

2,000 years of Chinese acupuncture

In China today most medical practitioners have some training in biomedical and traditional medicine. Varying degrees of integration are evident institutionally in the delivery of health-care at hospitals, in diagnosis, explanatory models of disease, therapeutic paths, and drug preparations. Some indigenous traditions, such as pharmacotherapy, acupuncture and moxibustion or massage are on offer in modern hospital and clinical settings, and even on emergency wards.

Far from being subsumed under the high tide of a globally powerful biomedicine, according to WHO estimates in 2002, traditional medicine still accounts for about 40% of Chinese health care. Indeed a multi-million pound trade in prepared Chinese medicines world-wide testifies to a two-way transfer of knowledge and techniques. With mass emigration and the globalisation of a plurality of medical traditions, Chinese medicine now survives in many different forms, transforming as it comes into contact with different cultures around the world.



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Chinese Health Care

Health care in China embraces a wide variety of different traditions. From well before the beginning of imperial history (221 BCE), there are naturalistic theories of health and disease based upon ideas about man's relationship with the heavens and earth, the weather, and the passing of the seasons. Equally, for the most part of the past two thousand years Chinese scholarly medical traditions have regarded the human body as vulnerable to interference by ancestors, demons and spirits.

Classical Chinese physiology, based upon ideas about man's relationship with the spirits, with the heavens and earth, the weather, and the passing of the seasons is well-documented from the late Warring States period (c 600-221 BCE). This was a time when philosophers and gentlemen hawked their skills around the courts of the kings. The first emperor was particularly fond of *fangshi* (gentlemen of remedies) who, it is said, transmitted the arts of Zou Yan. Little is known about Zou Yan except that his 'school' was purported to be the institutional origin of the Yin and Yang philosophies. In documents of state generated by these advisers, in their military tactics, divination, medical and religious matters, we find the earliest records of Yin Yang and the *wuxing* (five agents).

Earliest correspondences with Yin and Yang

The Yin and Yang system of correspondence became the enduring organizing principle of the epistemological framework behind many Chinese traditions.

Table 1 sets out the earliest correspondences with Yin and Yang. Based in large part on observations of change in the natural environment, they were a simple mapping tool for ordering time and space, used in divination, medicine, or as a guide to military action. Individual pairs change according to time and context.

The Earliest Correspondences with Yin Yang

Yang	Yin
Heaven	Earth
Spring	Autumn
Summer	Winter
Day	Night
Big States	Small States
Important State	Unimportant States
Action	Inaction
Stretching	Contracting
Ruler	Minister
Above	Below
Man	Woman
Father	Child
Elder Brother	Younger Brother
Older	Younger
Noble	Base
Getting on in the world	Being stuck where one is
Taking a wife/begetting a child	Mourning
Controlling others	Being controlled by others
Guest	Host
Soldiers	Labourers
Speech	Silence
Giving	Receiving

This representation of Yin-yang dating to ca 11th century models change by representing the opposing but complementary forces of Yin and Yang. Each flows into, and contains the seed of, the other.

Yin and Yang in medicine

In time medical theorists adapted the Yin and Yang correspondences to interpret signs and symptoms of illness specifically for medical intervention.

Yang	Yin
Outer	Inner
Upper	Lower
Dorsal	Ventral
Qi 氣	Xue 血 (Blood)
Vital function	Material Substrate
Stimulation	Restraint
Increase, Growth	Decrease, Decline
Ascent	Descent
Outward Orientation	Inward Orientation

Divination in Health Care

As a scheme for interpreting the changing nature of the world the Yin Yang system follows in the wake of the *Yi Jing* (Classic of Changes), a great repository of wisdom that took shape in the first millennium BCE. The symbols used in *Yi Jing* divination are the '8 trigrams', which when combined make '64 hexagrams', each one then related to a cryptic statement in the text. Traditionally the relevant hexagram is identified by throwing yarrow stalks, but in modern times diviners tend to use coins. The diviner then brings the hexagrams alive through interpreting the cryptic statement according to the topic of concern to the questioner, whether that be to decide when to go to war, when to marry or to foretell the outcome of an illness.



Some of the earliest writings in China were inscribed upon turtle shells and cow scapulas. They are the records of diviners in the courts of the Shang dynasty kings (trad. Dates 1766–1122 BCE). Some of the records relate to the kings illnesses.

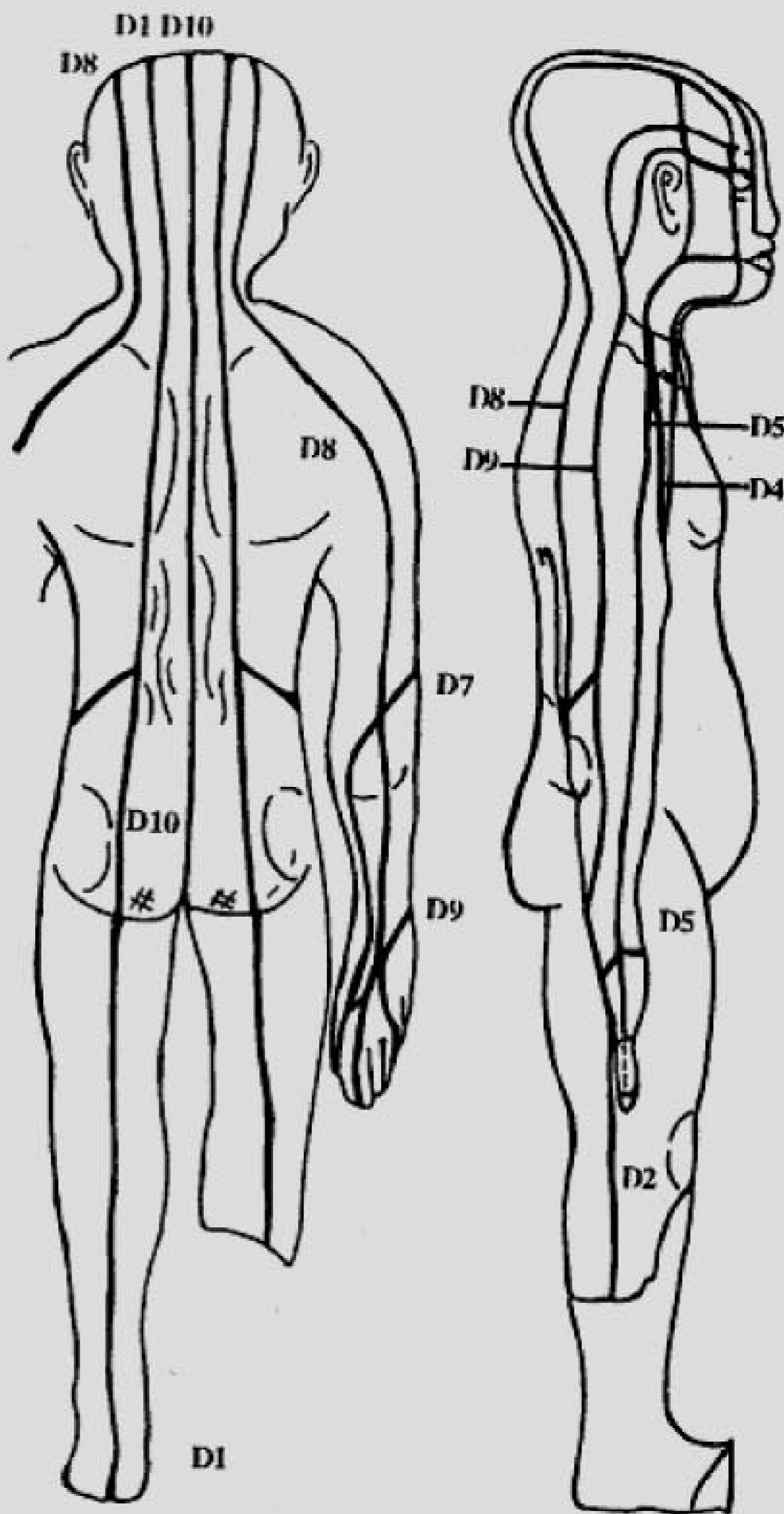


The *Wuxing* (five agents) correspondences

The Five Agents correspondences expanded the correlational basis for interpreting external phenomenon with groups of five. *Xing*, meaning literally 'to go' is often translated 'element', but this does not do justice to the dynamic qualities implied by the term. Rather than inert substances they are constantly transforming forces that power the world. From their earliest incarnations as a scheme to interpret the rise and fall of dynasties, they ultimately gave broader definition to the relationship between the external world and the human body with groups of five: five seasons of the year, five flavours, five organs etc. In practice physicians chose to emphasise different sets of correspondences at different times, but the ever evolving systems of correspondence shaped an enduring science founded on metaphysical thought.

Wu Xing correspondences according to *The Annals of Lu Buwei* (239 BCE)

Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
8	7	5	9	6
Spring	Summer	Late Summer	Autumn	Winter
East	South	Centre	West	North
Sour	Bitter	Sweet	Acrid	Salty
Goatish	Burning	Fragrant	Rank	Rotten
Jupiter	Mars	Saturn	Venus	Mercury
Wind	Heat	Thunder	Cold	Rain
Wheat	Beans	Pannicked Millet	Hemp	Millet
Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lungs	Kidney
Eyes	Tongue	Mouth	Nose	Ears
Anger	Joy	Desire	Sorrow	Fear
Shouting	Laughing	Singing	Wailing	Groaning
Blue-green	Red	Yellow	White	Black
Scaly	Feathered	Naked	Furred	Shelled

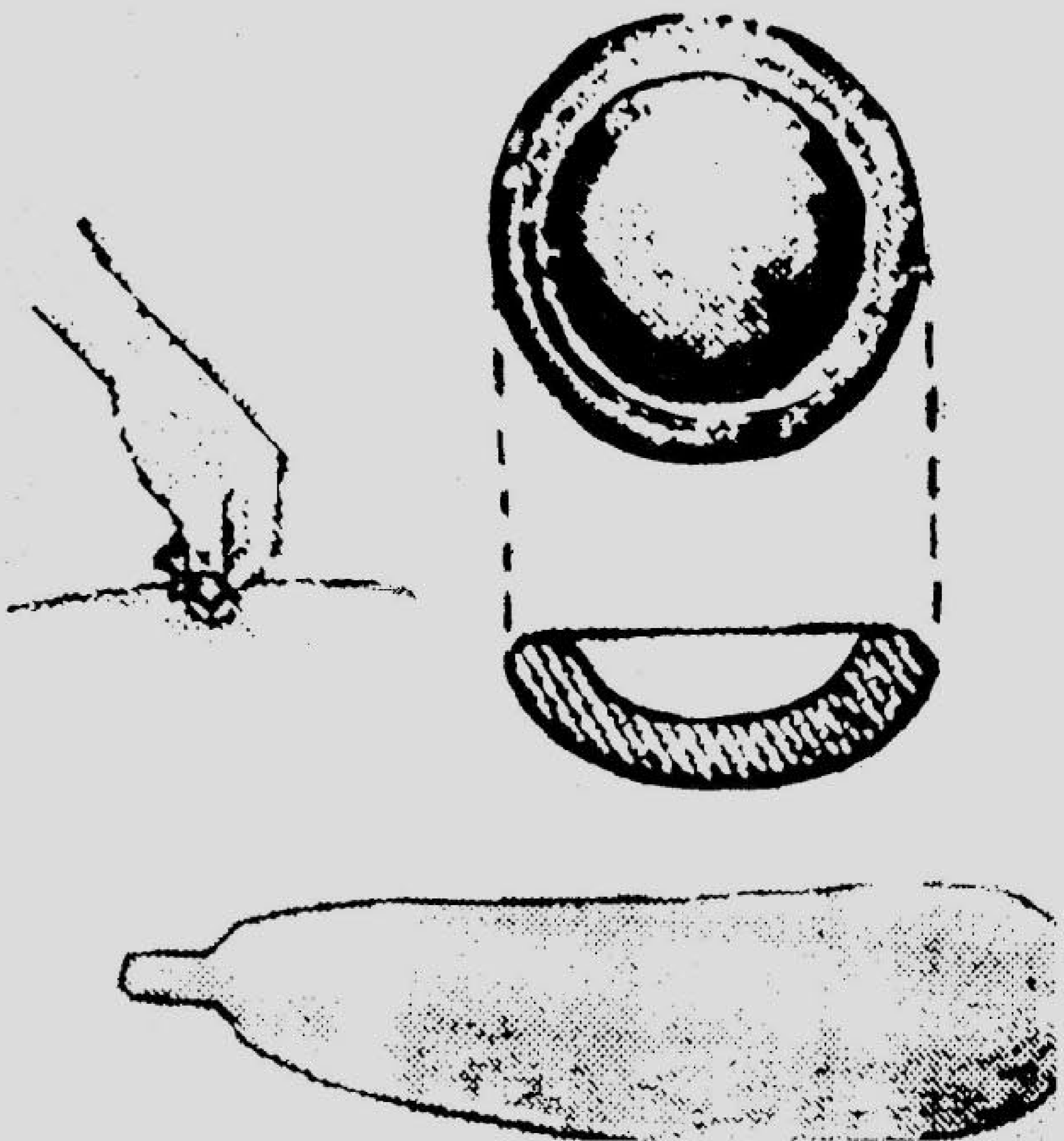


The Mianyang figurine

This figurine excavated from a military officer's tomb in Sichuan, West China, and dating to ca 118 BCE, is the earliest image of the body contoured by lines. It does not mark acupuncture loci and no loci are mentioned in records that date before this time. We can only be certain that it was a map of the body considered important enough to be placed in the outer coffin compartment of the tomb. As the lines cluster and meet around the sense organs, they must relate their author's ideas about vision, hearing, sight, taste and touch, and are therefore likely to represent part of the human structure that bounds and mediates between the internal and external worlds. Is this then a sensory map of the body, rather than a model concerned with illness – the ears and eyes of its deceased owner?

Early Tools and Practices

Acupuncture and moxibustion arise from a synthesis of older medical practices such as petty surgery, massage, bloodletting, hot stone treatment, and exorcistic archery with new ideas about the nature of the universe that flourished in the late Warring States. Although sharp stone and bone needles and knives survive from Neolithic times, acupuncture and moxibustion were first linked together with a theory of the channels in Han times (206BCE–220CE), although the accounts describe procedures quite unlike the treatments that we know today.



Early Chinese stones that may have been used for massaging the channels.

Mapping the Body

The earliest versions of the channels illustrate aspects of skeletal, muscular and arteriovenous structures. They also map a sensory experience of the body: of pain, pleasure and passion. At the same time the early texts match the acupuncture channels and the movement of *qi* in the body to the rivers of China and to the cycles of the heavenly bodies.

A reconstruction of a silk chart from the Mawangdui tomb (closed 168 BCE) showing therapeutic exercises from the Western Han period.



Self Cultivation and Chinese Medicine

Ideas about the movement of the spirits and souls, as well as *qi* in the body developed as scholars wrote about longevity practices such as sexual and breath techniques. In taking the inner realm of the body as its focus for improvement, self-cultivation culture generated classical Chinese concepts of physiological process whereby the gross material of the body could be invigorated and rejuvenated.

Many of these traditions survive as part of an ever-changing fund of folk medical knowledge: elderly people gather in the parks to practice Tai jiquan, the slow, gentle martial art that moves *qi* and strengthens the spirit. They pass on assumptions about dietary care and tonic medicines.

A reconstruction of a silk chart from the Mawangdui tomb (closed 168 BCE) showing therapeutic exercises from the Western Han period.





Bian Que and Mr White

In traditional histories the origins of acupuncture often relate to the legend of Bian Que, a cult figure associated with a human headed bird. His name, together with the Yellow Emperor and the mysterious Bai Shi, “Mr White”, is listed in the titles of medical literature in the official history of the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE – 23 CE). Nothing is known about Mr White, but a biography of Bian Que, attributing to him supernatural powers, is in *Shi Ji* (Records of the Grand Historian, comp. 104-87 BCE). In this Eastern Han (25 - 220 CE) stone relief Bian Que, in the centre, is giving a treatment to a woman patient.

The Yellow Emperor

The Yellow Emperor was one of the mythological culture bringers. Charged with civilising a savage world: he modelled punishments, law and the calendar after divine patterns thought to be immanent in Heaven and Earth. He had a role in divination and dividing the seasons – and it is these skills that linked him with essential medical arts – a knowledge of the body's relationship with the cycles and phases of nature and the accurate prediction of the progress of disease. It is his name that we find lending authority to the most comprehensive collection of early Chinese medical texts, the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*. Here we can find the body divided into twelve distinct 'channels' through which *qi* (the all-pervasive stuff that powers the universe), was thought to move rhythmically around the body. The channels surfaced in the form of the pulse at places where ancient Chinese physicians could examine the condition of the body's *qi*, and the organs through which it flowed. A large number of pulse types were distinguished, such as floating, superficial, sunken, hesitant, and this became the pre-eminent method of diagnosis for elite physicians.

Background: Images of Pulse Qualities *Mojue* Shanghai Medical University

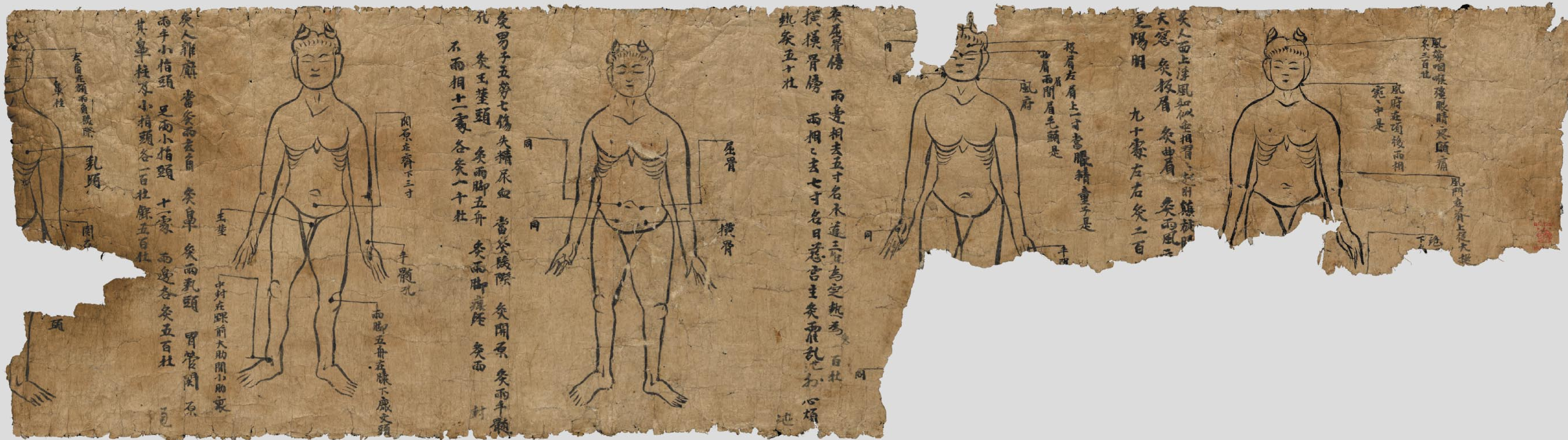
Moxibustion

Moxibustion, a form of heat treatment, was one of the earliest and most important methods for treating the channels. Being more accessible and cheaper than needles it was a more popular and widespread treatment. The dried and ground leaves of mugwort (*artemesia vulgaris*) burnt on and over the body are first known in atropaic techniques used to protect the household from attack by demons. Chinese medical practitioners nowadays will burn it on the end of metal needles, use cigar-shaped rolls of moxibustion, or roll cones to stimulate particular points or painful parts of the body.

A Song dynasty painting depicting a country doctor performing treatment on a patient's back.

Image courtesy of the Needham Research Institute.





The Earliest Surviving Moxibustion Charts

Among the thousands of Buddhist manuscripts discovered a century ago in a hidden cave library at Dunhuang on the Silk Road were some 100 medical manuscripts. One damaged series of sketches of the body, now held in the British Library, gives simple instructions for the treatment of specific conditions with moxibustion. The figures constitute the earliest surviving moxibustion charts and pre-date the Northern Song acupuncture bronzes that lay out comprehensive networks of acupuncture loci, by some three or four centuries. Characteristic of the Dunhuang archive is that it preserves a very wide variety of technical manuscripts in which we find intimate glimpses of popular medical theory and practice in Tang dynasty (618 – 907 CE) China at this Northwestern outpost of the empire.



Inner Alchemy

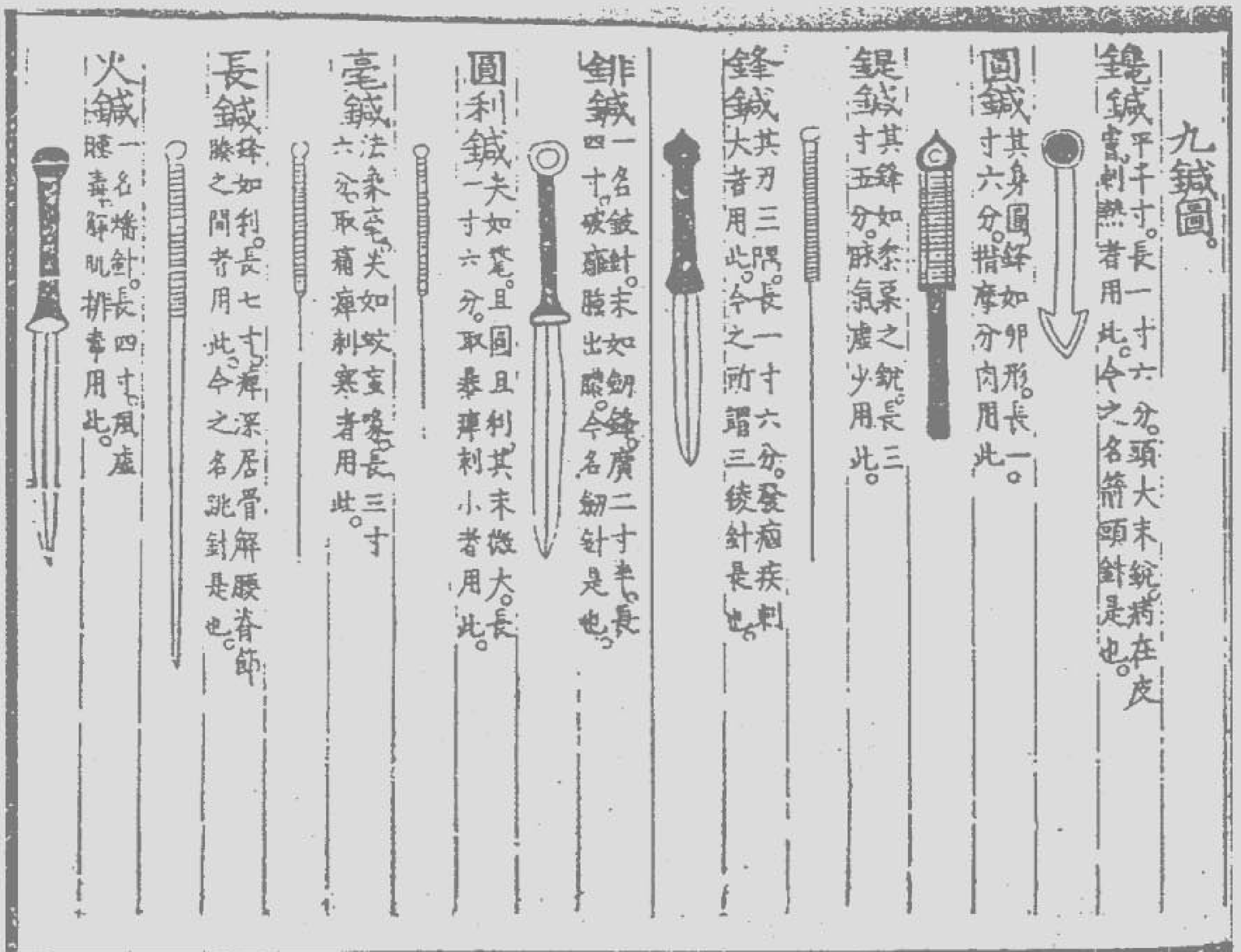
Classical Chinese perceptions of the medical body mirrored the geographical, philosophical, political and religious realities of early China. The surface of the body was landscaped with mountain ranges and waterways, and it sparkled with representations of the sun and moon, stars and constellations in the names of anatomical and acupuncture locations. Patterns and hierarchies of imperial bureaucracy and administration structured the imagination of physiological process.

In mediaeval times Chinese 'inner alchemy' often associated with the Shangqing (Supreme Purity) school of Daoism, was one context within which lyrical image of the inner body flourished. Preceded by the older practice of compounding of elixirs from metals and minerals, 'Inner Alchemy' aims to produce an elixir through practices that refine the substances within the adept's body.

Nine Needles

Classics of Chinese acupuncture tend to express dissatisfaction with the crude methods associated with early acupuncture. Yet much of the therapy described in one early treatise known as 'Nine Needles' describes petty surgery, blood-letting and massage. Needles for moving *qi* were of rare quality, likened to 'fine hair'.

A Ming (1368 – 1644 CE)
reconstruction of the Nine Needles



The Song (960–1279 CE) Bronzes

Imperial patronage of acupuncture flourished in the Tang period and was on the curriculum of the Song Imperial Medical College. In Song times scholars sought to systemise medical knowledge. Bronze acupuncture figurines were first cast by Wang Weiyi (11th century) for the purposes of teaching and examination. They clearly display the circulation networks and label each acupuncture point. When the model was covered with a layer of yellow wax and filled with water, medical students had to locate the required acupoint exactly with a needle, causing water to gush out of the model through the hole.

A bronze figurine made to
imperial decree in 1727 CE
*Photo: Wellcome Medical
Museum*



A fifteenth century
interpretation of Wang
Weiyi's bronzes
*Beijing National Museum of
History*



Medical Plurality

Surviving documentary evidence of acupuncture theory records the work of a scholarly medical elite. But throughout Chinese medical history we find traces of more popular practice. Ming novels, for example, describe large groups of competing and complementary practitioners. Acupuncture emerges as a lower class of practice, less prestigious than the prescription of Chinese medical drugs, and often the work of women. In Japan some of the most respected practitioners of acupuncture are to be found in the blind community.

'Bell doctors' were itinerate physicians who called attention to their presence by ringing a bell.
Wellcome Library



Acupuncture in Late Imperial China (1368–1911)

During the Ming and Qing dynasties the importance of acupuncture declined rapidly. Physicians like Zhang Jiebin (1563-1640) and Xu Dachun (1693-1771) noted that there were few well-known acupuncturists to be found in their time. In 1822 the Imperial Academy prohibited the teaching and practice of acupuncture. The reasons for this decline included a dislike of needles among patients, the emergence of gentler therapies such as *tuina* massage, and the preference of elite physicians for herbal medicine. Acupuncture was a manual therapy unsuited for the scholar-physicians that dominated the field of medicine. It became a specialist discipline often practised by external medicine physicians as a part of a larger repertoire of petty surgery techniques.

The photo shows the acupuncture tools of Yu Jinghe (1847-1907), a physician from Changshu in Jiangsu Province.



The Modernisation of Chinese Medicine in Republican China (1911–1949)

From the late nineteenth century onward, physicians of Chinese medicine increasingly advocated the need to modernize their tradition if it was to survive in a rapidly changing society. This included the establishment of Western-style schools, colleges and hospitals, the founding of professional associations, and the publication of learned journals. During this period, traditional medicine also had to defend itself against efforts by more radical modernizers to disband its practice altogether.

In 1929, a motion intended to prohibit the practice of traditional medicine was put before parliament. In response, physicians of traditional medicine united for the first time in their history into one single group at a conference held in Shanghai on 17 March 1929. The conference sent a delegation to the capital Nanjing that successfully lobbied to have the motion deferred. The events of March 1929 are therefore seen as the birth of modern “traditional” Chinese medicine and March 17th is still celebrated in Taiwan and Singapore as “National Medicine Day.”

The New China Chinese Medicine College in Shanghai and the 1929 Delegation to Nanjing.



Calligraphy by Mao Zedong
“Chinese medicine is a great
treasure house and should
be diligently explored and
improved upon.”

The Development of Chinese Medicine in Contemporary China (1949–)

Chinese Communist leaders had long viewed Chinese medicine as a “feudal superstition.” However, as Mao Zedong began to distance himself from the Soviet Union he changed his mind. Mao’s Chinese communism focused on “patriotism,” on “being self reliant” and “native” and Chinese medicine fitted this bill. From 1954 onward it was used as a symbol for China’s cultural genius. Colleges of Chinese Medicine were opened in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu and Beijing in 1956, and in 1958 Chinese medicine was declared a national treasure by the government. But Chinese medicine was not left to its own devices. It was expected to modernise, scientise, and eventually integrate with Western medicine. In the 1980s, it was defined by law as being part of a plural health care system in China and its infrastructure developed further. Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has made efforts to globalise Chinese medicine and to develop its economic potential.

Modern Acupuncture

Poverty, lack of public health care and a general spirit of renewal stimulated some doctors in Republican China to promote acupuncture as a cheap alternative to drug based medicine. One of them was Cheng Dan'an (1899-1957), an acupuncturist and paediatrician from Jiangsu, who had visited Japan in the early 1930s. On his return to China in 1933, he opened the first modern acupuncture college in China in Wuxi. His acupuncture was based on classical theory but attempted to systematize it in order to meet the needs of a modern audience. Through his students, his writings, and his political activity Cheng Dan'an exerted a profound influence on the development of acupuncture in China. At the same time that Chen Dan'an was developing his acupuncture in China, Japanese acupuncture in Japan also witnessed a revival, where acupuncturists like Yanagiya and Sawada developed "meridian therapy". Although promoted under the banner "return to the classics", it, too, was a distinctly modern innovation. Through its diffusion into Taiwan, Germany and France it influenced the development of acupuncture in the West.

Old acupuncture charts

