

London Business Matters

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YINTONG TALKS WITH...

Mr. Ren Guangfeng, owner and managing director of Everwell Chinese Medical Centres

THE first thing you notice in Ren Guangfeng's office is a map of the United Kingdom dotted with coloured drawing pins representing, I soon discovered, each of his 25 Chinese medicine centres in the country.

I wondered how many Chinese clinics there were in total and was pleased to get a potted history of the industry over the last two decades by way of an answer.

"The best time for my business and other Chinese clinics was undoubtedly during the 90s. Chinese medical centres mushroomed and the whole industry gained incredible profile, reaching its peak in 2000. After that, we saw a gradual slowdown, with 2006 as the turning point.

"There were too many clinics opening, and on too large a scale. My own company, for example, owned 45 clinics at the top of the market." The economic downturn over the last 15 months has hit hard and some clinics, including one very large group, went bankrupt. There are no official figures but Mr. Ren estimates that there are 10,000 people employed in the industry today, with 3000 practitioners in about 500 clinics - less than half of the estimated workforce in 2006.

Mr Ren was trained as a marine engineer and I asked him how he progressed from that to becoming the owner of one of the top three Chinese medicine groups in the UK.

I learned that he was among the first Chinese students studying in the UK after the Cultural Revolution in the mid '80s having been sent to study Marine Engineering at University College London on a UN programme. On completion of his Masters degree, Mr. Ren became a researcher at UCL before a brief spell at a Korean shipping company. Identifying a business opportunity, he and his first wife (who had a background in Chinese medicine) set up their first practice in Northern Ireland which was an instant success. Seizing the momentum, they soon established their second practice - in Romford - and were amazed how quickly it received a huge amount of attention from the local



"In the early '90s, 'back to nature' was the in-thing. There was a movement toward eating organic food, living a healthy life style and using natural remedies."

population. From then on, they were opening up several new practices every year until 2008.

What was the key to his phenomenal success? "The timing was perfect for us to start such a business," Mr. Ren offered. "In the early '90s, 'back to nature' was the in-thing. There was a movement toward eating organic food, living a healthy lifestyle and using natural remedies. The herb-based Chinese medicine and other alternative therapies such as acupuncture, chiropractic, yoga or homeopathy struck a chord."

"At the same time," he continued, "people also started to question the limitations of conventional medicine, especially in rela-

tion to long term and chronic illnesses. Our treatment filled some of these gaps and the patients were delighted and surprised with the results.

"Over the years, people's understanding of Chinese medicine had become far more sophisticated. The application of the treatment was also changing. We found ourselves helping people with weight loss, stress relief or providing care to assist their conventional treatments."

I noticed Mr. Ren used the term "complementary" instead of "alternative" medicine. He explained, "I am not saying Chinese medicine is a cure-all, it can't replace conventional treatment. We don't use modern

medical equipment so we always advise our patients to see their GP for a thorough check up first." Mr. Ren believes that conventional and Chinese medicines are complementary to each other, and that the combination of the two will achieve the best results.

It can't have all been plain sailing so I asked what problems he had experienced. "Herbal medicine was a novelty to the public as well as for its governing body in the early days. It takes time for the rules and regulations to be fully developed. Both the business owners and the government policy makers went through a steep learning curve. Meanwhile - ourselves - we were not experienced business people and we had limited resources," Mr. Ren reflected. "It was an uphill struggle, like walking a tight rope, the slightest slip could cause the confiscation of the clinic. It is a different story now - the market place has become much better regulated."

Mr. Ren is optimistic about the future, "This tighter control helped clear the market place; the industry has regained its status, and, the key players who were serious about their work and planning long term remained."

Mr. Ren told me that he enjoys running a business in the UK, as everyone is on an equal footing, English or Chinese; there is no prejudice against foreign nationalities. On the whole, he feels confident, "We have learnt the ropes in business. As long as we deliver the best results for our patients, the business will continue to prosper. As the Chinese medicine brings more benefits for more British people come to understand its benefits, I am very proud to have played a part."

www.everwell.co.uk

Yintong Betser is a China business specialist and the author of Active Business Travel - China www.activeukchina.com

If you have a story to tell about your China-related business, please contact her at yintong@activeukchina.com

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