

Integrated Chinese Medicine: Classical Acupuncture and TCM

Preface

Many of the first acupunctureⁱ publications in English (some translations from French), that appeared in the 1960s, predominantly focused on a Five Phase approach, among these authors were: Dr. J Lavier, Mme Dr. M Hashimoto, D & J Lawson Wood and Dr. Wu Wei Ping. One exception to this is the writings of Felix Mann which included more TCM type material. With the opening up of China in the 70s many more Westerners were exposed to modern TCM and there was a strong tendency to dismiss some of the earlier work as bogus. However, some of this criticism also displayed a considerable ignorance of the actual source texts.

One of the foremost proponents and practitioners of TCM wrote an article some years ago for the Journal of Chinese Medicine that questioned many of the ideas taught in non-TCM schools, and especially those of Worsley. Whether because of this article, or because of the general sense at the time that TCM was the ‘real teachings’, there came an idea, that I have heard directly spoken, that Europeans of Worsley’s generation and Worsley in particular must have ‘made it up’. One argument that was advanced was that the Five Phase theory was itself a later (mediaeval) system of thought, a surprising assertion considering how deeply embedded Five Phase theory is in the Classics.

Ted Kaptchuk has a section “Criticism of Five Phase Theory” in his “The Web that has no Weaver”.

Most modern Chinese critics describe Five Phases theory as a rigid metaphysical overlay on the practical and flexible observations of Chinese Medicine.

However, he does conclude:

Even so it is unfortunate that many practitioners simply consider Five Phases theory unscientific gibberish and do not try to understand it. It is actually an important secondary emblem system used to assess and discuss clinical reality.

(Kaptchuk 353-4)

It is of note of course that Ted Kaptchuk has worked closely with Five Element acupuncturist for many years now, even developing a more Five Element oriented approach to herbal medicine.

Since then we have come to a much fuller understanding of the provenance of non-TCM acupuncture and we are indebted to Peter Eckman for his 1996 publication “In the Footsteps of the Yellow Emperor”. He explored the story of many of the earlier Europeans, who brought acupuncture to the West, and where they learned the various parts of Traditional Acupuncture in general, and the origins of the various essential aspects of what he refers to as Leamington Acupuncture, or LA for short, in particular.

Many practitioners in England and America have had to deal with the reality of TCM as the majority, and predominating in the core curricula of its schools and national board exams. At the same time TCM oriented practitioners have had to accept that other traditions are not going to go away. There remains much tension and much bridge building. Many practitioners are also building the bridges within themselves and the publication of “Constitutional Five Element Acupuncture by Hicks, Hicks, and Mole is clearly the most important contribution to this process

so far.

Our intent is to further explore the provenance of Classical Acupuncture (Five Element in particular) in the source material of the “Classics”, and to further the process of integration.

Introduction

Some of what Worsley said about the philosophy of treatment was rhetorical. Worsley often said that one should never treat symptoms in a formulaic way. During my own clinical we had a patient who was a young man who had injured his knee playing football, the interns had done a full examination and Worsley said to do a protocol known as Bachman Knee Points, and tell him to give us a call if he needed further help. This was a jaw dropping moment for us. Clearly Worsley was not as fundamentalist about his principles as some imply. However, he saw how easily people would grasp at rules and protocols, and cease to apply the principles in an insightful individual way.

Similarly Worsley would often say that ‘anything could come from anything’; meaning that any disease or symptom could arise from any Element. On the face of it this would seem to be completely at odds with syndromic medicine. However, if we accept that syndromic medicine explains certain pathological mechanisms, but does not necessarily give us the full picture it is not impossible to square this circle. A person could have a Liver Qi Stagnation, but be a Metal CF.

It is often argued that the diagnosis is based upon the CSOE and not “types” of people, Hicks, Hicks and Mole have been criticized on this account. And yet in lecture Worsley would often refer to behaviours and such like characteristic even physical symptoms and attributes. Clearly the emphasis was on using more concrete terms as ‘fingers pointing at the moon’ His words were again said for rhetorical emphasis not to completely dismiss such speculations.

We shall see that Chinese Medicine has always included material that appears contradictory. The very name of the Nan Jing “Classic of Difficult Questions” reveals this. We shall argue that modern TCM has largely tried to simplify and avoid these difficulties and in so doing has tried to ignore many essential aspects of acupuncture, and potentially skewed the political process towards a more herbal based, and modern biomedicine based context for acupuncture.

Terminology

Clearly Worsley used terminology that was normative at the time, meridians, channels, elements. The crucial question rather than the merits of these terms is his understanding of these terms.

Meridians v Channels. Although ‘meridian’ was the usual term at the time, modern TCM has chosen the term ‘channel’. However, to some ‘meridian’ suggests a very arbitrary line and prefer ‘channel’ because of this. Channel can mean a path of least resistance with undefined boundaries, but could also convey an idea of a circumscribed structure like a blood vessel. Clearly Worsley did not see the energy pathways as physical entities.

Element v Phase. Element is a word that in the Western Tradition has come to mean a physical substance. Arguably even though the Four Elements “substances” were somewhat more phenomenological to the ancient Greeks. However, the Five Elements of Chinese thought are clearly intended to be more energetic phenomenon. Manfred Porkert has suggested “Eveloutive Phase” and many people have adopted the more simplified “Phase”. Even though Worsley used the term Element and the established extensive use of this word would justify its continual use Phase would seem to be more true to Worsley’s actual meaning. The jury is out at present as to whether Phase will become the more normative term. We see no particular problem with either continuing to use Element because of established convention or using the term Phase. The main point is how did Worsley understand this term and he clearly understood the more dynamic meaning.

Circulation/Sex v Pericardium: this topic goes beyond simple terminology to the actual function of this system. So this will be a topic for fuller discussion. Clearly Five Element acupuncture as taught by Worsley. Worsley had a very different understanding of this organ/function than the TCM preferred term “Pericardium” implies.

Causative Factor v Constitutional Factor

Worsley used the term “Causative Factor”; we agree with Hicks, Hicks and Mole that it would seem more in keeping with the concepts of Chinese Medicine to call this the “Constitutional Factor”. In effect Chinese Medicine may be based upon “The Web that Has no Weaver”, TCM agrees and identifies patterns as distinct from Western linear concepts, but ultimately we all have to decide where to treat, “The Main Contradiction” to use Giovanni Maciocia’s Terminology. However, Constitutional Factor would appear to be less suggestive of a Western type Causality.

Bibliography

Hicks, J & A, Mole P; Five Element Constitutional Acupuncture, London 2004
Kaptchuk, Ted; Chinese Medicine: The Web that Has no Weaver; Rider, London, 1983

©Andrew Prescott 2006

ⁱ Although Oriental medicine includes a wide range of modalities, acupuncture clearly captured Western interest and was the main subject of most European language texts up to the 1970s.