Tu Youyou

CHINESE

"The work was the top priority so I was certainly willing to sacrifice my personal life."

1930—
Pharmacologist

Tu Youyou was born in Ningbo, Zhejiang, China. A kind and modest girl, she dreamed of helping others when she grew up. Youyou excelled at her studies, but she had to take a break from school when she caught tuberculosis. Youyou’s illness inspired her to go into medical research.

Youyou attended Peking University in Beijing, where she developed an interest in traditional Chinese medicine. In 1955, she earned her degree in Pharmacology. Youyou continued her research on Chinese herbal medicine in the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences.

During the Vietnam War, a horrible disease called malaria had claimed the lives of countless soldiers. In 1967, Youyou was appointed to lead ‘Project 523’, a top-secret government project to find a treatment for malaria. Youyou and her team of researchers learned about folk medicine and remedies described in ancient Chinese medical texts. They discovered a plant called sweet wormwood and managed to extract a substance, artemisinin, which helped battle the malaria parasites in the body. Drugs based on Youyou’s research have led to the survival and improved health of millions of people around the world.

Despite not having a medical degree or a PhD, Youyou made one of the greatest scientific discoveries in modern medicine. In 2015, Youyou was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine and became the first Chinese woman to win a Nobel Prize.

One thing you can do: learn more about historical methods and practices – you never know when an old idea might lead to a new discovery!