

The Spirit of Acupuncture: The Channel Systems of the Ling Shu

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Contemporary acupuncture is widely taught through the Zang Fu approach. It has proven to be an effective system. However, its roots are considered by many to be a predominantly "herbal" way of thinking.

Prior to the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 AD), acupuncture was practiced as a system of channel energetics, represented by the six channel Systems. The channels were seen as a continuum of physiology and pathology, very different from the modern (post-Sung) Zang Fu approach. The channel approach to acupuncture is still practiced within the Vietnamese and French adapted systems, as well as through the teachings of Jeffrey Yuen. The channel systems are considered by many to be the heart of Classical Chinese Acupuncture. Teachers such as Yuen have reintroduced acupuncture as it was practiced during the pre-Sung era, rooting the profession in the spirit of its classical origins.

The channel systems were first presented in the *Nei Jing*, compiled during the Han Dynasty (206-220 AD). The *Nei Jing Ling Shu* is popularly known as the *Zhen Jing* or "Treatise of Acupuncture," and considered the foundational acupuncture text. It is through the channel systems of the *Ling Shu* that acupuncture's true sophistication, as a complete system of medicine, is established. To fully appreciate acupuncture as a system of medicine, the wisdom of the *Ling Shu*, and therefore the channel systems must be understood.

Sun Si-Miao is seen as the physician who encouraged clinicians to learn the theories and practices of both herbs and acupuncture; not because either system needed the other to become complete, but to enrich both traditions by seeing the world through the eyes of the other.

"Herbalized acupuncture" allows an acupuncturist the benefit of seeing acupuncture from an herbal point of view. However, within the current state of acupuncture education, the *Ling Shu's* acupuncture-specific view is largely missing. The theories of the *Ling Shu*, illuminated through the channel systems of acupuncture, could greatly strengthen the Chinese medical profession as a whole. It is a point of view which *Sun Si-Miao* (one of the "God's of Chinese Medicine") considered important for both acupuncturists as well as herbalists to know.

Each school of thought within Chinese Medicine presents a view of the world. The title "*Ling Shu*" suggests acupuncture goes beyond the physical or mental. The popular *Ling Shu* Chapter 8 infers that all diseases are also spiritual challenges: to treat with acupuncture, one must always remain "rooted in the spirit." The channel systems are presented by the *Ling Shu* as the "axis" to lead us back to our "*Ling-soul*." Fundamental Daoist and Confucian philosophies are communicated through the 74 Channels of Classical Acupuncture. There's deep philosophical significance to the way the channels are organized, how they connect, as well as their physiology and pathology. The Classical Chinese view

of the world is contained within the channel systems. Therein is the code to restore and maintain health, and return us to our spirit.

The channel systems represent the body's layers of *qi*. My teacher, Jeffrey Yuen has often referred to *qi* as "relationship," and the channel systems as "roads." There are three layers of *qi* in the body: *wei qi*, *ying qi* and *yuan qi*. These three levels of "relationship" are manifested through the acupuncture channels.

The art of diagnosis within classical acupuncture involves assessment into which "roadway" a patient is struggling with. This allows an acupuncturist to understand and focus into the specific layer of *qi* in which the patient is engaged. It is a way to listen and see the person, ideally creating the resonance necessary for healing to occur.

What is the language being used by the patient? How do they exhibit themselves? Is the complexion very pale or rosy, or containing varicosity along the skin? Do the emotions, which relate to the ying level, seem to be the etiology? These are classical Longitudinal Luo Vessel signs, as these channels manifest in "discoloration," and relate to the ying level. Or, are there symptoms of vulnerability to the external environment, which appear to be weakening the constitution, suggesting a *wei* and *yuan qi* relationship, associated with the Divergent Channels. Or, does the person keep referring to things that run in the family, associated with the Extraordinary Vessels and the level of constitutional *yuan qi*?

The channels systems provide great latitude in "treating the individual" - an attribute that sets Chinese Medicine apart from the modern western medical model. By identifying the level of *qi* the patient is engaged with, one can work individually on a very personalized "soul" level. Not every person is focused on the level of the Primary Channels. Some are more fully engaged with the Divergent Channels or Luo Vessels. To treat a patient using the 60 "Secondary" Channels of acupuncture can often reach a patient closer to where they are, creating greater resonance, and often very dramatic results.

If we allow ourselves to be inspired by the wisdom of *Sun Si-Miao*, modern acupuncturists and herbalists alike can benefit from the *Ling Shu*. It is through the spirit that healing occurs. The wisdom of the ancients contains the code, or "axis" into the spirit of each of us, and also into the beautiful medicine we love. To return to the source of the medicine, rooted in its classical history, is a return to the spirit of acupuncture.

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