

# Explore the Extraordinary: The Clinical Value of the Extraordinary Vessels

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Acupuncture can seem like miracle work, especially when a patient comes to us with a painful condition which disappears immediately after one treatment. Yet the most satisfying experiences often come after months or even years working with a patient which yield vastly profound change.

The way I was taught to view the body was as three energetic levels: *Wei-Defensive Qi*, *Ying-Nutritive Qi* and *Yuan-Source Qi*. I see the body as three levels: the exterior, interior and constitution. When I meet a patient and we discuss treatment goals, I assess which level of Qi they are asking to work on. *Wei Qi*-level issues are those that are often "cured" in one session. *Yuan Qi* constitutional issues can take an average of three months to show results and much longer to bear fruit.

The reason I became an acupuncturist was due to working with a practitioner who helped me not only cure physical ailments, but also evolve and cultivate change inside and out. My entire life shifted as a result of working with this healer. I learned later that we achieved such profound change due to working with the Eight Extraordinary Vessels. We worked together for years. It was slow, gradual process, but it resulted in a new life, outlook and experience for me.

## Controversy Behind the Extraordinary Vessels?

The Extraordinary Vessels have been historically controversial acupuncture channels. They work with *Yuan Qi* and the organs of evolution: the Curious Bowels. At one point in history, they were reserved for meditation and mystical practice. Largely due to Ming Dynasty practitioner Li Shi Zhen, the Extraordinary Vessels became popularized as channels for therapeutic use: effective ways to work on the brain, bones, uterus.

Controversy comes from belief that the Extraordinary Vessels can alter a person's Ming destiny, or at the very least help a person move through their karmic life lessons faster and easier. Some say this is beyond the moral scope of what a healer should engage with. Others, like myself, think this is exactly the role of a healer when a patient is asking for such cultivation and intervention.

It's important to deeply listen to what our patients are asking for. Working at such a deep level without consent or rapport can alienate. Some people resonate most working on the *Wei Qi* surface level of the body. Others are more focused on *ying*-internal *qi*, which resonates with the emotions. However, when a person wants to change something ancestral, constitutional or with chronicity - something fundamental about their experience of life - I think about the Extraordinary Vessels.

## Three Key Groupings

The Extraordinary Vessels are organized into three distinct "ancestries" or groupings. The first ancestry is comprised of the vessels of *Chong Mai*, *Ren Mai* and *Du Mai*. These are the deepest of all the Extraordinary Vessels.

*Chong Mai* gives birth to *Ren* and *Du Mai*: the "Seas" of yin and yang. *Ren*, as the Sea of Yin, is the material basis of the body, while *Du Mai* is the yang constructive capacity of that material: deep, fundamental reservoirs of yin and yang.

*Chong Mai* gives birth to the entirety of the body. It is the Sea of the 12 Primary Meridians and *Zang Fu*, as well as the "Sea of Blood."

The second ancestry is the yin and yang *Wei Mai*, which deal with the passage of time and its effects on the body. Traumatic events, abuse and disappointment can cause us to become stuck in time. The *Wei Mai* are translated as "linking" vessels, which essentially keep the passage of time and events in our lives woven together in a cohesively smooth way. When we become stuck in a particular moment in our past, or scattered (often due to fright) and unable to move into the future, or seem to have lost access to a period in our past, I use the *Wei* vessels.

The third ancestry is comprised of yinandyang *Qiao Mai* and *Dai Mai*. The *Nan Jing* describes the Extraordinary Vessels as "ditches and reservoirs." I tend to view the first ancestry as reservoirs, and the second ancestry as intermediaries between the first ancestry and the Primary Channels: the way in which the reservoirs are able to support the *Zang Fu* organs and their channels. The third ancestry comprises ditches where pathology is deposited deeply in the body.

The *Yin Qiao Mai* is classically associated with treatment of parasites, both physical and spiritual. This is a channel that effectively deals with addictions, compulsions and infestations. It also works strongly on our relationship with ourselves: self-esteem and self-recognition. On the other hand, the *Yang Qiao* deals with our relationship to the world and tendencies toward over-engagement with external events.

The *Qiao* vessels are traditionally seen as vessels of excess. To treat them is to encourage the body to release yin or yang excess (dampness, heat) manifesting as joint (or other Curious organ) problems and/or imbalanced hyper-focus on the self or the external world.

*Dai Mai* is the ultimate ditch for unresolved pathological issues. It is a "belt channel" that surrounds the waist, often manifesting as belly fat or urogenital conditions. *Dai Mai* holds onto challenges, experiences and issues that we've been either unwilling or unable to resolve, which become "the seed of our next incarnation," or the gift we pass onto our offspring.

*Chong Mai* is the channel we can use to resolve issues passed to us from our ancestors; *Dai Mai* is the channel we use to prevent passing our own issues onto subsequent generations.

### Clinical Pearls

Clinical progress with the Extraordinary Vessels can be slow, but it is indeed profound. Sometimes, effects will be immediate; yet they are like walking into a deep underground cave filled with mystery and wonder. They ask for time and attention.

The Extraordinary Vessels are deep energetic channels, so patients often recognize something significant is happening, even if they can't quite describe what that is. These channels require commitment. Working with them can be like therapy sessions in which physical and mental consciousness are slowly transformed over time. I find them the most satisfying channels within all of acupuncture.

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