

The Extraordinary Vessels

The eight extraordinary vessels, the *qi jing ba mai* [奇經八脈], constitute a fascinating level of energetic theory and treatment in Chinese medicine. Throughout medical history there have been many different ideas concerning their nature, their pathways, functions, associated symptomology and treatment. Not until the Ming dynasty, when a revolutionary new treatment style developed, had there been any practical consensus regarding these vessels, nor had they been systematically described by reference to the eight “master points.”¹ During this period, the famous doctor Li Shi Zhen wrote an entire text devoted to the theory and herbal treatment of extraordinary vessel energetics.²

Current clinical practice utilizing the extraordinary vessels demonstrates their vast versatility and effectiveness, and allows us to hypothesize some interesting functions and relationships, both in Oriental medicine and Western science. In this book, we will describe the work of two modern Japanese practitioners who use the eight extraordinary vessels extensively, Ms. Michi Tokito and Mr. Osamu Ito.

In addition, we will describe the theoretical basis of a powerful extraordinary vessel treatment system developed by Dr. Yoshio Manaka of Japan that demonstrates the clinical use of the extraordinary vessels. He has proposed and clinically proven special techniques of stimulating the body’s intrinsic bioelectrical systems. These procedures involve the use of “ion-pumping” cords, unidirectional diode connectors, that are capable of directed ion transfer. Dr. Manaka’s theories of diagnosis and treatment of the extraordinary vessels are the most coherent available and are more widely applicable than any in the medical literature. His use of the ion pumping cords is a substantial practical justification of his theories. The embryological, biorhythmic, physiological and practical details of Dr. Manaka’s ideas and procedures are presented in another text in association with the abdominal palpation system necessary for their use.³ While it is not entirely clear how influential Dr. Manaka’s work has been on the work of practitioners such as Ms. Tokito and Mr. Ito, they do utilize concepts that he helped develop in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Certainly, it would not be possible to do any

The energies of the cosmic no-form focus at ming men. They project forward to the area of the moving qi. Ming men is related to the master of the heart and pericardium. The triple warmer begins or is centered in the area of the moving qi. Ming men, master of the heart and the triple warmer have an energetic nature closer to no-form and thus transform this cosmic energy and stimulate the moving qi. Here, the prenatal and postnatal energies are transformed. Ming men, master of the heart and the triple warmer support all the body's energetic transformations, including the five element and ten stem relationships, the cycles of the twelve meridians and collaterals and their associated organ systems and functions. All are rooted in the moving qi.

The eight extraordinary vessels are also rooted here, originating at the tai yi, the moving qi. The ren, chong and du mai are frequently described as having their beginning in the uterus. Often, the uterus is equated with the moving qi or described as the site where the moving qi resides. The term we translate here as "uterus" does not refer exclusively to the physical structure, but as well to a set of functions. One conceptual approach may be drawn from considering the embryogenesis of the ren, chong and du mai as they relate to the primordial germ layers of the endoderm, mesoderm and ectoderm.

The chong mai is sometimes identified with the moving qi. The du and ren mai are usually described as the yin—yang branches of the moving qi. The chong and du mai were seen as the "way" of the twelve meridians, responsible for their movement and return to the meeting point at LU-9. Thus, the twelve meridians, the organ systems, the triple warmer system and the extraordinary vessels were each seen to begin at the center. The image emerging from the classical texts is that of a vortex. The cosmic energies come to a point at the center of our being; these energies are the powers of life, the generative force of the universe. From this center the cosmic energies change, transmute, merge and radiate in concentric systems.

The concept is symbolically powerful and complete. Heaven, the archetypical creative, yang force represents the entire set of kinetic energies. Earth, the ultimate yin symbol, is the representative of all that is formative. These cosmological energies pre-exist man, yet are essential to human life. Both meet, focus and are transformed in human life. The physical location of these transformations lies between ming men at the back, and the hara. The more

generalized energies take on different aspects as the triple warmer and the master of the heart. In turn, these functions precede and support each of the more specialized energetic systems.

This idea has important therapeutic implications that are the base of the asymptomatic tradition in acupuncture: great physicians treat root problems before attending to local symptoms. Certainly, in both classic and modern treatment sources, distinctions are made between root and local treatments. The model of human energetics just described provides a practical basis for these distinctions. Essentially, problems of the energetic center are root problems. Problems that arise in the branches, the meridians or organs, are symptomatic problems. Problems of the tai yi are given priority in treatment. In Japan, tradition teaches that this may be accomplished at the level of either the five elements or the extraordinary vessels. In modern Chinese tradition there is less specific reference to this distinct separation of root and local treatments in practice. Obviously, the concept is present and used. The open point systems that are still in use in China and the diagnoses of underlying dysfunctions that give rise to symptoms are both evidences of this concept. Dr. Zhang Xin Shu, who has developed a treatment system where six pairs of points on the arms and legs are treated to control various body zones, describes these points as root treatment points. His book *Wan Ke Zhen, Wrist Ankle Acupuncture*, will be discussed later.

Although related by the idea of root treatments, element or meridian problems are not equivalent to extraordinary vessel disease. The *Nan Jing* was first to state this distinction clearly. The meridian system and the diagnostic and therapeutic theories of the five elements represent a different energetic strata than the extraordinary vessels. Though all the energetic systems share an origin in the center, problems that manifest in the branch systems are not necessarily problems of the center:

*If the {twelve} meridians are full, {replete, overflowing},
this fullness {spills over} goes into the eight extraordinary
vessels, never to return.²⁶*

In the *Nan Jing* the extraordinary vessels were believed to function like the system of dikes that was used in China to drain fields when rivers overflowed. The yin and yang qiao mai, which were seen as two of the fifteen luo vessels described in the *Nan Jing*,²⁷ were particularly important, being the first to receive the energy that spilled over.²⁸ However, later discussions make little note of this function.

This was the earliest attempt to rationalize a general function for the extraordinary vessels. Earlier discussions had focussed on the individual functions of the extraordinary vessels. The *Nan Jing* attempted to place these vessels in the context of a global view of the human body.

This idea may be represented by a series of diagrams. The tai yi, the great one, starts to separate at the level of no-form. It then divides to become the two, yin and yang. Yin and yang then divide twice. On the one hand, the two become the three, the three warmers, their associated qi and functions. The three divide to become the six, the five elements and their source, or the six pairs of meridians: tai yang, shao yang, yang ming, tai yin, shao yin, and jue yin. These pairs further divide producing the twelve meridians. On the other hand, the second branch of the yin—yang division becomes the four, the divisions of the body, which become the eight, the extraordinary vessels.

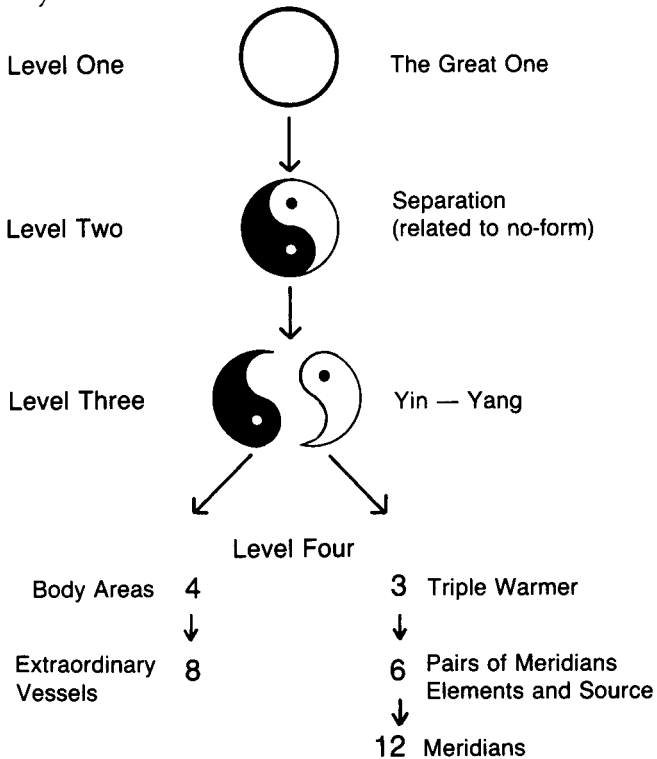


Figure 3

serious research or scholarship of the extraordinary vessels without referring to his work and that of his associate Dr. Kazuko Itaya.

Following Dr. Manaka's practice of examining classical ideas and proposing modern clinical uses, tests and theories, our discussions are intended to stimulate and promote scholarship and research. Absolute statements of principle are for matters much smaller and less central than the extraordinary vessels. The purpose of this text is to present the historical background and the essential theoretical and clinical detail necessary for the use of the extraordinary vessels in acupuncture practice. The clinically oriented sections of the text describe the symptomologies of both modern and classical sources.

Terminology

Any acupuncture text must explain some common terminology. We assume familiarity with basic terms such as qi, meridians, acupoints, yin and yang. However, some of the key concepts of this text deserve consideration. Bear in mind that simple, definitive meanings are for smaller ideas. Many, if not most, terms in Oriental medicine have numerous meanings, each of which depends on context. Often, there is no simple English equivalent; attempts to create simple cognates result in gross simplification or misuse of terms in some specific contexts. Meanings have flavor. The flavor of a character is often determined by its etymology.⁴ In most instances we have left the specialized terms in romanized form; English readers have demonstrated little difficulty in absorbing such words into their vocabulary. Multiplicity is evident. As is clear in some classical quotations, terms often imply function as much as they imply identity. Different words for the different functions of a single entity are not an unknown occurrence.

The principal exception to the rule of leaving Chinese words in romanized form is the word "extraordinary" itself. The term qi [奇], that we have translated as "extraordinary," generally refers to something exceptional, unusual, strange, rare or wonderful. For instance, it is used to reference the yang, odd numbers. The oldest usage of this term occurs in reference to an unusually shaped or deformed body, someone hunched over, sloping to one side or hand-dicapped by a physical deformity. Such reference to bodily shape or structure is interesting to many practitioners, notably Dr. Manaka and

Mr. Ito, who have found that treatment of the extraordinary vessels is able to correct structural imbalances or deformities. Some of the modern theories of the extraordinary vessels concern their structural and topological qualities.

In English literature we often find the term *qi* of *qi jing ba mai* loosely translated as “extra” or “secondary.” These translations imply that these vessels are subordinate to the twelve meridians. This is an unfortunate mistranslation that more accurately reflects the order of teaching acupuncture concepts than it demonstrates the place of the extraordinary vessels in human energetic anatomy. As we will see, the extraordinary vessels are more primary than the twelve meridians. Functionally, they are certainly not simply additional trajectories.

The names of the vessels are also a key to how we think of them. The term *du*, often translated as *governing*, refers to a general, someone who controls. *Ren*, usually translated as “conception,” refers to pregnancy, responsibility, or obligation. It can mean “to accept” or “to hold something in front of the abdomen.” *Dai* refers to a belt or girdle that acts as a support. *Chong* means a street. It is used to express the idea of passing or transformation. In some contexts *chong* refers to alchemical transformation, two entities “crashing together” to produce something different. *Qiao* generally means “the heel,” or “to stand on the toes.” It often indicates the action of the heel rising up; it further means to walk on one’s toes with the legs stretched. Most interestingly, it refers to the action of kicking one’s foot as high as possible. *Wei* denotes a rope and is often translated as “link,” or “bind.” Specifically, it refers to a rope that is tied around something, pulling it down and securing it.

Dr. Manaka discovered important clinical rules for the use of the *qiao mai* and *wei mai* vessels because of differences in the meaning of the characters. He was able to posit that the *wei mai* controlled downward movement, while the *qiao mai* controlled upward movement, because of the “pulling down” and “rising up” connotations of the terms. Through clinical corroboration of this theory, he has determined that it is preferable to treat the *wei mai* before treating the *qiao mai* using the ion pumping cords, when there is evidence that the patient’s *qi* is rising. Given the clinical prevalence of “rebellious *qi*,” this is indeed useful.

Historical Review

Three major components comprise the study of the extraordinary vessels: their pathways, the various theories that describe their function and the symptoms and treatments associated with each vessel. The earliest descriptions of the extraordinary vessels concern the pathways. Most, if not all, later commentaries offer variations, additions or opinions concerning the descriptions found in the *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu*. Descriptions of the extraordinary vessels are scattered among many chapters of both the *Ling Shu* and *Su Wen*.⁵ When the twelve meridians are described in the *Ling Shu*, the entirety of Chapter 10 is devoted to their pathways. Many of these early discussions contradict each other, intimating that different authors produced different sections. This suggests that the function and use of the extraordinary vessels was not fully developed during the early and middle Han dynasty. Certainly, the ideas were still evolving.

In modern discussions of the extraordinary vessels there is a general consensus regarding their pathways, a result of the considerable work accomplished in the period bridging the compilation of the *Su Wen* and the arrival of the Ming dynasty. This same evolution is apparent in discussions of symptomology and treatment. There are symptom descriptions in the *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu*, some of which are unclear. The *Nan Jing*, an important early acupuncture text and a major commentary and expansion of the *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu*, written circa 100 BC to 100 AD, systematized and simplified both the pathways and symptomology. Clearly the author of the *Nan Jing* was a clinician of considerable skill. In his work there was a constant attempt to cut through the theoretical knots of the earlier books; the descriptions of both pathways and symptoms were concise. Ironically, as is the case with many great clinicians, the treatment descriptions were neither complete nor systematic.

Some description of pulse types associated with each of the extraordinary vessels was given by Wang Shu He, who wrote the *Mai Jing*, the famous pulse classic,⁶ and a major commentary on the *Nan Jing*, circa 300 AD. These representations appear to be the basis of Li Shi Zhen's description of the pulse types for each of the extraordinary vessels.⁷ While the descriptions of both Wang Shu He and Li Shi Zhen are evocative and interesting, they are as equally difficult to understand and translate. We have included Wang Shu He's descriptions in this text only as an historical reference. From a

practical viewpoint, his descriptions remain somewhat unclear. The theories from the *Nan Jing* and Wang Shu He regarding the extraordinary vessels are the stepping stones between the often obscure and contradictory information in the *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu* and later systematic presentations. In the *Nan Jing* we find a clear development of the energetic theory of the extraordinary vessels. This theory provides a perspective that distinguishes the extraordinary vessels from five element and meridian energetics, and provides us with insight into the nature of the body's energies, the nature of life and the rationale of the treatment procedures associated with these vessels. Wang Shu He had a profound understanding of *Nan Jing*, and contributed greatly to the theories of the extraordinary vessels with his attempts to systematize treatment points, pulse diagnosis and biorhythmic descriptions. These descriptions are rooted in *Nan Jing* energetics.

The author of the *Nan Jing*, though probably not the originator of all these ideas, is nonetheless a powerful protagonist. The enthusiasm with which he champions these ideas has caught the attention of many practitioners and scholars through the centuries. Many Asian commentaries on the *Nan Jing* attempt to clarify these ideas. Most scholars feel that these theories are rooted in Daoist philosophy and contemplative practice.⁸ Certainly, many of the concepts may be found in later Daoist literature. If the Daoist influence on the development of extraordinary vessel theory was pervasive, the sparsity of the Han dynasty texts might be explained by the intellectual environment in which they were written. The *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu* descriptions of the extraordinary vessels may have been brief references to Daoist knowledge. Obviously, there is a considerable probability that the ideas were simply at the nascence of their evolution. Although the beginning of a systematic treatment approach could be found in Wang Shu He's commentary, clearly the development was still partial.⁹

The first complete and systematic treatment description of the extraordinary vessels is found in the *Zhen Jiu Da Quan*, written in 1439 AD, wherein the eight master or treatment points are clearly described. By the time of the *Zhen Jiu Da Cheng* in 1601 AD, there was a precise and thorough treatment approach for the extraordinary vessels, following the style established by the earlier *Da Quan* and describing the eight master points, their uses alone, their use in pairs and in combination with other points.

The *Zhen Jiu Da Quan* also made other important contributions. It clearly described a systematic, biorhythmic treatment style based on daily and bihourly stem and branch changes.¹⁰ These biorhythmic treatments are some of the most interesting and useful parts of acupuncture theory and practice. It is impossible to say with certainty that these ideas were developed earlier and transmitted by oral tradition, or were the development of Xu Feng, the author of the *Da Quan*.¹¹ Whatever the heritage or source, these remarkable theories, positing that the human body is affected by cosmological cycles, have enlarged the idea of environment in Oriental medicine.

Xu Feng described the eight extraordinary vessels with reference to the temporal sequence of the trigrams and to their eight treatment points. These points are usually called “master” points and sometimes “respectable” points.¹²

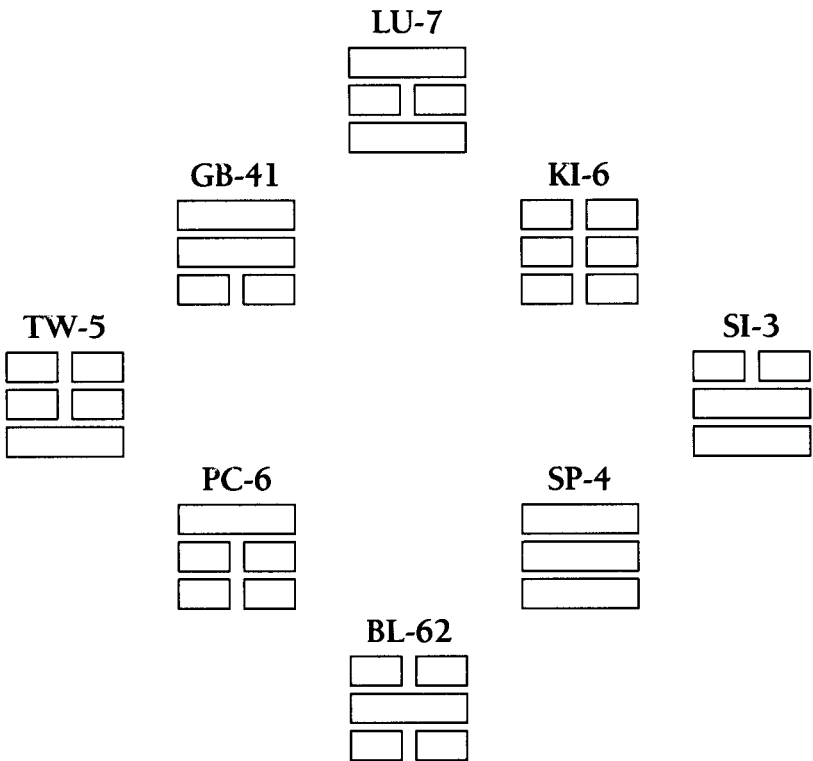


Figure 1

Part of the explanation for these relationships among the extraordinary vessels and the sequence of trigrams is that functionally the eight vessels are four paired sets:¹³

chong mai	◄—►	yin wei mai
ren mai	◄—►	yin qiao mai
dai mai	◄—►	yang wei mai
du mai	◄—►	yang qiao mai

These relationships are described further as:¹⁴

Extraordinary Vessel Relationships			
Point	Vessel	Relation	Meeting Places
SP-4	chong mai	father	heart, chest and stomach
PC-6	yin wei mai	mother	
SI-3	du mai	husband	lateral edges of the bridge of the nose next to the eyes, at the back of the neck, ears, shoulders, arms and the small intestine and bladder meridians
BL-62	yang qiao mai	wife	
GB-41	dai mai	male	the lateral aspect of the eyes, behind the ears, cheeks, neck and shoulders
TW-5	yang wei mai	female	
LU-7	ren mai	master	the "supporter of the lungs" (trachea and bronchi), throat and diaphragm
KI-6	yin qiao mai	guest	

The *Zhen Jiu Da Cheng* also makes interesting comments about the eight vessels as they relate to areas of the body:

*The yang qiao, yang wei, du and dai mai mainly treat diseases of the shoulders, back, lumbar and thighs that are superficial. The yin qiao, yin wei, ren and chong mai mainly treat diseases of the heart, abdomen, ribs and sides of the body that are in the lining {inside}.*¹⁵

The selection of these four pairs of points is probably based on the same point pairing in an earlier text, the *Zhen Jing Zhi Nan, Acupuncture Text South Pointer*, written circa 1295 AD. In this text, SP-4 was paired with PC-6, LU-7 with KI-6, SI-3 with BL-62 and GB-41 with TW-5. However, no clear mention was made of the eight extraordinary vessels in regard to these four pairs of points. The pairs were described as special points, that when treated singly or together would control and cure many disorders.¹⁶ Thus, this text likely influenced Xu Feng's theories.

Many of these developments survive in modern clinical practice. In Dr. Manaka's work, areas where the vessels meet or that may be treated through the extraordinary vessels are often significant diagnostic sites. This is also apparent in the treatment systems described later in this text.

The Nan Jing Theory

The *Nan Jing* extraordinary vessel theory depends on the concept of an energetic center in the body, the "moving qi between the kidneys." In many texts the moving qi is identified with, or related to, ming men, the "small heart" and qihai dantian. The energetic center was known as:

*The root of the twelve meridians, fundamental to the five
yin and six yang organs;
the source of the triple warmer, the gate of breathing;
the source of the vital qi.*¹⁷

While this center is located in the body, it is also the site of many energetic transformations that reach beyond the body. Ultimately, the source of the center is the heaven—person—earth interaction from which life is generated. Thus, the energies of the center are the essential procreative and generative energies of jing and shen. The energies produced in the center are the main energies of nutrition and protection and the meridian qi. The macrocosmic—microcosmic analogy of Chinese cosmology is completed in the body's center. Just as heaven has a point of origin or energetic center, "tai yi," the great one, so too does the body. The moving qi between the kidneys is the tai yi of the body, the great one from which yin and yang evolve. It is the root and origin of all the body's energetic systems.

In the *Nan Jing* and the Daoist treatises, one concept used to name the origin of human energies within the cosmos was "no-form." The master of the heart, pericardium and the triple warmer have "a name but no form."¹⁸ According to the Daoists, no-form is the "tiny jing" that is the precursor of all material substance.¹⁹ It is the ancestor of matter; it's child is light; it's grandchild is water. All is created from no-form.²⁰ No-form arises directly from the tai yi, the great one,²¹ from which everything else materializes, heaven and earth, yin and yang.²² No-form creates form, the body, which is continually transformed and animated by shen, sometimes called the spirit.²³

The traditional Chinese idea of no-form stretches the credulity of those who cannot accept that an ancient society produced powerfully sophisticated ideas. It is clearly interpretable as the universal matrix of energy from which springs all material, animate and inanimate. As it notes the birth of water, the symbol of the ultimate source of matter, from light, energy, it is a direct parallel of modern ideas of the energetic origin of matter. It posits no-form as what we would now call the unifying field. David Bohm's idea of an "implicate order" a "vast ocean of energy" in "space," a vast universal hidden matrix,²⁴ is much like this ancient cosmological concept.

The transformations of no-form into the energies that are the basis of acupuncture theory occurs in the energetic center, the abdomen, the hara. The triple warmer, master of the heart, pericardium and ming men are the energetic creations of no-form, the first materializations of energy that precede all other material and energetic processes in the body. They function to "step down" the energies of the universe, transforming them to energies that function in the human body. These energies are the center of the body's energetic systems, the first materializations of yin and yang, symbolized as fire and water.²⁵

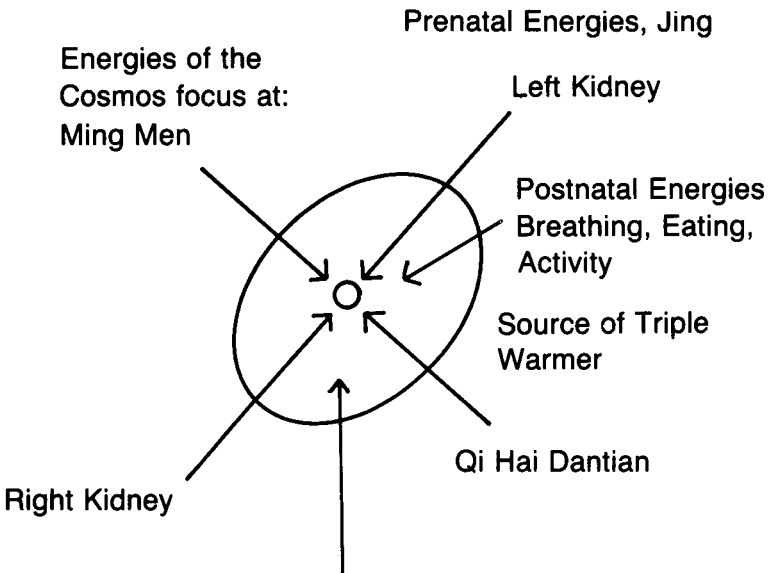


Figure 2 Moving Qi Between the Kidneys