but a duty. I did my best.” He wrote proposal about protecting China’s natual resources; he criticized the government of charging Daur minority people too much grain as they are better at animal husbandry. His effort was acknowledged as he was given the “Outstanding Contribution to the Socociety” award, in which he takes enormous pride.

When asked if he has any regrets. He answers: “I wish I had studied something more useful, like engineering. I always thought I would be a good engineer. But I can’t ask more from life. Oh, no,” he thinks for a second, “I would be happier if I could find a place to rent as my clinic at an affordable price. Then, I could advertise and receive more patients than my little flat allows.” His childhood hobby of riding has stayed with him. Today, he still gets around in a motorbike with a special liscense from authorthy - if fact, he is the only person in China aged above 70 with that special permit.

Back in the Forbidden City, a sudden ‘beep, beep...’ sound alerts the small crowd. Runqi puts a hand inside his coat and gets out a pager attached to his belt. This time, it is not from a needy patient, but time reporting station. “Doesn’t time fly!” He often surprises his audience, forieng ones in particular, by uttering some English phrases. He tucks his pager away, and says with total confidence. “Let time fly. I am still a young man!”