



PRACTICAL TCM

Unpacking Illusive Terms for Practical Use: The Extraordinary Vessels

Nicholas Sieben, LAc

One of the challenges in being an acupuncturist is unpacking the words, phrases and strategies we learn from the medical classics. Much of our early training involves memorization of terms that sound foreign and unreal. It is up to us during practice to imbue these terms with life and deep practical meaning. In much the same way, the acupuncture channels seem illusive at first - until we develop a personal relationship with them.

Within my own training, we focused strongly on levels of energetic anatomy. The deepest energetic level, that of *yuan*-source *qi*, was referred to as the "constitutional level" of the body, relating to the substance of *jing*-essence. While the concept of "constitution" as the fundamental organization of the self was clear, it's taken me several years to "unpack" the significance of the *yuan*-level.

In past articles, I've written extensively about blood and *ying*-nourishing *qi*. Within Chinese medicine, blood is not just a metabolic substance, but also has resonance with the mind, emotions and spirit.

Blood, as a form of *ying qi*, is interactive: a way we nourish ourselves, not just through nutrients from food and drink, but also through our relationships and socialization. I've come to better understand blood and its functions through the acupuncture channel systems that conduct *ying qi*, primarily the *luo*-connecting vessels.

Jing-essence as our deepest energetic substance is an aspect of *yuan*-source *qi*. To understand *yuan qi* and *jing*-essence, I continually explore the channels that conduct this substance: the extraordinary vessels.

The names of the extraordinary vessels are good way to begin exploring these channels, as they help describe what *yuan qi* deals with.

The extraordinary vessels can be divided into three units or "ancestries." *Ren mai* as the "sea of

yin, " *du mai* as the "sea of *yang*" and *chong mai* as the "sea of blood, sea of the *zang fu* and 12 primary channels" comprise the "first ancestry," the deepest of the extraordinary vessels.

The second "ancestry" contains *yin* and *yang wei mai*: the "linking vessels." The third ancestry is *yin* and *yang qiao mai*, the "stance vessels"; as well as *dai mai*, the "belt vessel."

In terms of extraordinary vessel form and function, there are two major chapters from the medical classics I find helpful. Chapter 27 of the *Nan Jing* describes the vessels as being reservoirs and ditches. Chapter 54 of the *Ling Shu*, translated as "Years Given by Heaven" by Paul U. Unschuld, indirectly describes the function of these vessels.

Yuan qi governs birth, death and development. *Yin* and *yang* are the body's primordial store of essence material to fuel the unfolding of life and its processes. *Ren* and *du* are reservoirs for *yin* and *yang*, which feed and support the post-natal primary channels that serve the *zang fu*. *Chong mai* as the "sea of blood" is also a reservoir, giving rise to the organs and channels. This is arguably the role of the first ancestry: to act as reservoirs for *yin*, *yang*, blood and *qi*.

Jing-essence has a vital relationship with *shen*-spirit. *Jing shen* is the basis of one's animation and thrust in life: the way in which *ming*-destiny expresses itself in action. It is what creates our personality, reality and desires.

Chong mai is called the "great *luo* of *shao yin*," designating it as the major vessel that manages heart-kidney communication: the relationship between the *jing shen*. It travels from the lower abdomen at the point ST 30 (*Qi Chong*) into the chest at the kidney *shu*-transport points, which have spirit-oriented names, illustrating interaction between the *jing shen*.

Chong mai as the body's "blueprint" holds the plan for how life will unfold. It is the way the *yin* and *yang* are utilized. This is arguably why *chong mai* is sometimes translated as the "thrusting vessel." It manages the thrust of our life: the movement of essence into spirit through *qi* as action and manifestation.

Chapter 54 of the *Ling Shu* explores the question, "What is spirit?" The answer is described as being "when *qi* and blood are harmonized," including the proper exchange of *wei* and *ying qi*. It also involves the "fulfillment" of the internal organs and their virtues within form (*yin*) and function (*yang*). The passage goes on to say that "spirit *qi*" must be "settled" in the heart, and the *hun* and *po* (corporeal and non-corporeal souls) must be "matured." This leads to a state of "completion," which is inferred to be the purpose of the spirit.

Chong mai, being the "sea of blood" and the "sea of the *zang fu* and 12 primary channels," is involved in the fulfillment of the organs and channels in cultivating their purpose. As discussed, the trajectory of *chong mai* illustrates how this occurs. However, the *wei* vessels also support this process through their "linking" of *qi* and blood, most importantly in relation to time: the cycles and stages of our lives.

Yin wei mai is a network for exchange (*jiao*) to occur. *Yang wei mai* is a network for all the *yang* to meet: *hui*. They are described as being ditches that gather excess pathology from the primary channels, as a type of container for "overflow." The *Nan Jing* describes the extraordinary vessels as being like holes drilled into the rocks so flooding in our lives can recede, allowing us to return to a sense of normalcy when in times of crisis.

The *wei* vessels manage the smooth passage of time through the cycles of one's life, including the traumas and inconsistencies.

Chapter 26 of the *Nan Jing* calls the *qiao* vessels the "*luo* of *yin* and *yang*," into which the *luo* vessels drain. The *qiao* vessels meet at the brain, showing how unresolved issues impact our perception.

The *wei* and *qiao* vessels are a type of network: *luo*. They absorb and maintain excess pathology, but also have a role in "exchange" and "meeting/gathering." They absorb difficult pathology, but also hold the body together within form and function.

Working with the *wei* and *qiao* vessels clinically can therefore impact a person's perception, physical and emotional "stance." They harmonize relationship to the past, present and future to revive a person's path toward "spirit." They essentially treat the *jing shen* relationship.

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