

Curious traditions in Chinese pregnancy

Asa Butcher | 01.06.2011

There are many curious and quirky traditions connected with pregnancy and childbirth in China that often result in a disbelieving eyebrow being raised in the West. Radio86 met Jacquelyn Carman, an American mother who helps run the HavingaBabyinChina.com website, in order to lower that eyebrow and, instead, leave us slowly shaking our head in disbelief.

"During our first year in China, I remember a friend saying that when she was sick her dad went and got her placenta soup and I was like 'What?' Yeah... she ate the placenta!" Some believe the consumption of the placenta, known as placentophagy, helps prevent postpartum depression, although this has not been scientifically proven – perhaps placentophagy merely stems from the fact that the word 'placenta' comes from the Latin for 'cake'.

Placentophagy is the more extreme aspect of Chinese tradition, but the practice does manage to take an even stranger turn. "After you deliver the placenta, the doctor will ask whether you want it or not. If you say no then they will most likely sell it, but if you say yes then you actually have to purchase it back from the hospital," explains Jacquelyn.

From surreal to sensible

Jacquelyn has had four children with her husband Jeremy Carman and each pregnancy has presented its own cultural differences. It is common practice for the Chinese to impart advice to pregnant women on the street, especially if they see them doing something they feel is bad. "If they see me carrying a child, then they're like 'You shouldn't be carrying that baby' or if you are eating something, then it's 'Oh! That's not good; you need to only eat this', so that can be a little trying," she admits.

There is a long list of Chinese superstitions but practising them really depends upon the region. "In the south of China, where we first lived, they really did adhere to those things. They would never get their haircut when they were pregnant because they really feared that would cause a cleft palate. I think in the southern parts they are much more superstitious than they are up in the north," Jacquelyn says.

The Old Wives Tales swing back and forth from sensible to surreal, such as touching anything with glue can cause birthmarks and if a pregnant woman criticises someone, then the baby will resemble and act like the person criticised. Avoiding heavy work and sexual intercourse to avoid a miscarriage during the early months are also reasonable suggestions. However, the idea that eating shellfish could give the baby rashes or pineapple can cause miscarriage are both debatable.

Watch out for evil spirits

If you thought that the superstitions would come to end after the waters had broken and the baby is on the way, then think again. During labour, many believe that the pregnant woman's mother should be present at the first delivery but not for subsequent ones. The father is not present during delivery, but he is expected to give the baby its first bath.

Should the delivery be natural rather than a Caesarean, which is encouraged in China, then the ideal position for labour is squatting. It is thought that the baby will not have enough energy to come out if the mother is lying on her back.

Mothers should also try to be quiet during labour, as crying out will attract evil spirits to the new child, but I suspect the midwives and doctors created this one themselves. Finally, before the umbilical cord is cut, a necklace is placed around the baby's neck to ensure that the baby's life is tied to the necklace, and not to the cord.

The Sitting Month

Once mother and baby are safely home, then something called the "Sitting Month" (*Zuo yuezi*) begins – a tradition that some Western mothers might consider embracing.

For 30 days after childbirth, she is expected to stay in bed and not do any heavy work, including housework. However, she should not comb or wash her hair, she should not brush her teeth, she should not shower and sexual activity is also not encouraged – I expect this last piece advice stems from the woman's lack of personal hygiene for a month.

To assist the mother during the Sitting Month, her mother-in-law traditionally comes and takes care of everything, although the couple will sometimes hire a special housekeeper called an *ayi*. "She will come and work for that first month, just feeding the mum, taking care of the mum and the new baby," explains Jacquelyn.

Chinese tradition also encourages the mother to stay warm and eat protein-rich soup, which is considered "hot", in order to increase breast milk – I'm sure the placenta makes the perfect protein-rich ingredient. She should also avoid fruits and other "cold" foods to maintain the balance between yin and yang.

You may still be raising that disbelieving eye-brow and shaking your head doubtfully at some of these customs and traditions connected with pregnancy and childbirth in China, but we shouldn't forget that China currently has almost 1.3 billion people so perhaps the West shouldn't immediately dismiss them. However, I doubt we will see placenta soup served in maternity hospital canteens any time soon...