



HEALTH & WELLNESS / LIFESTYLE

Understanding Mental Illness Through the *Luo* Vessels

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How do we communicate the depth and sophistication of Chinese medicine, especially in the treatment of mental health? Language, terminology and different theories about body function make this challenging. It's important as practitioners to be as clear as possible and to communicate from a place of deep belief.

The *luo* vessels are important in the treatment of mental health issues. They are conduits of “*ying qi*”: blood and fluids. We believe that the *shen* is “housed” in the heart and circulated through the blood, making a channel system that “conducts” *ying qi* ideal for treatment of the mind and emotions.

Nineteenth-century herbalist Wang Qing Ren focused on the *luo* vessels in his book *Yi Lin Gai Cuo*. Viewing formulas from Ren alongside passages from the *Ling Shu*, we can understand blood stasis and its relationship with the *luo* vessels, especially relating to mental health.

A striking discussion about mental illness is that of *dian kuang*, a type of manic-depression. Ren created a formula to treat *dian kuang* called *Dian Kuang Meng Xing Tang*, a variation on his popular blood stasis-resolving *Xue Fu Zhu Yu Tang*.

Ren's *dian kuang* formula is classified as resolving “*qi* and blood stasis complicated by phlegm obstruction.” The *Ling Shu* suggests how to treat *dian kuang*, yet it remains unclear which channel systems are most appropriate.

This raises a common debate about acupuncture treatment strategy. Is it best to treat the physiology of a patient or the pathology? The primary channels, even if they technically treat all aspects of the body, are generally seen as meridians of physiological function; whereas the collaterals (*luo*) are vessels of pathology.

Luo vessels act as storage containers for the primary channels, diverting pathogens away from

physiological pathways. They manifest states of blood stagnation when they are in a state of “fullness” and phlegm stagnation when they “empty.”

The concept of “full” and “empty” is something master teacher Jeffrey Yuen has emphasized when discussing the *luo* vessels. “Fullness” indicates the primary channels have put unresolved pathology into their collateral system: the *luo*. The pathology becomes trapped as blood stagnation, manifesting varicosity on the surface of the skin. The trapped pathology is visible in “fullness.”

Vessels keep filling to capacity, then overflow. With “emptiness,” they go back into the physiological primary pathways or deeper into the internal branches. “Emptiness” manifests as phlegm stagnation: lipomas appear.

Three stages seem to manifest: first, that of compartmentalization in “fullness,” then direct confrontation as they empty, followed by invisibility and unconsciousness tolerance.

Internal branches of the primary channels connect with the organs; first with the bowels (*fu*), where the divergent channels become activated, diverting pathology into the joints (the level of *yuan qi*).

“*Ying qi*” is the realm of the mind and emotions, composed of blood and body fluids. It is the “nourishing” energy of the body. In contrast to the *wei* and *yuan* levels, the *ying* possesses a degree of conscious awareness. It manages our emotions, thoughts, cognitive ability and relationship capacity. The *luo* vessels circulate here.

Stagnation of blood impacts thought, emotion and relationship. “*Ying*” is the post-natal, interactive level of the body. Progression from blood stagnation into phlegm causes a more serious state.

Yuen says: “Emptiness [goes] into the Primary Meridians. So you just allow it to be part of your life. It becomes something that is problematic, but you just have a certain degree of acceptance, that this is something that [you] can’t change ... So even if you feel somewhat upset by it, you come to accept it. There’s a certain level of tolerance, and that tolerance is where it no longer becomes visible over time.”

Blood stagnation has a level of conscious awareness of it: the blood contains the *shen*. It is still visible in our life. There’s a sense of “fullness” or agitation about it. The mind is able to rationalize and contain it, putting it into a *luo* vessel. However when the issue “empties” back into the primary channel, there’s no way to compartmentalize it. It’s in your face. In order to cope or “tolerate” the problem, it becomes phlegmatic.

The philosophy of “emptiness of the *luo*” suggests a conscious issue becoming invisible; unconscious. It brings to mind another classical mental-emotional syndrome called *zang zao*: “visceral dryness,” whereby a trauma or disappointment can lead to personality change.

It is easy to visualize a pathogen trapped in the internal pathway of the primary channels creating inflammation, burning up the (endocrine) *ying* fluids, leading to a dryness state. Yet in terms of the *luo*, blood stasis is always seen as the origination of the problem.

Ren’s strategy for treating *dian kuan* suggests the *luo* vessels are primary for treating mental health, as they address the initial blood stagnation leading to phlegm complication.

In terms of acupuncture, understanding progression of the problem is key. Severity of symptoms often relates to the degree of phlegm complication, and underlying stagnations and deficiencies. Acupuncture differs from herbal medicine, looking at progression through channels to target depth

of disease. This is key to treatment success.

The *luo* vessels eventually culminate in the “great *luo* of the spleen” and eventually the “*luo* of *yin* and *yang*,” which the *Nan Jing* designates as the *qiao* vessels. The classic symptoms of the great *luo* are: pain all over the body (fullness) and looseness of the joints (emptiness). *Yin Qiao Mai* is indicated for severe states of *yin* stasis (phlegm), and *yang qiao* for *yang* excess (wind).

The joints suggest movement into the divergent channels. The *qiao* vessels are extraordinary vessels. This indicates pathological movement from the *ying* into *yuan* level of the body. *Ying* is interpersonal, while *yuan* is constitutional. *Ying* has consciousness to it, being the interactive aspect between ourselves and the world. *Yuan* is our nature and personality. The *qiao* are called “stance,” but *qiao* is also a word for the sensory portals. The *qiao* are involved in our posture, but also our unconscious “stance” and perception.

The description of *dian kuang* in the *Ling Shu* says the condition begins in the eyes, an area where the *qiao* vessels meet before entering the brain. When viewed through the lens of the *luo* vessels, mental illness can be due to long-term unresolved pathology that finds its way through the *luo* into the source by emptying into the extraordinary vessels and curious organs.

Divergent and *qiao* vessels impact the brain, bones and uterus. This is when an unresolved issue can impact a person’s form (posture), perception (brain) and offspring (uterus). Something that originally had a storyline, able to be contained and compartmentalized, transforms into our very being – an unconscious altered state which can be categorized as mental illness.

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