

Acupuncture

“One Small Needle Cures a Thousand Illnesses”

Ancient Chinese Saying

Acupuncture (Latin: acus=needle, pungere=to prick) is the oldest system of medicine known to man. When, where and under what circumstances it originated is still a mystery. A Chinese book called *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Dictionary of characters) compiled about 2000 yrs ago during the Han Dynasty mentions *pian*, which means ‘cure of diseases by pressing with a stone’. From this we can thus conclude that acupuncture had been practiced as far as the Stone Age.

Unlike the western system of medicine the Acupuncture works on the philosophy of Yin-Yang and of Five Elements of the ancient Chinese. It is most certainly that acupuncture has been preserved in China and that through constant experiment and re-thinking on the subject, the Chinese people have mastered and practiced this healing art to the extent unknown among other peoples.

The classical Chinese explanation of the acupuncture phenomenon is the existence of specific circumscribed areas on the skin called **acupuncture points**. Recent researches has established that acupuncture points are in fact points of lowered electrical resistance on the skin, and that they exhibit bioelectric phenomenon which can be detected only with special photographic techniques (Kirlian Photography).

The earliest written records that are available about acupuncture are found in the Chinese Medical treatise called *Huang Di Nei Jing* (Yellow Emperor’s Classic of internal Medicine). This is said to be the oldest medical book in the world. It was probably the collective work collated in the third or fourth century B.C., and it is really a compendium of all the medical knowledge, which had accumulated during the preceding several centuries. The *Nei Jing* is the basis of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Upon it is built the whole edifice of Chinese Medical thought and practice. By the time it was written, acupuncture had achieved a high level of sophistication after several centuries of practice. There are 365 points on the body (As 365 Days of a year) and 12 channel (as 12 months of a year) described in *Nei Jing*. The ancient Chinese believed that these points were connected by a system of sub-surface channels, which in turn were connected to internal organs. The vital energy (qi) was supposed to flow along these channels and was said to make up of two contradictory forms called Yin and Yang. Health and well-being were said to depend on the harmonious balancing of the Yin and Yang. Conversely, disease and ill health were said to be result of the unbalancing between Yin and Yang caused by the extrinsic or intrinsic factors acting on the internal organs and manifesting themselves at certain points.

There is specificity of action with regard to disease at each of these points and puncturing the correct combination of points could treat disease. The Yin and Yang imbalance could also be corrected in the same manner.

For modern system of medicine, it is very easy to dismiss such a fictitious hypothesis. If however, these hypothesis are viewed properly one can see the brilliant deductive reasoning based on the empirical observations.

The Cannon of Medicine written over 2000 years before Harvey's monumental proof of circulation of blood stated: "*The blood current flows in a circle and never stops. It may be compared to a circle without beginning or end.*"

Smallpox, a devastating epidemic disease in the 16th century abstracted a great deal of attention at that time. More than 50 treatises were written on the subject. However over 200 yrs before Jenner's epoch-making discovery, a form of inoculation against smallpox consisting of extracting and drying the contents of a pustule and blowing the powder into the nose, gained wide acceptance in China. Russian doctors came to china to study this method in the 17th century and reported this to England in 1717.

These are about some of the vast accurate observations and empirical knowledge accumulated by Chinese Traditional Medicine over centuries.

TCM considered man as the microscopic replica of the universe, which is the macrocosm, and therefore subject to the identical cosmic laws. Man must therefore live in harmony with his environment or suffer the consequences. Chinese medicine was aimed at correcting the internal and external factors in order to help a patient to readjust himself to the nature.

The concept of integrity of the "*milieu interieur*" described by the French physiologist, Claude Bernard, to maintain the internal balance in living organisms is carried to man's external environment as well, in Chinese philosophy. The concept of *Tao* (the Way; the concept of the union of heaven and earth to complete the yearly cycle of nature) is to produce a balance in the "*milieu interieur*" and the *Yin & Yang* combine in a buffering action to produce a "*milieu interieur*".

In acupuncture nine kinds of needles with lengths varying from 1 inch to 8 inches were used. The needles were of various materials and shapes and were inserted into particular points of the body. In very ancient times the needles were made of flint, later of iron, silver, gold or steel.

The earliest recorded case of a cure by acupuncture is found in the "Biographies of Pien Chueh and Tsang Kung" found in the *Shi Ji* (Historical Records) written about 2000 yrs ago. According to this book, the physician Pien Chueh applied acupuncture-moxibustion to the ailing prince of Kuo State and brought him out of the deep coma. This happened during the Warring States Period (476-211 B.C.).

During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.- 220 A.D.) lived a famous surgeon Hua Tuo who was one of the greatest figures in Chinese medicines. He was an expert in the art of acupuncture and a whole line of acupuncture points (called the Huatuoji points) on the back of the trunk are named after him. Hua Tuo discovered that a mixture of hemp and

strong wine was a good anesthetic agent, and by using this medication which he called 'ma fai san' he was able to perform complicated brain and spinal surgery. He was thus the first surgeon in history known to have operated under general anesthesia. Hua Tuo was also the originator of hydrotherapy and medicinal baths.

During the Tsin Dynasty (265-420 A.D.) acupuncture and moxibustion developed still further. At this time there appeared a book, which dealt exclusively with these subjects for the first time. This was the *Zhen Jiu Jia Yi Jing* (An Introduction to Acupuncture and Moxibustion). It summarized all that was known of acupuncture and moxibustion up to this period, and dealt compressively with the theory and principles of acupuncture, the properties and indications of each point, methods of manipulation, dangerous points and prohibitions. Colored diagrams, and acupuncture charts were made during this period and the art of 'cupping' also made appearance as an ancillary method used in combination with acupuncture and venesection.

The Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) is of next importance because it was at this time that Imperial Medical College with a special department for acupuncture and moxibustion was established. This was the first medical school in China. It came into being 200 yrs before the first medical school in Europe.

The next dynasty of interest is Sung Dynasty (960-1280 A.D.) during which time lived Shen Kua, an intellectual genius who postulated (before Kepler did so in Regensburg, Europe, 1609 A.D.) that the apparent course of the sun around the earth was not circular but elliptical. In 1027 A.D., the physician Weng Wei-yi had two hollow life-size bronze figures cast, with the points and channels marked clearly on the surface. *Tong Jen* or 'The Men of Bronze' as they were called, latter became models for teaching and examination purposes. Weng Wei-yi also wrote a book, which became a standard text for acupuncture examinations. It was called *Tong Jen Shu Xue Zhen Jiu Tu Jing*, which means 'Illustrated Manual on the Points for Acupuncture and Moxibustion as found on the Bronze Figure.' The various acupuncture points and their individual properties were discussed at great length in this book, which marked another milestone in the literature on acupuncture. The method of presentation was crisp, logical and exhaustive, and divergent views were presented.

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1664 A.D.) all previous knowledge about acupuncture was once again summarized by Yang Chi-chou in his *Zhen Jiu Da Cheng* (Compendium of Acupuncture and Moxibustion). It was encyclopedic in size and written in short lines of rhythmic prose. Unwritten traditions as well as classical concepts were fully discussed, and exhaustive sections on clinical and therapeutic procedures were included.

The Ching Dynasty (1644-1911 A.D.) was the period when China was thrown open to Western influence. This was the time when Manchus seized power throughout China. Huge encyclopedias, which were four times the size of the Encyclopedia Britannica, were published at this time. One of these called the *Golden Mirror of Medicine* dealt exclusively with the medical science and was fully illustrated. The Ching rulers were however hostile towards acupuncture and issued a decree in 1822 to ban its practice. But

owing to its acceptance by the masses of ordinary people this measure was not very successful. Visiting German, Dutch and French scholars including physicians, Sinologists and Jesuit missionaries were impressed by the therapeutic value of acupuncture and commenced introducing it to their respective countries during this period.

After the First Opium War (1839-1842 A.D.) the Western colonial powers established themselves in China thereby hastening the dissolution of a social order, which had prevailed unbroken for several millennia. The rule of Manchus ended in 1911, and the Sun Yat Sen became President. After a period of civil wars, the Kuomintang regime came into power in 1927 with Chiang Kai Shek as President. The Kuomintang paid little attention to the heritage of traditional Chinese medicine and branded it as quackery. In 1929 the government proposed a complete ban on the traditional medicine, but this suggestion met with such a bitter opposition that they have to withdraw it. Nevertheless everything possible was done to discourage it and a rift was created between traditional doctor (chung-i) and doctors who were trained in Western Medicine (his-i).

This was the situation up to 1949 when the Kuomintang regime was ended by the victory of the Red Army under Mao Tse-tung. The developments, which followed, opened an entirely new chapter in the history of acupuncture. It is amazing to see that Mao Tse-tung laid the foundations for this new era of progress even before his accession to power. In 1928, he suggested the integration of Western medicine with the TCM in an article written by him entitled "the Struggle in the Ching kang Mountains". This appeal was made at a time when the liberated area was blocked by Kuomintang, and medical equipment were in short supply. Malaria was rampant among the troops and their situation seemed hopeless, as no anti-malaria drugs were available. Necessity is the mother of invention and someone suggested that the malaria should be treated by acupuncture. Incredible it may sound, it has been estimated that no less than 182,000 cases of malaria were treated successfully by acupuncture and herbal medicines during this campaign, thus 'making the past serve the present'. Through this first hand experience, the founders of the new Republic came to appreciate the legacy of their traditional medicine and no efforts were spared to 'explore them, and raise them to higher level'.

In October 1944, at a conference held in Yen-an in Shensi-Kansu-Ningsia Border Region, Mao Tse-tung called upon Western doctors and traditional practitioners to forget their professional jealousies and work together in a common program of disease prevention and health upliftment. This was followed soon after, in April 1945, by the opening of an acupuncture clinic at Yen-an Peace Hospital. Classes of acupuncture were started all over the country and every encouragement was given to its practitioners.

Thus, by 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded, acupuncture had once more become an official accepted form of therapy. The next decisive step was taken in 1955 when the Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine was set up in Peking with the Research Center for Acupuncture and Moxibustion as a key faculty.

The historical records of the diseases in ancient China also give a good insight into the clinical practices of the past. The practice of maintaining detailed records of various diseases and their clinical features has been a unique feature of Chinese Civilization from the very earliest times. These records, which comprises of voluminous mass of material are the earliest medical writings to be found in the history. The oldest records are so called “carapace writings” made on tortoise shells, sometimes on scapular bones, and the oracle bones all of which date from the second half of the second millennium B.C. There are also seals and bronze vessels from the first millennium B.C., which are inscribed with the disease records. Later there are classical texts such as the *Shu Ching* and the *Shih Ching* (circa 1000 B.C.). The greatest medical classic of all was the *Hunag Di Nei Jing*, which is believed to have taken its present form about 4th to 2nd century B.C. Some records of diseases written on bamboo and wood have also been preserved.

The *Nei Jing* represents the crystallization of a whole millennium of clinical tradition. The ancient physicians who compiled it were able to ingeniously combine into one science the influence of external factors on health, the abnormal functioning of internal organs whether excess or deficit, and the manifestation and interrelationships of symptoms, using the concept of *Yin-Yang*, *Wu Hsing*, *Pa Kang & Jing Luo*. The *Nei Jing* forms the foundation of today’s practice of TCM.

Bibliography:

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