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# Ancient Chinese medicine: understanding the laws of nature to understand and treat man

## Introduction to Chinese medicine

Chinese medicine, recognized by the World Health Organization and included among non-conventional medicines, is considered the oldest known medical system. It is a complex medical system, whose most popular version (that, in fact, recognized by the WHO) is the model of traditional Chinese medicine, also known by the acronym TCM, whose foundation and systematization, however, dates back only to the era of Mao Tse-Tung (more precisely in the decade between 1950 and 1960). Ancient Chinese Medicine (ACM), instead, refers to older medical models. The first work about ACM dates back to 2600 BC and is the Huang Ti Nei Ching Su Wen. It consists of inscriptions on tortoise shells and shoulder blades of bovines, about a form of massage practiced by shamans. When the body is in an agitated state, channels or meridians are hindered; consequently the body loses sensitivity and has to be treated with massage (Chap. V: Vital energy, blood, physical and mental constitution of the work mentioned above). The ACM, first an expression of Taoism and then of Chan Buddhism, was born as a system based on massage, acupuncture and “osteopathic-like maneuvers”. The use of needles, moxa, cupping was, and still should be, an integration and never a complete replacement of the direct contact of the hands and fingers of the operator with the body of the “yin” (that is, the person who benefits from the treatment). Since each ACM treatment is aimed at harmonizing the energies of a person, no system or equipment can be more suitable for this purpose than the direct source of vital energy: the operator’s hands. The ancient masters have always invited to be very cautious in the use of acupuncture needles, a practice which is unfortunately highly inflated by modern acupuncturists. The practice of medical arts in ancient times was necessarily carried out in parallel



to the practice of the so-called “martial arts”, in full compliance with the necessary complementarity of opposites, expressed in the law of yin and yang. The names of the first massage therapists known in China, who lived, according to Chinese tradition, between 2600 and 2100 BC, are Chi Bo, Dai Ji, Yu Fu. Since then, the Chinese massage has been increasingly used and systematized. In the fifth century BC the doctor Hua To codified the techniques, transmitted until the present day, of the 5 therapeutic animals (monkey, bear, snake, tiger, heron).

Such techniques are energy postural exercises inspired by the movements of the 5 animals mentioned above, performed at the “rhythm” of functional breathing (a breathing performed with the movement of the diaphragm, which must anticipate the movement of the chest both in the breathe-in phase and the breath-out phase) and aimed at obtaining well-being and longevity. Pao Pu Tzu Nei Pian (The Master who embraces the simplicity of the child) by Ge Hong (281-341 AC), is a

precious handbook of inner alchemy to optimize the consumption of vital energy and a manual of prescriptions for emergencies. It is also worth remembering Chang San Feng (Wudang, 1296 AC) and his Long Lun Nei Ching (Canon of Internal Medicine of the dragon and the phoenix). It is to this Treaty that I refer for the subject I teach in the Master Course of Sports Physiotherapy, namely the Protocol “Long Lun Shu Lao Tuina” (the massage of the ancient stream of the Dragon and the Phoenix). During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the “tui na” and Chinese medicine were introduced as a core examination subject at the Imperial School of Medicine. In this period, by Imperial will, tui na became very popular and the pediatric techniques of tui na (massage and acupressure) developed enormously. During the subsequent Ching dynasty (1644-1911) tui na was considered unsuitable for the refined tastes of the imperial family and was therefore removed from the court and from the Imperial School of Medicine. Any form of prohibition, however, always causes a physiological rebound, so the people secretly continued the practice, and developed its practical-applicative aspects associated with the popular diffusion of martial arts, which always took place in secret at that time: a medical encyclopaedia of the time, by various authors, mentions “the 8 methods to treat bone fractures” (“duànliè gu pa fa”). In the twentieth century, the technical inferiority that the Celestial Empire experienced in the encounter with the West (the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion) undermined the self-confidence of the Chinese people. Thus began, on the part of the Chinese people, the collapse of confidence in their own culture (including AMC). Then, in 1949, with the advent of the Republic of China of Mao Tse-Tung, the period of the “cultural revolution” began, and in its diverse aspects, also started a real process of purging of every aspect of the ancient Taoist arts. Just like the practice of “martial arts” was immediately banned, thousands of texts of ancient medicine were destroyed and their use by the people was banned. Only in the late ‘50s, following the position taken by China with respect to the “cold war” (an event that came to define the opposing blocks east / west), the need arose to repropose the products of the ancient Chinese culture to give to the world the image of the power of the “middle country” through autochthonous expressions. In a few years the practice of martial arts was recodified and re-systematized (and became what we see today, that is, spectacular practices having however no link with the original ancient practice) just like the protocols of the modern traditional Chinese medicine (anything belonging to the ancients and saved from the destruction of cultural purge was reconstructed and rearranged), and ancient medicine was therefore presented in a “diluted” version, deprived of most of its therapeutic efficacy. My master Huang Wan De witnessed and painfully described that time. Indeed, he was forced to flee China in 1950 at the age of 42 to avoid being killed by the weapons of the Maoist army, which was at the

time in “full swing” and aimed at completing that dreary example of human carnage that took precisely the name of “cultural purge”. The father of the great master was not so lucky, and died shot, “guilty” only of being one of the masters of ancient arts. Those ancient arts (medicine and combat) represented precisely one of the deepest roots of the millennial culture of China, and because of that had to be - and actually were - eradicated with inhuman violence. As a form of respect for the master and for this sad historic watershed, I willingly adopt the terms of Wade Giles transliteration, and not those of pinyin, the transcription system introduced by the People’s Republic of China and still in use today (I will talk about “chi” and not of “qi”, of “tai chi chuan” and not of “tai ji quan”, etc.). The World Health Organization has recognized, however, the traditional Chinese medicine as part of non-conventional medicines. CTM is considered as composed of “five pillars”: tui na, acupuncture, drug therapy, dietetics, movement therapies (tai chi chuan, chi kung). Deep differences remain in any case between CTM and ancient medicine.

### **Modern society and oriental disciplines**

The western society of the third millennium has become, over the past three decades, extremely permeable to all kinds of conception resulting from the so-called ancient oriental disciplines. In a society plagued by growing problems such as rampant petty crime, on the one hand, and imploding stress on the other, we increasingly tend to import the cultural components of the ancient East in an attempt to integrate them in the western mentality and lifestyles to benefit from them and obtain help, and often succeeding in operating only an adaptation process that degrades and impoverishes the original essence of such components. The concept of oriental disciplines includes the whole range of activities focused on finding a deep psycho-physical-emotional connection, and forming a continuum that starts with those practices being mainly focused on the acquisition of practical skills in combat techniques (kung fu, karate, ju jitsu, etc.) to get to more introspective practices aimed at finding the equilibrium and calm of inner dialogue (chi kung, yoga, meditation, etc.). Along this continuum, other activities can be found that complement the two dichotomous aspects (e.g., tai chi chuan) and some practices being more focused on medical-therapeutic aspects (tui na, shiatsu, acupuncture, etc.).

It is precisely in the importation of the medical-therapeutic aspects, especially in the application of traditional Chinese medicine, that the impoverishment of the essence of the ancient arts appears more paradoxical. Many aspects would be worthy of attention and study but, to be concise, any reference to the historical aspects, to the methods of application and especially to the relationship between modern science and ancient medicine will be omitted for the moment, so as to focus on a fundamental but forgotten

concept, which now little or nothing is known about: the subjective energy biotype. It is a concept that stems from (and at the same time demonstrates...) a fundamental postulate: every individual possesses unique and different energetic and organic characteristics; as a consequence, each therapeutic practice is only partially effective (or even harmful ...), if it does not take into account the subjective characteristics of the patient mentioned above. This concept is defined starting from the Huang Dao, the Chinese calendar.

### The basic postulates of ancient Chinese medicine

Let us look briefly at some of the assumptions that formed the very foundations of the entire theoretical and practical system of ancient Chinese medicine:

- all is one, a basic concept that starts from one's awareness that nothing in nature is considered antithetical to something else, but is only complementary and integral to it; the concept is expressed by the law of yin / yang;
- the human being is an OLOS composed of 4 spheres being independent and at the same time interdependent from each other. These four spheres are: the corporeal sphere, the energy sphere, the psycho-emotional sphere and the spiritual sphere. Any intervention on one of the four spheres can have direct effects on the other 3;
- every human being is a microcosm and represents an integral and essential part of the macrocosm of nature;
- every human being lives in relation to the energy flows of nature and is governed by the rhythms of the laws that govern nature itself. Just as nature is changing, despite the repetitive cyclical rhythms that regulate it, the human being too has some characteristics which vary cyclically and are governed by the laws of the cosmos;
- knowing the laws that govern nature allows to better understand the laws that sustain the human being in his life in the world;
- the strong link between the human being and nature, the fact that the human being himself is powered by the same energy that powers nature: the chi (pronounced "ci"), the vital energy;
- every human being is born with some sort of pre-conceived tank of chi (the yuan chi, the chi of the origin, which comes from the encounter of the energies of parents strengthened or weakened by the natural energies of the day – or of the period of conception. No one can increase, but only optimize, the consumption of the yuan chi, which, once finished, marks the end of earthly life. To optimize the use of the yuan chi, the ancient masters used special psycho-corporeal techniques (meditation, chi kung, tai chi chuan, etc.) and adopted healthy eating and correct breathing, based mainly on the use of the

diaphragm and on the full awareness while breathing. The circulation of the chi in the human being is continuous and guaranteed by a system of 12 meridians (or ordinary channels and 8 extraordinary channels) (for ancient medicine, any disease is only an imbalance of the flow of chi which can be restored by the therapist with suitable interventions on the points of access to energy, acupuncture points). The chi flows, in the circadian cycle, in all ordinary meridians simultaneously but reaches its energy peak for about 2 hours in each of the 12 meridians according to Table I below.

**Table I.** Meridians and maximum energy peak circadian circulation.

Circadian circulation	Time of max energy peak
Lung	03-05
Large intestine	05-07
Stomach	07-09
Spleen	09-11
Heart	11-13
Small intestine	13-15
Bladder	15-17
Kidney	17-19
Heart	19-21
Triple heater	21-23
Gallbladder	23-01
Liver	01-03

### Rhythms of nature, rhythms of humans

February 19th was the first day of 2015 (the year of the sheep) as calculated by the ancient Chinese calendar. Therefore, while the western new year is conventionally set each year on the same day (January 1st), the Chinese New Year varies according to the years. This is because the first day of our Gregorian calendar was conventionally established in relation to the date of Christ's birth (a week after the nativity, the people of Israel used to circumcise children), the one of the ancient Chinese calendar instead is related to the energy flows of nature, as it was established in the aftermath of the new moon being closest to the date of February 4th. The Chinese New Year marks the first day of spring and the other seasons depend on that date: May 19th, 2015 will be the first day of summer, August 19th of autumn and November 19th of winter (a short winter, because in 2016 the New Year, and therefore spring, will start on February 8th, in the year of the monkey).

Understanding this step is essential from a therapeutic point of view. Any intervention should be set in close connection with the law of the 5 changes (Tab. II), which becomes applicable just because of its connection with the season and with the relevant organs and viscera.

**Table II.** Some of the most significant correspondences associated with the 5 changes

	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Organ	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lungs	Kidneys
Viscera	Gallbladder	Small intestine	Stomach	Large intestine	Bladder
Season	Spring	Summer	5th season	Autumn	Winter
Body	Muscles	Tendons, Cardiocirc. system	Connective tissue	Skin	Bone marrow
Emotions	Anger	Joy	Worry	Pain	Fear
Senses	Sight	Touch	Taste	Smell	Hearing
Life stages	Birth	Growth	Transformation	Decline	Death

Just think, for example, that August 20th, 2010, which was for us in the middle of summer, from the point of view of natural energy flows was already in autumn, with the result that the organs had to be stimulated by the therapist in a completely different way (summer = heart / small intestine / blood vessels / etc .; while autumn = lung / large intestine / skin / etc.). The Chinese calendar had been built by ancient masters to understand the energies of nature and had been structured referring to the rhythmic interactions between the energies of heaven and those on earth, interactions that are based on the knowledge of the 10 Celestial Stems and 12 Earthly Branches. In particular, the 12 Earthly Branches express both the division of the day in two-hourly cycles which are the so-called 6 fundamental energies of nature (wind, damp, dryness, cold, ministerial fire, imperial fire) which are to connect directly to the 12 energy meridians of humans: each of the 12 Earthly Branches combined with a human energy meridian expresses its energy in the circadian cycle which was previously flowing in humans every 2 hours in a continuous flow. Each of the

12 Earthly Branches is connected to only one of the 12 animals of the Chinese calendar (Tab. III). 10 is the number of Celestial Stems because they correspond to the 5 changes (and therefore to the organs and viscera and to the correlated changes, see again Tab. II), in correspondence and in combination with the 12 Earthly Branches in the ancient calendar, and determine the energy status of each year. Since the least common multiple of 12 and 10 is 60, after 60 years it is clearly possible to repeat the combination of a branch / stem couple with identical energy characteristics (Tab. IV). It is worth noting that the rat, for example, returns every 13 years, but since the stem / branch combination is different, two people-mouse receive completely different energy characteristics (jia / zi and bing zi). A mouse can potentially have the same characteristics as the person mouse of 1924 in 1984, the year in which the rat / jia-zi recur.

It is worth remembering that the 10 celestial stems allow to calculate the energies that change daily: the first day of the new year will be jia, the second yi, the eleventh

**Table III.** Meridians and energy circulation in relation to the animals of the ancient calendar and to Earthly Branches.

Meridian	Time of max energy peak	Corresponding Animal	Earthly Branch
Lungs	03-05	Tiger	Yin
large intestine	05-07	Rabbit	Mao
stomach	07-09	Dragon	Chen
spleen	09-11	Snake	Si
heart	11-13	Horse	Wu
small intestine	13-15	Sheep	Wei
bladder	15-17	Monkey	Shen
kidney	17-19	Cock	You
heart	19-21	Dog	Xu
triple heater	21-23	Pig	Hai
gallbladder	23-01	Mouse	Zi
liver	01-03	Ox	Chou

**Table IV.**

Year	New Year	Animal	Element	Stems	Branches
1924	5 February	Mouse	Wood	Jia	Zi
1925	24 January	Ox	Wood	Yi	Chou
1926	13 February	Tiger	Fire	Bing	Yin
1927	2 February	Rabbit	Fire	Ding	Mao
1928	23 January	Dragon	Earth	Wu	Chen
1929	10 February	Snake	Earth	Ji	Si
1930	30 January	Horse	Metal	Geng	Wu
1931	17 February	Sheep	Metal	Xin	Wei
1932	6 February	Monkey	Water	Ren	Shen
1933	26 January	Cock	Water	Gui	You
1934	14 February	Dog	Wood	Jia	Xu
1935	4 February	Pig	Wood	Yi	Hai
1936	24 January	Mouse	Fire	Bing	Zi
1937	11 February	Ox	Fire	Ding	Chou
1938	31 January	Tiger	Earth	Wu	Yin

again jia, and so on during all the year. As a result, at least in theory, it is clear that:

- 1) from the moment he sees the light, every Human being acquires a personal energy biotype that makes him unique and unrepeatably. This unique energy biotype is the result of the energy biotypes of parents, of the natural energy being dominant on the day of conception, of the natural energy being dominant in the year, on the day and in the minute of birth of the subject in question;
- 2) Energy biotype represents the fundamental motivation, beyond any other purely theoretical / philosophical aspect, for the fact that the therapeutic approach and the attention of ancient medicine are constantly focused on the patient and never on the illness: not only does a single disease have different causes in different patients, but the same symptoms in the same patient may have different causes if appearing in different seasons and even in different daily cycles;
- 3) Once calculated, energy biotype is an essential reference value for each therapeutic intervention intending to be really effective. Depending on the type of energy balance shown by the subject, and in relation to the time of year (season) in which the imbalance occurs,

it will be necessary to act in the times of the day being most appropriate to support and meet the energy needs of the patient. Every therapist should therefore be willing to design a plan of action being based not on their agenda (that is, defined on the commitments of the therapist), but rather on what can be called «the bioenergy agenda of the patient» (defined on the real energy needs of the patient) which cannot take into account neither public holidays, nor inconvenient hours (I have had to give appointments on the morning of Easter Sunday at 06.00!). In ancient medicine only one treatment is transmitted and can be applied to any person, notwithstanding the subjective energy characteristics: it is the «Long Lun Shu Lao Tuina» («the massage of the ancient stream of the Dragon and the Phoenix»). It is an intervention of general energy harmonization that the traditional Chinese medicine based on a «Maoist conception» has totally lost. The great master Huang Wan De used to say:

*“One cannot consider any bodily treatment without involving the energy sphere and the psycho-emotional sphere of the person: only the path traced by the Shu Lao has no risks ...*

#### CORRESPONDENCE

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