

The Eight Extraordinary Confluent Points

David Twicken, DOM, LAc

The eight extraordinary confluent points are a very popular set of acupuncture points in the modern practice of acupuncture. They are also called the intersection, meeting, command, opening, master, and the flowing and pooling points of the eight extraordinary vessels. Prior to the Jin (1115-1234 AD) and Yuan Dynasties (1279-1368 AD) this category of points were not known in Chinese medical texts.

The intersection points were introduced to the Chinese medical community by Dou Hanqing (1196-1280) in his book, *Compass Bearings for the Acupuncture Classic*. This book is also known as the *Guide to Acupuncture*. The history of this category of points is interesting. Dou Hangqing states he was given a copy of the book from the hermit Song Zihua. This book was destroyed in a fire in his family library. Years later, Dou Hanqing was able to get a copy from a private library collection.¹ The origin of this text is credited to the hermit Shao Shi.² He is from an unknown time and location.

The *Compass Bearings for the Acupuncture Classic* includes a presentation of the eight points of intersection. The book states that the points of intersection communicate with one of the eight extraordinary vessels and unite at areas of the body. The following summarizes these connections:

- Gong Sun, Spleen 4 communicates with the Chong Mai, and Nei Guan, Pericardium 6 communicates with the Yin Wei Mai, and both points and vessels unite with the chest, heart and the stomach.
- Zu Lin Qi, Gallbladder 41 communicates with the Dai Mai, and Wai Guan, San Jiao 5 communicates with the Yang Wei Mai, and both points and vessels unite at the outer canthus, behind the ear, cheek, neck shoulder, supraclavicular fossa and the diaphragm.
- Hou Xi, Small Intestine 3 communicates with the Du Mai, and Shen Mai, Bladder 62 communicates with the Yang Qiao Mai, and both points and vessels unite at the inner canthus, nape of the neck, small intestine and bladder.
- Lie Que, Lung 7 communicates with the Ren Mai, and Zhao Hai, Kidney 6 communicates with the Yin Qiao Mai, and they both unite with the lungs, throat and diaphragm.³

The book goes on to describe the point locations and the symptoms that the eight points treat. There are long lists of symptoms and conditions the points treat (each point treats over 20-symptoms and conditions).⁴ There is no diagnosis or cause for each of the symptoms and conditions. The book does not include any theories or functions of the eight extraordinary vessels. It does not list any points on the eight extraordinary vessels or how these eight intersecting points actually intersect with their associated eight extraordinary vessels. There is no internal pathway explanation of these meetings and no Chinese medical theory why these points were selected. There is only a list of symptoms that each of the eight points treat and the associated eight extraordinary vessel they intersect.

Theories about the eight extraordinary vessels developed throughout the long history of Chinese

medicine. The Ren and Du vessels have their own points. The remaining vessels include points from the main channels. One might ask how does the body know the points selected are an eight extraordinary vessel treatment and not a treatment for the channel, collateral or the organ where the point is located? For example, if Gong Sun, Spleen 4 was selected to treat the Chong Mai, how does the body know it is not a spleen luo collateral treatment or a spleen organ/channel treatment? There is no recognized acupuncture theory in the classics before or after Dou Hanqing that explains how these points work within the body.

Chapter 9 of the *Ling Shu*, "From Beginning to End," offers an acupuncture treatment plan. Once a diagnosis is made, the method is to treat points on the imbalanced channels. Three points are selected on the Yin-Yang paired channels to balance them. For example, if the foot yang ming (stomach channel) is excess, the treatment will be to treat the foot tai yin (spleen) and the foot yang ming (stomach) channels, to balance the foot yang ming (stomach). This treatment plan is applied to all the channels. The strategy is to directly treat the channel that is imbalanced and treat its Yin-Yang pair. If we apply this strategy to the eight extraordinary vessels, we would select points on the vessels being treated. The *Ling Shu* offers three points as a treatment, which can be a guide to developing point combinations to influence the eight extraordinary vessels. Whether a practitioner treats more or less than three points is not of primary importance, the goal is to treat the channel directly and pick enough points to cause the therapeutic effect.

Nei Dan is a part of ancient Chinese culture. It can be translated as inner pill or inner alchemy. There are many traditions and methods of Nei Dan. One method I have learned is eight extraordinary vessels Nei Dan. In this practice, qi is guided (with yi/focus) through each of the pathways of the eight extraordinary vessels multiple times. The practice begins by circulating qi in each channel to clear the pathway and restore it to a balanced condition. In Nei Dan, the practitioner is able to feel the pathways and feel the condition of the channel.⁵ This practice is similar to the guidance in chapter 9 of the *Ling Shu*, in this situation we are not needling the channel but we are directly influencing the channel by circulating qi inside it. This Nei Dan practice was a guiding experience for how I treat the eight extraordinary vessels: treat multiple points on the vessels(s) to be treated.

The eight extraordinary vessels theories developed for more than a thousand years. A clear presentation of their relationships to jing and yuan qi has become part of mainstream Chinese medical teachings. This relationship is not part of Dou Hanqing's book. The symptoms in his book are not presented in any framework that differentiates the main channels, zangfu organs, luo collaterals or the eight extraordinary vessels. There is no theory that correlates the eight intersecting points presented by Dou Hanqing and the modern understanding of the eight extraordinary vessels. This lack of correlation is a major reason that treating points on the pathways of the eight extraordinary channels is the key to influencing them instead of treating the one intersecting point; this treatment plan is supported by the guidance gained from chapter 9 of the *Ling Shu*, "treat the imbalanced vessel."

There is no clear record of important developments of the eight extraordinary vessels. An example of this is the Wei vessels. The early Chinese Medical texts do not list the pathways or acupuncture points of the Yin and Yang Wei vessels. Based on the early Chinese medical texts it would not be possible to do an acupuncture treatment that included the Yin and Yang Wei vessels. The *Su Wen* and the *Ling Shu*, the Han Dynasty medical classics include detailed descriptions of the main acupuncture channel pathways. They also include about 160-points. The *Su Wen* and the *Ling Shu* reference the Yin and Yang Wei vessels. They do not include pathway descriptions or acupuncture points. The *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu* basically state: "The Yang Wei is where all Yang meet and the Yin Wei is where all Yin Meet."

The later Han Dynasty classic the *Nan Ching*, The Classic of Difficulties, Chapter 29 states: "The yang wei arises where all the yang (channels) meet, while the yin wei arises where all the yin (channels) intersect. The yang wei links with the yang (channels), while the yin wei links the yin (channels)"⁶

The *Jia Yi Jing*, The Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion (Jin Dynasty, 215-282 AD) includes two main sections that refer to the Eight Extraordinary Vessels. Chapter 2 of Book II is "Eight Extraordinary Vessels," this section primarily presents the material found in the *Su Wen*, *Ling Shu* and *Nan Ching*. It says the following about the Wei Vessels: "The yang and yin linking vessels link (all the parts of) the body (into a whole). They collect and store but cannot not circulate or irrigate. Therefore, the yang linking vessel originates at the meeting place of the yang (channels) and the yin linking vessel originates at the joining place of all the yin (channels)."⁷

In Book Three of the *Jia Yi Jing*, the main channels are presented by regions of the body, for example, points on the head, points on the back and points on the abdomen. The points on the Wei vessels are listed in this area with other point qualities. For instance, in Chapter One section 2, "Root Spirit (Ben Shen, GB 13) is a meeting point of the foot shao yang and the yang linking point." In Chapter 22, it states, "Cycle Gate (Qi Men, Liver 14) is a meeting point of the foot tai yin, jue yin and the yin linking vessel." And "Abdominal Lament (Fu Ai, Spleen 16) is a meeting point of the foot tai yin and the yin linking vessel."⁸ The *Jia Yi Jing* is the first book to list the points on the Yin and Yang Wei vessels. We do not have an original version of this classic book; it was restored at a later time. The difference between Book Three, the "Eight Extraordinary Vessels" and the information in the main channels section provide strong support that the information was most likely added much later than the time the *Jia Yi Jing* was originally written. Also, there are no pathway descriptions of the Yin and Yang Wei vessels in the *Jia Yi Jing*.

Practitioners and historians do not know when the Yin and Yang Wei vessels pathways and points were developed. We do not know who formulated them and the discussions that may have occurred in deciding which points were selected and which were not. For this reason, as students and practitioners of Chinese medicine, we should critically analyze the theories and points for these vessels.

Learning the history of Chinese medicine offers the practitioner the opportunity to understand how new theories and methods were introduced. This knowledge can offer the practitioner the flexibility to learn and apply different strategies and methods from the long history of Chinese medicine.

References:

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