

Respecting our Ancestors and Searching for our Roots: The Source for the Cultivation and Establishment of Applied Channel Theory

by Wang Ju-yi

Abstract

In recent generations, research on Chinese medical theory has focused on Zang-Fu theories, with little emphasis placed on channel theory. Research and interpretation of classical channel theory in particular are ignored, leading to a decline in acupuncture theory. As a result, the development of acupuncture has become stagnant. Through the author's research into classical channel theory rooted in the *Nei Jing*, he has developed a new concept, Applied Channel Theory. This paper is an introduction to this theoretical system, including the anatomical structure, physiological functions, and qi transformation of channels. In addition, he advocates for the cultivation and establishment of the source of Applied Channel Theory through our recognition of this invaluable knowledge handed down from our ancestors, and our search for the roots of this medical art.

Key Words: Applied Channel Theory, channel structure, channel Qi transformation, theoretical research

Channels are not only central to acupuncture, but also an important fundamental theory of Chinese Medicine. As a result of many historical factors, Applied Channel Theory was pushed to the fringes and largely forgotten. A medical practitioner only had to master the location, functions, and hand manipulations of a few acupuncture points to be considered an acupuncturist! If he were to learn family secrets, special points, or magical methods, and also accumulated some clinical experience, then he would achieve fame. Over a long period of time, the absence of acupuncture theory in clinical practice and education led to its stagnation and decline, which created an obstacle to the development of scholarly research related to acupuncture.

It was from classical channel theory that I deciphered the truth and essence of acupuncture theory. While the ancient physicians gradually accumulated clinical experience over a long period of time, philosophical thought of the era was also assimilated to explain their understanding of

phenomena in the clinic. Over time the merging of meticulous clinical experience and philosophical thought led to the genesis of channel theory. Continuous clinical practice led to its further refinement, resulting in the formation of Applied Channel Theory, which, in turn, stimulated the development of Chinese medicine and acupuncture.

When we search for the roots of our medical art and trace back to its source, we discover that acupuncture was not concocted in a laboratory or from anatomical studies. Instead, it was developed by our ancestors and recorded in the classic, the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor*, which contains scholarly thought on Applied Channel Theory. My understanding of channel theory spanned a 30-year process, which was a hefty sacrifice. I believe that many of our acupuncture colleagues can relate to my personal experiences and share a similar learning curve. We do not refute the contributions of modern medical science, but when searching for the theoretical foundations of acupuncture, it is imperative to respect the achievements of our ancestors and to dutifully return to the classics. It is our responsibility to decipher traditional and classical theories in order to discover the true nature of channels.

The following four topics will be discussed.

1. Do channels have a foundation in anatomy?

Up to now, scholars have yet to discover the anatomical structure of channels, which is the evidence used to refute their existence. In actuality, Chinese classical medicine had knowledge of anatomy. Within classical medical texts that date back 3000 years, such as the *Nei-Jing* and *Classic of Difficulties*, there is detailed documentation of anatomical knowledge, which is similar to the universally accepted content found in modern anatomical texts from the past 200 years.

For instance, in the *Nei-Jing* and *Classic of Difficulties* it describes the location, size, weight, length and functions of the viscera, which all correspond to modern anatomical records. Only the spleen is heavier, since the classical physicians measured the weight of the pancreas and spleen together. Classical physicians also had a clear understanding of the surface anatomy of the human body, and used a five-tissues classification system (skin, vessels, muscles, sinews and bones). According to historical records, the accumulation of anatomical knowledge was related to wars, exacting revenge against enemies, brutal torture of prisoners of war, including live dissections. If there weren't large numbers of subjects who sacrificed their bodies for careful observation and dissection, then the ancient

physician would not have achieved such clear and detailed anatomical knowledge.

2. Channels are an amalgam of anatomy and physiology

Channels were an important discovery by classical sages from astute observation and research on life sciences. Channel theory provided a unique contribution to medicine in its understanding of human physiology, pathology, diagnosis, and treatment. Chapter 10 of the *Divine Pivot* states, "the channels determine life and death; are involved in all disease; regulate excess and deficiency; and, must not be blocked." (《灵枢·经脉篇》云: "经脉者, 所以能决死生、处百病、调虚实, 不可不通。" 其中 "决死生、处百病、调虚实, 不可不通。") These words summarize the functions of channels, and up to the present day serve as the theoretical foundation for Chinese medical physicians, and especially acupuncturists.

Chapter 33 of the *Divine Pivot* states "the 12 channels belong to the zang-fu in the interior and connect with the articulations on the exterior;" (《灵枢·海论》: "夫十二经脉者, 内属于腑脏, 外络于肢节") and, Chapter 47 states that the channels "move Qi and Blood to nourish Yin-Yang, moisten the sinews and bones, benefit the unimpeded movement of the joints." (《灵枢·本藏》: "经脉者, 所以行血气而营阴阳, 濡筋骨, 利关节者也。") These two passages clearly reveal that channels are involved in the movement of body fluids and function as a complete system that carries out the rhythmic distribution of metabolism in the human body. Thus, channels must not be mistakenly considered from an anatomical perspective alone. This is a misconception that contemporaries have succumbed to in their interpretation and research of channels over the past 100 years. Such a flawed understanding of channels impedes the development of acupuncture. Now is the time to free and remove ourselves from these misconceptions.

3. Structure, location, and functions of channels

Chapter 10 of the *Divine Pivot* states that "the 12 channels travel in the muscle divisions, in a depth that cannot be seen; what is observable are the collaterals." (《灵枢·经脉》: "经脉十二者, 伏行分肉之间, 深而不见; 其常见者, 足太阴过于外踝之上, 无所隐故也。诸脉之浮而常见者, 皆络脉也。") If the channels travel in the muscle divisions, in a layer that can't be seen, and only the collaterals are observable, then how are we able to understand the nature of channels?

In Chapter 10 it also writes, "if one were to take an eight *chi* tall man, the skin and flesh (*rou*) are here. Externally one can determine and measure

the length, and then press (*qie*) and palpate (*xun*) for the precise location. Once dead, the body can be dissected and the channels observed.” (《灵枢·经脉》：“若夫八尺之士，皮肉在此，外可度量切循而得之，其死可解剖而视之。”) In this passage, “flesh (*rou*肉)” has a broad meaning, which refers to the skin, vessels, muscles, sinews and bones, all tissues that have physical form. *Qie, xun* (切循) means to press and palpate on the surface of the body. “Muscle divisions” (分肉) indicate the crevices between all of the different viscera and tissues in the body, including the spaces between the skin, vessels, muscles, sinews, and bones; the spaces between the tissue membranes; the crevices between the lobes of the viscera; and, also includes the gaps within each individual tissue.

In the past, a greater emphasis was placed on the first part of the passage, commenting that channels should be externally measured. However, the rest of the sentence that mentions pressing and palpating was ignored. The crevices of the channels on the surface of the body and between the muscle divisions can be pressed and palpated by the practitioner. It's these very crevices that link and communicate the interior with the exterior, and integrate the internal and external. In addition, crevices are involved with the movement of the body's Qi, Blood and Fluids. They complete the processes of nourishment, metabolism, growth and decline of the entire body's viscera, nine orifices, and tissues (skin, vessels, muscles, sinews, bones).

The spaces between the muscles and the borders of these spaces comprise the two important aspects of the channels, and are involved with channel Qi transformation. Therefore, channels are essential for implementing the control, regulation and balance of the absorption and metabolism of Qi, Blood, Fluids, and nutrients.

Channels exist in the crevices between the muscles, but the borders of these crevices (the surrounding walls) also consist of the surrounding external membranes (triple burner) of the skin, vessels, muscles, sinews and bones. Beyond the membranes, in a deeper layer, are the tissues – the skin, vessels, muscles, sinews and bones. Crevices between the muscle divisions consist of variations in depth, width, and size (in the classical documents they are described in terms of water systems – streams, ditches, pools and seas – 溪、沟、池、海). As a result, there arose special categories of acupuncture points that describe the unique flow of Qi and Blood in the channels distal to the elbow and knee joints, such as the Jing-Well, Ying-Spring, Shu-Stream, Jing-River and He-Sea points, where Qi-Blood emanates (Well Points), glides (Spring Points), pours (Jing Points), and enters inwards (Sea Points).

4. Unique characteristics of channel qi transformation

Focus is typically placed on channel pathways and their connections to the Zang-Fu and joints and limbs. As for Qi transformation, mainly Zang-Fu Qi transformation is considered. In reality, channel qi transformation is the most important concept of the channel theoretical system. Channel Qi transformation refers to the conversion of energy of different material products within the channel system, which helps to accomplish the human body's entire process of growth, development, and survival. Channel Qi transformation points primarily to the transformation of Yin-Yang. Since within Yin, there is both Yin and Yang; and, within Yang there is also both Yin and Yang; therefore, the permutations of Qi transformation are infinite. All physiological and pathological processes involve qi transformation. When there is an impediment in the process of Qi transformation, an abnormal change will appear in the channels. Changes in the natural, pre-natal, post-natal, social, and psychological environments all require the participation of the channels to control, regulate and balance Qi and Blood in the channels. When this is achieved, normal physiological activities can be performed.

Conclusion

The author believes, as an analogy, that if the Zang-Fu are seen as the coal mines, steel factories, oilfields, mechanical factories, farms and ranches of a country, then the channels are likened to its transportation networks, such as the railways, public roads and airways. Channel Qi transformation is involved in the important task of physical distribution, management, and planning of the transportation of products. Without the regulation from the channels, the Zang-Fu become solitary viscera. If channel Qi transformation is devoid of the functions of the Zang-Fu, then they become a body of water without its source, a tree without its roots. Only when the Zang-Fu and channel system are coordinated and unified, can life exist and be maintained. As a unified whole, life is able to rhythmically follow its complete course from birth, youth to old age. Modern life sciences already verify Chinese Medicine's unique understanding of life, and will continue to confirm its “theories” as time passes. Therefore, the author summarizes the relationship between the channels and Zang-Fu in two sentences: the *five zang foster essence, thus govern destiny; the channels permeate, thus govern life* (五脏育精而主命，经络灌渗而主生)。Only when the Zang-Fu and channels are mutually in harmony and working together can there be life, and an effortless completion of its entire life course.

Channels are the guiding principle in the entire Chinese medical theoretical system, occupying 70 percent of the content in the *Nei Jing*. Failure to systematically study and apply Chinese medical theories makes it extremely difficult to pass on and learn this knowledge. We are only at the forefront of our understanding and research of channels. To correctly understand and master the profound concepts of channel theory, we must search for the original understanding of channels. From within classical Chinese medical theory, excavate the ancient physicians' entire process of understanding the functions of channel Qi transformation and the anatomy of channels. Therefore, the solid foundation and source of establishing theories for Applied Channel Theory is through “respecting our ancestors, and searching for the roots (认祖寻根).” I believe that as channel theory and the structures of channels is researched in depth, the result will be not only the development of theories for acupuncture and the rest of Chinese medicine, but will also make profound and long-lasting contributions to the development of all human sciences.

Translated from Chinese by Jonathan Chang

Wang Ju-yi graduated from the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine in 1962 and has been practicing Chinese medicine for over 50 years. Former posts held by Dr. Wang include as chief physician of the Acupuncture Department of Beijing Hospital of Chinese Medicine, director of the Xuanwu Hospital of Chinese Medicine, director of the Department of Acupuncture and Moxibustion of the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences, and Editor-in-chief of the journal Chinese Acupuncture and Moxibustion. He is the founder of the Wang Ju-yi Applied Channel Theory Research Center in Beijing. In 2012, he was recognized by the Beijing Bureau of Chinese Medicine as one of the famous Chinese medical doctors of Beijing; a workstation was established to promote and continue research on Wang Ju-yi's Applied Channel Theory.