

# TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE (TCM) BASICS

by Lady Carla Davis, MPH  
*Specializing in nutrition*

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), has a long history that goes back 2,500 years of Chinese medical practice. It includes acupuncture, various forms of herbal and medicinal medicine, massage (tui na), exercise (qigong), and dietary therapy. TCM has been the standard system of medicine in China for thousands of years and is still widely used in China today. Its philosophy is based on Yinyangism (i.e. the combination of yin/yang with Five Phases), which was later absorbed by Daoism. Because of its therapeutic benefits, without the side effects of drugs, it is increasingly being used as a complementary or alternative medicinal approach in many other parts of the world.

TCM places more emphasis on the identification of functional entities that regulate digestion, breathing, aging, etc. Health is perceived as the harmonious interaction of these entities and the environment. Disease is perceived as disharmony or imbalance in the functions or interactions of yin, yang, qi, xue, zang-fu, meridians, and the interaction between the human body and the environment. Therapy is based on which pattern of disharmony can be identified. Thus, pattern assessment is the most important step in TCM diagnosis. To diagnose a condition, TCM measures pulse and inspects the tongue, skin, and eyes, along with eating and sleeping habits of the person.

## DIAGNOSIS

There are eight principles of diagnosis:

- **Yin**
- **Yang**
- **Exterior**
- **Interior**
- **Cold**
- **Heat**
- **Deficiency**
- **Excess**

## DIAGNOSTICS

There are five diagnostic methods:

- **Inspection:** Focuses on parts of the face such as the skin, eyes, aura, and tongue (e.g. marks around the edge, cracks, and in particular the coating).
- **Auscultation:** Listening for particular sounds such as wheezing.
- **Olfaction:** Smelling body odor
- **Inquiry:** Focuses on the 'seven inquiries.' Asking the patient about the regularity, severity, or characteristics of: chills, fever, perspiration, appetite, thirst, taste, defecation, urination, pain, sleep, menses, leukorrhea.
- **Palpation:** Feeling the body for tender A-shi points, palpation of the wrist pulses as well as various other pulses, including the palpation of the abdomen.

## SIX EXCESSES & CHARACTERISTIC CLINICAL SIGNS

The six excesses patterns can consist of one or a combination of excesses. They

can also transform from one into another.

- Wind (pinyin feng): rapid onset of symptoms, wandering location of symptoms, itching, nasal congestion, floating pulse, tremor, paralysis, convulsion.
- Cold (pinyin: han) cold sensations, aversion to cold, relief of symptoms by warmth, water/clear excreta, severe pain, abdominal pain, contractor/hypertonicity of muscles, (slimy white tongue fur, deep/hidden or string-like pulse, or slow pulse.
- Fire/Heat pinyin: ho): aversion to heat, high fever, thirst, concentrated urine, red face, red tongue, yellow tongue fur, 'slippery' pulse.
- Dampness (pinyin:shi): sensation of heaviness, sensation of fullness, symptoms of Spleen dysfunction, greasy tongue fur, "slippery' pulse.
- Dryness (pinyin: zao): dry cough, dry mouth, dry throat, dry lips, nose bleeds, dry skin, dry stools.
- Summer heat (pinyin: shu): either heat or mixed damp-heat symptoms.

## YIN/YANG



Yin and yang are universal aspects all things can be classified under. This includes the Eight Principles' first three couples. For example, cold is identified as yin, while heat is yang.

The yin/yang concept can be traced back to the Shang dynasty (1600-1100BC). They represent to complementary aspects that every phenomenon in the universe can be divided into. Primordial analogies for these aspects are shown in the chart below:

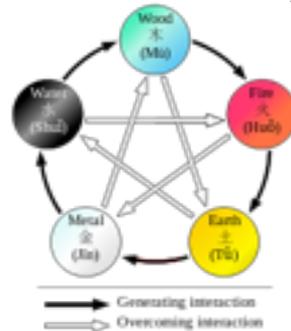
Phenomenon	Yin	Yang
<b>Celestial bodies</b> <sup>[22]</sup>	moon	sun
<b>Gender</b> <sup>[22]</sup>	female	male
<b>Location</b> <sup>[22]</sup>	inside	outside
<b>Temperature</b> <sup>[22]</sup>	cold	hot
<b>Direction</b> <sup>[57]</sup>	downward	upward
<b>Degree of humidity</b>	damp/ moist	dry

The yin/yang concept is also applicable to the human body. The upper and back parts of the body are yang, while the lower and front parts of the body are yin. Yin/yang characterization also applies to various body functions and disease symptoms.

## FIVE PHASES

Five Phases or the Five Elements presumes that all phenomena of the universe and nature can be broken down into five elemental qualities represented by wood,

fire, earth, metal, and water. The five phases constitute the basis of the zang-fu concept and have a great influence of the body. The Five Phase concept is also applied in diagnosis and therapy. Correspondences between the body and the universe are seen not only between the Five Elements, but also between the Great Numbers (pinyin: ad shu). For example, the number of acu-points has been seen to be 365, corresponding with the number of days in a year, and the number of main meridians-12 corresponds with the number of rivers flowing through the ancient Chinese empire (and possibly the 12 months of the year).



**Wood**= East, green/green, wind, sour, liver, gallbladder, eye, above bridge of nose, iris  
**Fire**= South, red, heat, bitter, heart, small intestine, tongue, between eyes, lower part, inner/outer corner of the eye

**Earth**= Center, yellow, damp, sweet, spleen, stomach, mouth, bridge of nose, upper and lower lid

**Metal**= West, white, dryness, acrid, lung, large intestine, nose, between eyes, middle part, sclera

**Water**= North, black, cold, salty, kidney, bladder, ears, cheeks (below cheekbone), pupil.

There are also three special pattern diagnosis systems used in case of febrile and infectious diseases. Although TCM and its concept of disease does not strongly differentiate between a cause and effect pattern, discrimination can include considerations regarding the disease cause. There are three fundamental categories of disease causes recognized:

- **External causes**
- **Internal causes**
- **Non-external and non-internal causes (dietary irregularities, too much alcohol or drugs, pollution, fatigue, sexual intemperance, trauma, parasites).**

## QI/CHI

One of the basic tenets of TCM is that the body's vital energy (chi or qi) circulates through channels, called meridians, which have branches connected to body organs and functions. It is well known that the body is electrical as much as it is chemical and physical. Thus, it is recognized that acupuncture points and meridian structures are special conduits for electrical signals. Qi is defined by five cardinal functions:

- **Actuation**
- **Warming**
- **Defense**
- **Containment**
- **Transformation**

Vacuity of qi is characterized by pale complexion, lassitude of spirit, lack of strength, shortness of breath (especially on exertion), laziness to speak, non-digestion of food, spontaneous sweating, and pale and enlarged tongue.

Qi is generated partially from food and drink and partially from air by breathing. Another part is genetic.

Qi is said to circulate in the meridians and held by each of the zang-fu organs. Qi running inside the blood vessels is called ying-qi. Its function is to complement xue and its nature has a strong yin aspect although qi in general is considered to be yang.

Qi distributed in the skin, muscles and tissues in between them is called wei-qi. Its main function is defense and it is yang in nature.

#### XUE

Xue correlates with physical form, such as the red liquid moving through the blood vessels. Its function is to nourish all parts and tissues of the body, ensuring an adequate degree of moisture, and sustaining and soothing both consciousness and sleep.

Symptoms of lack of xue are: pale-white or withered-yellow complexion, dizziness, flowery vision, palpitations, insomnia, numbness of extremities, pale tongue, and fine pulse.

#### JINYE

Jinye relates to xue and translates into body fluids, (e.g. lymphatic fluid, etc.). Just like xue, they are considered yin in nature. Their function first and foremost is of nurturing and moisturizing the different structures of the body. Their other functions are to harmonize yin and yang, and help with secretion of waste products,

Jinye are extracted from food and drink and constitute the raw materials for production of xue; conversely, xue can also be transformed into jinye. Their palpable manifestations are all bodily fluids: tears, sputum, saliva, gastric acid, joint fluid, sweat urine, etc.

#### ZANG-FU

Zang-fu constitute the center piece of TCMs systematization of bodily functions. The organs are primarily defined by their functions. They are not equivalent to the anatomical organs but are primarily defined by their functions.

The term zang refers to the five entities: Heart, Liver, Spleen, Lung, Kidney, which are all yin in nature. The fu refers to the six organs: Small Intestine, Large Intestine, Gall Bladder, Urinary Bladder, Stomach, and Sanjiao, which are yang in nature. The zang's essential functions consist in production and storage of qi and xue. They regulate digestion, breathing, water metabolism, the musculoskeletal system, the skin, the sense organs, aging, emotional processes, and mental activity, and other structures and processes. The fu organs main purpose is merely to transmit and digest

substances such as food and waste.

The zang is paired with a fu and each zang-fu pair is assigned to one of five elemental qualities (e.g. Five Phases), which correspond as such:

**Fire**= Heart and Small Intestine, and secondary Sanjiao (Tripple Burner) and Pericardium.

**Earth** = Spleen and Stomach

**Metal** = Lung and Large intestine

**Water** = Kidney and Bladder

**Wood** = Liver and Gallbladder

The zang-fu are also connected to the twelve standard meridians. Each yang meridian is attached to a fu organ, and five of the yin meridians are attached to a zang. Since there are five zang meridians, but six yin meridians, the sixth is assigned to the Pericardium, similar to the Heart zang.

## JING-LUO

Meridians (pinyin) are believed to be channels running from zang-fu in the interior of the body to the limbs and joints that transport the qi and xue. TCM identifies 12 regular meridians and 8 extraordinary meridians. There are also a number of less customary channels branching from the regular meridians.

**Tui na** is an is a form of massage akin to acupressure from which shiatsu evolved. Asian massage is typically administered with the person fully clothed, without the application of oils. Techniques employed may include thumb presses, rubbing, percussion, and assisted stretching.

**Qigong** is a TCM system of exercise and meditation that combines regulated breathing, slow movement, and focused awareness, to cultivate and balance qi. One branch of qigong is giggling massage, in which the practitioner combines massage techniques with awareness of the acupuncture channels and points.

## HISTORY

The doctrines of Chinese medicine are rooted in books such as the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (dialogue compiled between the Yellow Emperor and his ministers around the first century BC) and the *Treatise on Cold Damage Disorders and Miscellaneous Illnesses by Zhang Zhongjing* (between 196 and 220 CE; at the end of the Han Dynasty), which focused on drug prescriptions combined with the Yin-Yang doctrines and the Five Phases principals.

## INDIAN INFLUENCE

Between the 4th and 8th centuries, Indian medicine penetrated into the Chinese world. Ayurveda greatly influenced TCM during its formation. And, some believe acupuncture had its origins in ancient India. Indian medical knowledge of internal medicine, surgery, obstetrics, gynecology, pediatrics, ophthalmology, dentistry, and otorhinolaryngology was brought to China. Kashyapa Samhita, dating back to the 6th century BCE, was translated into Chinese during the Middle Ages. Kashyap Samhita, also known as Vriddha Jivkiya Tantra is a treatise on Ayurveda attributed to the

sage Kashyap. According to the Book of Sue and the Book of Tang, eleven Indian medical works were translated into Chinese. Indian monks and translators, who had a good understanding of medicine introduced surgery into China. An Shigao translated an Indian medical work into Chinese, which dealt with 404 diseases. The Chinese monk, Yijing went to India and brought back some 400 Buddhist translated texts. Yijing highlights India's superior medical knowledge and praised the practice of fasting among Indians, which he believed could cure imbalances within days. He also introduced hygiene practiced in India. Formulae for lung diseases were imported from India during the Tang dynasty. Indian ophthalmologist also practiced medicine in China. Indian medicine had a profound influence on physician Sun Simian who mentions many Indian surgical techniques for treatment of cataracts, glaucoma, and other eye diseases. Over ninety articles were attributed to Indian physician Jivaka, which were recorded by Ishinpo of Tanba Yasuyori.

In the centuries that followed, the completion of the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Cannon*, several shorter books tried to summarize or systematize its contents. The *Canon of Problems* (second century CE) tried to reconcile divergent doctrines from the Inner Canon and developed a complete medical system centered on needling therapy. The *AB Canon of Acupuncture and Moxibustion* compiled by Huangfu Mi (between 256 and 282 CE) assembled a consistent body of doctrines concerning acupuncture. The *Canon of the Pulse* presented itself as a comprehensive handbook on diagnostics and therapy.

In the 1950s, these precepts were standardized in the People's Republic of China, which included attempts to integrate them with modern notions of anatomy and pathology. In 1952, the president of the Chinese Medical Assoc. said that, "This One Medicine, will possess a basis in modern natural sciences, will have absorbed the ancient and the new, the Chinese and the foreign, all medical achievements, and will be China's New Medicine."



NOTE: The information in this article is basic. The Science and study of TCM is a lot more complex.