



PHILOSOPHY

The Sinew Channels: A Lesson in *Wei Qi*

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The *Ling Shu* is considered the seminal text of acupuncture. It begins with a mission statement: "To preserve and protect acupuncture, so it won't be forgotten, obliterated and lost."

Acupuncture is regarded as an art in the *Ling Shu*, with a standard of excellence that is difficult to attain. Outlined within are methods by which a student can cultivate understanding and skill as an "artist of the needle." Respect for the six channel systems, the three types of *qi* and the "Nine Needles" of Classical Acupuncture are essential to the education of the acupuncturist.

This is as an "ode" to the wisdom of the *Ling Shu*, as well as to my own teacher Jeffrey Yuen. I am committed to help preserve the art of the needle, as presented in its original form.

The *Ling Shu* teaches that the body is composed of three levels of *qi*: *wei qi*, *ying qi* and *yuan qi*. Each level is illustrated through the channel systems. Statements about physiological function and pathological tendency are communicated through the trajectories of each channel.

I would like to focus on the most superficial level of *qi*: the *wei* level, and the channel system which conducts *wei qi*: the Sinew Channels.



The channel systems in the *Ling Shu* are introduced through a discussion of the "Nine Needles." The needle, being the tool of the acupuncturist, represents the cultivation of skill and understanding of *qi* and the channels. Classically, an apprentice was given one needle at a time. The intent was to become acquainted with one channel system, and therefore one level of *qi* at a time. Once that level was mastered, the next needle would be given. Each needle became a graduation into the deeper layers of the body.

Beginning in the *Ming* Dynasty (1368-1644), eight of the "Nine Needles" were abandoned. The "Round and Sharp Needle," similar to the modern filiform needle, was the only one that remained. The effects of the other eight were simulated through various needle techniques developed for the filiform needle. Within Classical Acupuncture, the techniques of the "Nine Needles" are still employed.

The first of the "Nine Needles" is the "Chisel." It works to stimulate *wei qi*. It is associated with the Sinew Channels, which are presented in Chapter 13 of the *Ling Shu*. The second needle is the "Round," also associated with the Sinews, often used for pain from sinew stasis.

The Sinew Channels are conduits of *wei qi*, which flows within the muscles, tendons, ligaments, skin and smooth muscles of the gut. The *Yang* Sinews ascend into the head and face to affect the sense organs. The *Yin* Sinews descend into the chest and abdomen to affect peristalsis and the heart.

All Sinew channels begin at the *Jing Well* point, which is the only standardized point along the channel trajectories. All other points are "Ah Shi," based on reactivity.

Channel trajectories teach us about *qi*. The Sinews are a lesson in *wei qi*. It is commonly known that Sinew Channels treat pain and external pathogenic factors. The trajectories of the Sinews also show *wei qi*'s effect on the sense organs, the heart muscle and peristalsis of the gut. This is why they are used to treat issues of the head and sense organs, the digestive system and even issues associated with sleep and the chest.

Wei qi relates to the cyclical aspects of the body. In addition to its relationship with climatic factors, *Wei qi* can be seen to regulate the "seasons" within the body. This is illustrated by the Sinew Channels.

The Sinews follow a daily cyclical timeclock. Unlike the Primary Channels, the Sinews are organized "zonally" instead of "elementally." They flow from *Tai Yang* to *Shao Yang* to *Yang Ming*. The yin channels flow from *Tai Yin* to *Shao Yin* to *Jue Yin*. *Wei qi* is activated upon waking, beginning its circulation through the Leg *Tai Yang* (Bladder) Sinew; eventually moving inward at the end of the day to "home" into the *Jue Yin* (Pericardium) Sinew at the chest. Sleep is heavily affected by *wei qi*, as illustrated by the trajectories of the Sinew Channels. If the *wei qi* is not successfully returning to the chest via the Pericardium Sinew, sleep will be disturbed. The same is true for digestion. One must "rest to digest," illustrated by the Yin Sinew Channels returning to the abdomen at the end of the day.

Wei qi also follows a cyclical flow that is seasonal. For each of the year's 12 months, a particular Sinew Channel is at its height of activity. The monthly cycle differs from the daily flow, moving from Leg *Shao Yang* in January to Leg *Tai Yang* in February and Leg *Yang Ming* in March, eventually ending in December with Arm *Shao Yin*. Seasonal allergies are often due to unresolved external pathology trapped within the monthly Sinew Channel.

Wei qi is also associated with involuntary, autonomic processes, such as heart rate and sweating. *Wei qi* and the Sinews are spontaneous, automatic and unconscious. They relate to "moods" and unconscious activity. Often when we feel or act in a certain way, yet don't know why or what it is about, it's a *wei qi* pathology, associated with the Sinew Channels.

There are a vast number of clinical applications for the Sinew Channels. Anything relating to *wei qi* can be addressed through using the Sinew Channels. With a greater understanding of *wei qi*, the application of the Sinew Channels become far wider and more interesting than the treatment of pain and external pathogenic factors.

The Sinew Channels are treated with *Jing Well* and *Ah Shi* points. They are also treated through the Sinew's "fruits" or "binding areas" where pathogens and *wei qi* collect. The "Chisel" is the needle technique used in Sinew Channel treatments: to clear *wei* level obstructions. A deeper, more muscular or "damp" condition may require the use of the "Round" or "Spoon" techniques to engage with the muscle and activate *ying qi* for support.

Diagnosis of the Sinew Channels is not classically associated with the pulse or tongue. They are channels to be palpated. They are also channels that are diagnosed through movement assessment associated with the "zones."

The Sinew Channels are seldom taught within TCM colleges. However, their importance is worthy of preservation, both in terms of treatment and as teaching tools. Through understanding the Sinew

Channels, the nature of *wei qi* is illuminated. Even for those committed to using only the Primary Channels in clinical practice, understanding the Sinew Channels can enrich treatments. Greater intention can inform the application of the Primary Channels through information gleaned from the Sinew Channels.

The first chapter of the *Su Wen* is a call to respect the wisdom of the past. The *Ling Shu* returns to this theme, suggesting that such wisdom is at risk of being lost and obliterated if not preserved. The full power of acupuncture, as a complete system of medicine, is contained within the teachings of the *Ling Shu*. The wisdom of the *Ling Shu*, and its methods for achieving artistic cultivation and skill, can only elevate acupuncture as a profession - supporting its effectiveness and expanding its application.

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