

A Comparison of Dr. Wang Ju-Yi's Diagnosis through Meridian-Channel Palpation and Early Acupuncture Literature

by Shelley Ochs

Introduction

Studying with Dr. Wang Ju-Yi has profoundly influenced my understanding of acupuncture theory and practice, Chinese medical literature, the history of Chinese medicine, and even my personal world view. In the last few years I have stepped away from the clinic to pursue a PhD in the history of Chinese medicine. In unexpected ways, these two areas of research have come together in the concept of channel palpation and channel diagnosis.

My PhD dissertation topic was about Bian Que, the legendary physician who may have lived during the Warring States period, about 500 BCE. As I began my research, I was struck by how the early medical literature related to acupuncture and moxibustion described the vessels or channels as objects of palpation. In fact, the process of the formation of the concept of the channels and their use in clinical practice that we find in a mature, sophisticated form in the *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu*, bears a striking resemblance to the concept of the meridian-channels developed by Dr. Wang through 50 years of practice, reflection, and study.

However, in a certain sense, his process has been exactly the opposite of the historical evolution of the concept of the meridian-channels. Since he was born in modern times, when the concept of the channels as carriers of qi and blood and their links to the internal organs are emphasized, it was Dr. Wang's clinical experience and his study and application of the concepts and methods we find in classical acupuncture literature that led him to "rediscover" the principles and clinical efficacy of channel palpation.

Dr. Wang's Understanding of the Nature of the Meridian-Channels

王居易老师对经络的认识

如果把有形的脏腑、器官、组织看作是生命的物质基础，则经络是生命活动的存在形式”（王居易，未病，第330页）

“If we consider the zang-fu, the organs and other tissues with tangible form, to be the material basis

of life, then we can say that the meridian-channels are the living structure or form for all the activities and movements of living things.”

The standard translation of the mai or jing-luo as “meridians” unduly emphasizes that they are invisible lines on the body. They have therefore been easily associated with “energy,” without paying due attention to their physical nature. Although the meridian-channels are not reducible to any one anatomical structure, they are a material, substantial part of the living, human body, as well as the bodies of animals. The complexity of the term jing-luo makes rendering it into English quite difficult. My current solution is to use the compound term “meridian-channel” to highlight the fact that they are both pathways that unify sets of functions and structures, as well as conduits for material substances. I hope that this term captures more of the nuances of the term jing-luo in the work of Dr. Wang.

In his teaching and writing, Dr. Wang has emphasized that we should keep two definitions of the meridian-channels in mind: the first is that they are “gaps,” or holes or crevices within the divisions of the flesh or muscle that transport qi and blood; the second is that they are sets of functions, specifically, they move qi and blood, protect yin and yang, lubricate the sinews and bones, and mobilize the joints. He has also described the latter as “a system for the supply and metabolism of substances that works through multiple pathways and multiple levels of the body.”

Dr. Wang has elucidated the nature of the channels in both modern and classical terms. Here I want to focus on his understanding of the following statement that we find in the *Ling Shu* or *Pivot of Efficacy*.

“经脉者，所以能诀死生，处百病，调虚实，不可不通。”（灵枢·经脉）

“Because the meridian-channels determine life and death, harbor the hundred diseases and regulate emptiness and fullness, they cannot be blocked.”

This pithy statement reminds us of the fundamental principle behind acupuncture: keeping the channels open is the key to health, disease and longevity. We can examine each section of this statement further.

1. “诀死生” Determine Life and Death

Concepts of life and death differ significantly across eras and cultures in the world. In early Chinese civilization, the meridian-channels were part of a tapestry of concepts about the nature of living beings and their place in the world. Therefore, we find the statement in the *Ling Shu* that,

“the channels determine life and death.” This can be understood to mean that it is the presence or absence of the channels that determines whether a person is alive. It also reflects the importance of the health of the channels for maintaining optimal bodily functions. The state of the channels determines whether a person will recover or succumb to a serious illness. Dr. Wang has summarized the relationship between the internal organs and the meridian-channels thus: “The five zang foster essence and therefore govern destiny, the channels permeate and provide [substances], and therefore they govern life.”（“五脏育精主命，经络灌渗主生。”）

2. 处百病 Harbor or Co-exist with the Hundred Diseases

“The channels co-exist with the hundred diseases.” This means that all illnesses, including those due to internal causes, external causes, injuries, or damage to the body through poor diet, lack of sleep, etc., influence and are reflected in the meridian-channels. Disease or dysfunction in the skin, vessels, flesh, sinews and bones, or in the five zang and six fu, or the nine orifices will be reflected in the meridian-channels and can be treated through them. This may be one reason the compilers of the Han Dynasty *Ling Shu* or *Pivot of Efficacy* named it thus.

3. 各有所长 Each Component of the Channel System is Responsible for Specific Aspects of the Functioning of the Organism

This short statement points to the heart of channel theory. It is necessary to have the preceding view of the nature of the channels in order to appreciate the meaning and significance of the six qi or six levels in acupuncture theory. In modern times, we often focus on either the connections between the internal organs and the same-named channel or a simple understanding of pathology along the pathways of the channels. Dr. Wang's work provides us with a way of utilizing the principles of qi transformation, including the patterns found in the *Shang Han Lun*, and making them relevant for acupuncture diagnosis and treatment.

We can divide the channel system into six sets of functions. For example, the hand and foot tai yin channels are responsible for moving water and transforming dampness and transforming and regulating qi. The hand and foot shao yin channels drain fire and clear heat, and open and penetrate the yin collaterals. The hand and foot jue yin channels nourish yin and calm the shen-spirit, and nourish blood and regulate the channels. The hand and foot tai yang channels warm yang and relieve the surface, and raise yang and disperse cold. The hand and foot shao yang channels regulate the qi dynamic and course and

open bindings and stagnation. The hand and foot yang ming channels ferment and transform water and grains (food) and guide out waste.

Channel Pathology in Wang Ju-Yi's Thought and Practice

王居易理论及临床中的经络诊查

“经脉者，所以能决死生，处百病，调虚实，不可不通。”（灵枢·经脉）

“Because the meridian-channels determine life and death, harbor the hundred diseases and regulate emptiness and fullness, they cannot be blocked.”

Channel palpation relates to the second half of the statement above. It is important to have a clear idea of channel pathology and its manifestations before we attempt to use the channels for diagnosis. An important pillar of Dr. Wang's acupuncture theory is the differentiation of reactive channels, which reflect disease and disharmony in particular patients, and the treatment channels for patients, which primarily regulate the six levels and treat ailments along the channel pathways. This distinction is rooted in both his interpretation of the sections of the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* related to channel pathology and knowledge of the correspondences between symptoms, palpable channel changes, and effective treatment points accumulated over 50 years of practice.

Channel symptoms are systematically recorded in the “Jing Mai” chapter of the *Ling Shu*. Each channel is described under the following rubric:

经络症状在《灵枢·经脉》篇中有系统的描述。每条经络都在以下标题后有描述。

- Name of meridian-channel
- Origin (site near the ankles or wrists)
- Pathway
- 是动则病 “When this one moves, there are thus ailments of...”
- 是主[肺] 所生病者 “It is this one that controls the ailments generated by the [x-zang]. [List of ailments].”
- States of qi [excess, vacuous, effulgent, insufficient] cause ailments of...
- Treatment Principles “For all these ailments, one should needle quickly if there is heat, retain if there is cold..” etc.

经络名

起点（踝、腕周围）

循行

是动则病（若此运动，则会生如此疾病...）

是主[肺] 所生病者（为此脏所主疾病，疾病列举）

气的状态（气盛，少气，气有余，气虚）病因...

治则 “为此诸病，盛则泻之，虚则补之，热则疾之，寒则留之” 等。

In 1988, Dr. Wang published an article with his interpretation of the meaning and the clinical significance of these passages. After his article was published many physicians wrote to him to thank him for clarifying this problem and giving them an interpretation than could be applied in clinical practice. He explained it thus: 是主[肺] 所生病者。 “It is this one that controls the ailments generated by the [x-zang]. [List of ailments],” should be understood to mean “this channel and its acupuncture points treat the following ailments” and can thus be abbreviated as “this channel governs” (是主).

The parallel phrase, 是动则病 “When this one moves, there are thus ailments of...” should be understood to mean “abnormal changes in this channel produce or indicate ailments of....” This is also in accord with the Song Dynasty scholar Shi Song's definition of dong as “changing the original state or position of an object; resonance.” The author of the Ming Dynasty *Classified Canon*, Zhang Jie-bin also wrote, “ ‘Moving’ refers to change, changes that alter the normal conditions cause ailments.” This relates directly to using the findings gleaned from palpation of the channels as the basis for acupuncture treatment. Dr. Wang succinctly summarized this idea thus:

“The theory of ‘ailments caused by abnormal changes’ (*shi dong*) in the meridian-channels tells us that any illness or pattern (*zheng*) will inevitably cause abnormal changes in the channels. The disease, pattern or symptoms can be diagnosed through the four examinations (looking, inquiring, listening/smelling and palpating), the latter can only be determined through palpating the channels with the techniques of observing, pulse diagnosis, palpation of channel pathways, pressing of points, and feeling the surface of the body.”¹

“ ‘是动’ 病候理论表明，任何疾病或证型的出现，必然伴有经脉异常的出现。前者通过 ‘望闻问切’ 可以获得，后者则通过对经络的 ‘审、切、循、按、扪’ 才能确定。”

Historical Context

Due to the discovery of the Mawangdui and Zhangjiashan medical manuscripts in the 1970s, we can now trace these passages from the *Ling Shu* to older texts and thus see the evolution of the development of the concept of the channels over a several-hundred-year period. Dr. Wang's interpretation is further justified if we consider this historical development of “channel symptoms” in

the early acupuncture literature. If we compare these excavated texts with the received version of the *Ling Shu*, we immediately see that almost all of the ailments were added under “suo sheng,” or “shi zhu” as Dr. Wang prefers to designate it, the sections related to the disorders that a channel can treat (see table below). The author believes there are two possibilities for this phenomenon: one is that the *shi dong* ailments were based on channel palpation and as it was replaced by palpation of the radial pulse, this mode of diagnosis was gradually abandoned; the other is that the ascendancy of zang-fu diagnosis led to less emphasis on “channel diagnosis,” at least in the extant medical literature.

Meridian-channel Palpation and the Development of the Concept of the Channels

Research on the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*, as well as excavated medical texts such as those found at Mawangdui in Hunan, China, suggests that palpation of multiple areas of the body determined the sites for bian-stone, moxibustion, or needle therapy, and the results obtained led to the further elaboration of the connections between the upper and lower body. Initially, observations of palpable and visible blood vessels, skin temperature and texture, and pathological changes in skin and soft tissue were correlated with ailments and effective treatment sites. This eventually culminated in a system of channels and collaterals that incorporated ideas from astrology/astronomy, calendar science, musical theory, and multiple views of the internal and external structure of the body.

Many different diagnostic techniques involving body palpation and observation are recorded in the early acupuncture literature in China. Many of these techniques are not a part of the mainstream practice of Chinese medicine in either China or Western countries today. However, evidence suggests that body palpation was once considered to be the critical link in the process of choosing the most effective channel and technique to relieve bodily pain and ailments. The author, and some scholars in China today, are convinced that physical palpation or observation of pulsating vessels, small blood vessels, skin tone and texture, and other pathological changes in the skin and soft tissue were essential in the early development of acupuncture theory and practice. The channels as we know them today were originally conceived of as palpable and observable blood vessels that could be used to diagnose and treat ailments. Over time, the concept of the channel system as one continuous circuit came to define acupuncture practice and the channels were seen as carriers

of qi and blood with links to every location and function of the human body. Palpation and the subsequent codification of the information obtained from it were critical steps in this historical process.

This is important because it tells us something about how physicians in Han and pre-Han times conceived of the nature of the channels and their effective use in relieving human pain and suffering. Understanding the origins of the channel system may help us to more skillfully utilize it in clinical practice today, and it may also point to fruitful ways to develop and expand its use in the future.

Examination of the pulses, *mai zhen*, in early Chinese medicine originally involved palpation at multiple sites along the *mai* (vessels), or what later came to be known as the acupuncture channels. In the *Ling Shu*, (jiu zhen shi er yuan) it states, "If one is planning to use needles, it is essential to first examine the mai (meridian-channels)." Several other passages in both the *Ling Shu* and *Su Wen* explicitly describe using a variety of hand techniques to examine various sites or channels in order to determine where to needle. For example:

- "Those who use needles must first inspect the channels [jing-luo] for emptiness or fullness [xu-shi, deficiency or excess]. Separate and follow, press and flick, and see which moves under examination. Then, take that one and needle into it." *Ling Shu* (zi jie zhen xie lun)
- "Therefore, when puncturing those with impediment (bi), one must first separate and follow the lower six channels [i.e. leg channels], seeing whether they are empty or full [xu-shi], ...then adjust them." *Ling Shu* (zhou bi)
- "Examine, separate, follow, glide along and press, and notice whether they are hot, cold, flourishing, or in decline, then adjust them." *Ling Shu* (jing shui)
- "One must examine and inquire about how the ailment began, as well as the state of the ailment today. Then, separate and follow the pulsations, noticing whether the channels [jing-luo] are floating or sinking. Follow upwards and downwards, moving with and against [the channels]. Those with rapid pulsations are not ill, those with slow pulsations are ill. Those with no pulsations moving back and forth will die. Those with translucent skin will die." *Su Wen*, Chapter 20 (san bu jiu hou lun)
- "As to the number of punctures, first inspect the channels (jing-mai), separating and following. Determine emptiness and fullness [deficiency and excess] and then adjust them accordingly." *Su Wen* (miao ci lun)

Channel Palpation and the Future Development of Acupuncture

Over time, palpating multiple sites on the body in order to determine acupuncture treatment was mostly abandoned. The ascendancy of organ (zang-fu) manifestation theory and herbal medicine led to the exclusive emphasis on palpating the wrist pulse and observing the tongue. This situation became particularly extreme in the 20th century, when we can say with no exaggeration that mainstream education in China and the West has been engaged in a process of "herbifying" acupuncture theory and practice. Fortunately, Dr. Wang Ju-Yi has revived and expanded channel palpation and has shown us how it leads to outstanding clinical results.

As a practicing clinician, I find that the textual resources on channel palpation are further confirmation that acupuncture must be rooted in a physical, visceral understanding of how the channels manifest and change in living bodies.

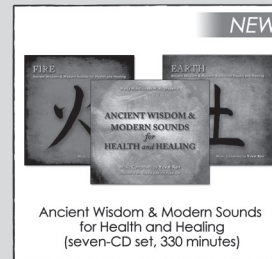
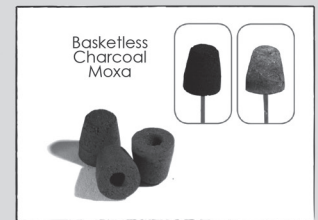
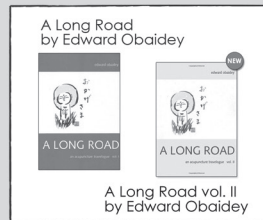
Notes

1. 王居易, "经络病候初探", 中医杂志. 1988年(4): 11

Shelley Ochs received her PhD in the History of Chinese Medicine and Chinese Medical Literature from the Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences in Beijing, where she is now a researcher and translator at the Research Centre for the Protection of Traditional Knowledge of Chinese Medicine. She is a practitioner of traditional Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture, and has completed traditional apprenticeship training with senior acupuncturist Dr. Wang Ju-yi in. She has published on the history and application of acupuncture in both Chinese and English.



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