THE EIGHT EXTRAORDINARY VESSELS
(PART ONE)
By Giovanni Maciocia
Drawings by Linda Upton

A two-part article on the Extraordinary Vessels by Giovanni Maciocia was originally published in Issues 2 and 3 of The Journal of Chinese Medicine (1979/80) and is now out of print. Since these articles and indeed the subject of the Extraordinary Vessels have generated so much interest, we make no apology for publishing another article on the subject by Giovanni Maciocia. This article is based on the chapter ‘Extraordinary Vessels’ in his forthcoming book ‘The Foundations of Chinese Medicine’ due to be published in June 1989 by Churchill Livingstone. Additional parts have been added from the original article.

INTRODUCTION

In order to discuss the function and nature of the extraordinary vessel points, it is necessary to discuss the nature of the vessels themselves.

The main sources of knowledge for the extraordinary vessels derives from the following classics:

- the “Spiritual Axis” (Ling Shu), chapters 17, 21 and 62
- the “Classic of Difficulties” (Nan Jing), chapters 27, 28 and 29
- the “Study of the Eight Extraordinary Vessels” (Qi Jing Ba Mai Kao) by Li Shi Zhen, 1578
- the “Compendium of Acupuncture” (Zhen Jiu Da Cheng) by Yang Ji Zhou, 1601.

The 8 extraordinary vessels and their points are:

- Directing Vessel (Ren Mai) LU-7
- Governing Vessel (Du Mai) SI-3
- Penetrating Vessel (Chong Mai) SP-4
- Girdle Vessel (Dai Mai) GB-41
- Yin Linking Vessel (Yin Wei Mai) P-6
- Yang Linking Vessel (Yang Wei Mai) SJ-5
- Yin Heel Vessel (Yin Qiao Mai) KID-6
- Yang Heel Vessel (Yang Qiao Mai) BL-62.

The main functions of the extraordinary vessels can be summarised as follows:

1) They act as reservoirs of energy in relation to the main channels which are compared to rivers. This idea comes from the “Classic of Difficulties” in chapter 27. It says: “When there are heavy rains, canals and ditches are full to the brim.... similarly, the extraordinary vessels are left out of the channel system so that they can take the overflow from the main channels”. This means that the extraordinary vessels can both absorb energy from the main channels and transfer energy to them when needed. This happens in cases of shock, for example.

2) The extraordinary vessels all derive their energy from the Kidneys and all contain the Essence (Jing) which is stored in the Kidneys. They circulate the Essence around the body, thus contributing to integrating the circulation of Nutritive (Ying) Qi with that of the Essence. For this reason, the extraordinary vessels are the link between the Pre-Heaven and the Post-Heaven Qi in so far as they are connected to the main channels and circulate the Essence all over the body. The extraordinary vessels therefore represent a deeper level of treatment related to the Pre-Heaven Qi and the basic constitution of an individual.

3) The extraordinary vessels circulate Defensive (Wei) Qi over the thorax, abdomen and back. This is a function which is performed by the Penetrating, Directing and Governing Vessels only. Since they circulate Defensive Qi, which protects the body from exterior pathogenic factors, the extraordinary vessels also play a role in the body’s resistance to pathogenic factors. This also explains the important role played by the Kidneys in the resistance to pathogenic factors since all extraordinary vessels derive from the Kidneys.

4) The Directing and Penetrating Vessels regulate the 7 and 8 year cycles of women’s and men’s lives respectively. These life cycles are described in the “Simple Questions” in Chapter 1. Beyond the above functions, it is impossible to generalise as each of the extraordinary vessels has special characteristics of its own.
Yin and Yang Heel Vessels

These two vessels are directly complementary: the Yin Heel Vessel starts at Zhaohai KID-6 and flows up to the eye carrying Yin energy to it, the Yang Heel Vessel starts at Shenmai BL-62 and flows up to the eye carrying Yang energy to it. Thus when the energy is in excess in the Yin Heel Vessel, the person will be constantly sleepy and the eyes will want to close, while when the energy is in excess in the Yang Heel Vessel, the person is awake and the eyes are open.

The two heel vessels also control the state of the muscles of the legs. When the Yin Heel Vessel is diseased, the Yin is tight and the Yang is relaxed, (i.e. the muscles of the inner aspect of the leg are tight, and those of the outer aspect too relaxed). When the Yang Heel Vessel is diseased, the Yang is tight and the Yin relaxed (i.e. the muscles of the inner aspect of the leg are relaxed and those of the outer aspect tight).

Yin and Yang Linking Vessels

The two Heel Vessel complement each other in so far as they link the Yin and Yang channels. In addition, their opening points belong to the Lesser (Shao) Yang and Terminal (Jue) Yin channels i.e. San Jiao and Pericardium respectively, which are internally-externally related.

Girdle Vessel

The Girdle Vessel stands on its own as it is the only horizontal channel in the body. It encircles the main channels and because of this, it exerts an influence on the circulation of energy to the legs.
Thus the extraordinary vessels form an energetic pattern of the whole body which develops from the Kidneys, in much the same way as the embryo develops along a central axis. The Penetrating Vessel is at the centre of this energetic vortex as it is also the “Sea of the 5 Yin and 6 Yang organs”, the “Sea of Blood” and “Sea of the 12 channels” (the meaning of which will be explained later) and it starts from the Kidney itself. The energy of the Penetrating Vessel is then distributed all over the body in small channels at the Defensive Qi energetic level. When its energy reaches Zhaohai KID-6, Zhubin KID-9, Shenmai BL-62, Jinmen BL-63 and Daimai GB-26 it gives rise to the Yin Heel Vessel, Yin Linking Vessel, Yang Heel Vessel, Yang Linking Vessel and Girdle Vessel respectively. Thus the Penetrating Vessel can be seen as the origin of these five extraordinary vessels.

The Directing and Governing Vessels determine and define the coronal plane of the body, the Girdle Vessel defines the transverse plane, while the Yang Heel and Linking Vessels define the sagittal plane (see figure 1). The Governing and Directing Vessels cut across the Girdle Vessel linking it with the Heart above, the ‘generative gate’ below, the umbilicus in front and the Penetrating Vessel in the middle. This emphasises why these four vessels (Governing, Directing, Penetrating and Girdle) are interlinked for the production, circulation, discharge and regeneration of the Essence. When these meridians are blocked, the generative force cannot be produced and a man or woman grows old.

We can now discuss the function and clinical use of each extraordinary vessel and their opening points.

### GOVERNING VESSEL

**Opening point:** Houxi SI-3  
**Coupled point:** Shenmai BL-62  
**Starting point:** Changqiang DU-1  
**Area of body influenced:** back, spine, back of neck and head.

The Governing Vessel is called the “Sea of the Yang channels” as it exerts an influence on all the Yang channels and it can be used to strengthen the Yang of the body. It can strengthen the spine and tonify Kidney-Yang.

The Governing Vessel also nourishes the spine and brain as the inner pathway of the vessel enters the brain. In this sense it can be used to strengthen the Kidney function of nourishing Marrow and Brain, for such symptoms as dizziness and poor memory. To summarise, the opening and coupled point can be used for the following cases:

1. To tonify Kidney-Yang and strengthen the back. The Governing Vessel is extremely useful in all cases of chronic lower back ache due to Kidney deficiency, especially (but not exclusively) when the pain is on the midline of the back. The use of the opening and coupled points can strengthen the back and actually straighten the spine. In men the Governing Vessel can be used on its own, and in women is best combined with the Directing Vessel, crossing over the opening and coupled points. Thus in a woman, one would use Houxi SI-3 on the right, Shenmai BL-62 on the left, Lieque LU-7 on the left and Zhaohai KID-6 on the right, the needles being inserted in this order and taken out in the reverse order.

When used for lower back ache, the Governing Vessel opening and coupled points are used first and left in for about 10-15 minutes. This has the effect of opening the Governing Vessel, making it more receptive to treatment with local points. It also has the effect of actually straightening the spine. After withdrawal of the opening and coupled point needles, local points can be used, particularly Yaoyangguan DU-3 or the extra point Shiqizhuxia situated on the midline below the tip of L-5 lumbar vertebra.

Since the Governing Vessel is the “Sea of the Yang channels” it can be used to tonify the whole Yang energy of the body. Points such as Yaoyangguan DU-3, Mingmen DU-4, Dazhui DU-14, Baihui DU-20 which lie along its pathway have a strong tonifying effect on the Yang energy, especially Mingmen DU-4 with moxa:

**Yaoyangguan DU-3:** this point tonifies the Kidneys, strengthens Yang Qi and Original (Yuan) Qi, controls emissions, and warms the back and legs. It is indicated for coldness and numbness of the back and legs.

**Mingmen DU-4:** this point tonifies Kidney-Yang which is the root of the Yang of the body. If Kidney-Yang is deficient, Spleen-Yang will also be deficient, hence there will be cold symptoms in the digestive and urinary tracts (diarrhoea, abdominal swelling, food not digested properly, frequent and pale urination etc.).
Dazhui DU-14: this point has a powerful tonifying effect on the heart, which although it is a Yin organ and controls the Blood which is Yin, also puts Qi back into the Blood - a Yang function. Lack of Heart-Yang will involve poor circulation and many cold symptoms (pale face, cold hands, feeling cold, pale tongue, Slow pulse etc.). Baihui DU-20: this is also a meeting point of all the Yang, but it has the added action of summoning energy to the head. It should thus not be tonified in cases of high blood pressure (some authors recommend it to be bled). It is effective to raise Qi when the Central Qi is weak, with symptoms such as prolapse of the uterus or bladder, or simply a dragging feeling in the lower abdomen and stagnant Qi in that area.

2. To expel Wind: this can be either internal or external wind. In exterior attacks, the Governing vessel can be used to release the Exterior and expel Wind at the Greater (Tai) Yang stage of the 6 Stages. It is therefore used for such symptoms as fever, runny nose, headache, stiff neck and a floating pulse.

The Governing Vessel can also be used to treat intermittent fevers and cases of lingering heat where the pathogenic factors are not completely expelled. A typical example of this condition is myalgic encephalomyelitis (M.E. or post-viral syndrome). In these cases, the points Taoao DU-13 and Dazhui DU-14 are indicated.

In interior conditions, the Governing Vessel can be used to subdue interior Wind, for such symptoms as dizziness, tremors, convulsions, epilepsy, or for the sequelae of Wind-stroke.

3. To nourish the spine and brain. Using the opening and coupled points of the Governing Vessel can strengthen the Kidney function of nourishing Marrow and Brain, for such symptoms as dizziness, tinnitus, poor mental development and poor memory.

Incidentally, the Governing and Directing Vessels are strongly connected with the martial arts of the Inner School and with Taoist Yoga, precisely because of their connection with the Kidneys and the brain. One of the aims of the Inner School is to direct the Essence from the Kidneys up the spine (Governing Vessel) to the head, down the front of the body along the Directing Vessel and back to the genitals, passing through the three ‘dan tian’. It is said that when this happens, the body is greatly revitalised, the Qi flows harmoniously and unimpeded, and the Qi can repel any attack. It is also said that the aim of the Inner School is to transform Essence into Qi, then Qi into Shen (Spirit) and finally Shen into Emptiness.

This is the reason why the Inner School stresses relaxation, which alone can permit an unobstructed flow of Qi, and a straight back and neck for the same reason. In these exercises one also keeps the tongue curled back so that its tip touches the palate: this allows the joining of flow between the Governing and Directing Vessels.

4. The role of the Governing Vessel in the circulation of energy in the back provides interesting observations. Above Dazhui DU-14 the Governing Vessel tends to absorb excess energy from the Yang channels. When there is excess Yang energy in the head there can be symptoms of Yang mental illness. Hence the use of the Governing Vessel for hallucinations, dementia etc.

CASE HISTORY

A man suffered from chronic back ache on the midline in the lumbar area. This was caused by a Kidney deficiency, and the Governing Vessel opening and coupled points (Houxi SI-3 and Shenmai BL-62) were used, together with Taixi KID-3 and Shenshu BL-23, producing an immediate and marked improvement.

Directing Vessel

Opening point: Lieque LU-7
Coupled point: Zhaohai KID-6
Starting point: Huiyin REN-1
Area of body influenced: abdomen, thorax, lungs, throat, face.

The Directing Vessel is called the “Sea of the Yin channels” as it exerts an influence on all the Yin channels of the body. It originates from the Kidneys and flows through the uterus down to Huiyin REN-1 where the superficial pathway starts. The Directing Vessel is of paramount importance for the reproductive system of both men and women, but particularly women, as it regulates menstruation, fertility, conception, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause. Its functions and clinical use can be summarised as follows:

Fig. 3 The Directing vessel

1. It can be used to nourish the Yin energy of the body. In this context it is particularly useful to nourish Yin in women after menopause as the Directing channel controls the uterus and determines the 7-year life cycles of women. It can therefore regulate the energy of the reproductive system and, after the menopause, tonify Blood and Yin to reduce the effects of Empty-Heat symptoms deriving from Yin deficiency.
It can therefore be used for such symptoms as night sweating, hot flushes, feelings of heat, mental irritability, anxiety, dry mouth at night, dizziness, tinnitus or insomnia, all symptoms of Kidney-Yin deficiency and Heart Empty-Heat. When used in this way, the opening and coupled points are best combined with Guanyuan REN-4.

2. It regulates the uterus and Blood in women, so that it is responsible for menstruation, fertility, conception, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause. It can be used for infertility to promote the supply of Blood to the uterus and in many menstrual disorders such as dysmenorrhea, amenorrhea, menorrhagia and metrorrhagia.

3. It moves Qi in the Lower Burner and uterus, so that it can be used for lumps, fibroids and carcinoma of the uterus. In men, it is used for hernia. According to the “Classic of Difficulties” the Directing Vessel can be used to treat the “7 kinds of Lower Burner pain” in men and the “8 kinds of lumps in the lower abdomen” in women.

Of course for all these problems there will be a hot or cold kind, an Excess or Deficiency kind, a damp-heat kind which needs to be treated accordingly. In general it can be said that the Directing Vessel is excellent in cases of gynaecological problems due to stagnation of Qi and/or Blood (whether hot or cold). The stagnation of Qi can be caused by excessive consumption of cold food (food with cold energy eg raw foods, salads, fruit etc.) especially during childhood and puberty. The stagnation can also be caused by emotional problems such as sadness or worry. In these cases one must use the opening and coupled points to move the Qi stagnation. The good results obtained are due to the fact that the Directing Vessel’s opening point is Lieque LU-7 and the Lungs control Qi and are the mother of the Kidneys ("Metal generates Water"). This point provides a powerful stimulation and movement of Qi, which in turn moves the Blood. The coupled point Zhaohai KID-6 tonifies the Yin and has a strong upward-moving movement, hence the use of both points sets the Qi in motion like a wheel and resolves stagnation.

4. The sphere of action of the Directing Vessel extends not only to the Lower Burner, but also the Middle and Upper Burner. It can in fact also be used to stimulate the Lung descending function and the Kidney function of reception of Qi. For this reason, it is used for chronic asthma, for which it is excellent.

5. The Directing Vessel is very important for the correct distribution of fluids and Defensive Qi in the abdomen, hence it can be used in oedema, itchiness, urinary retention etc. Oedema is usually caused by:
   i. The Lungs not descending Qi and transforming fluids.
   ii. Spleen-Yang not moving fluids.
   iii. Kidney-Yang not moving, transforming and expelling fluids.

By using the Directing Vessel we can send the Qi down by using Lieque LU-7 and stimulate the Kidneys by using Zhaohai KID-6. The use of Lieque LU-7 in the context of the Directing Vessel also stimulates the Bladder to expel fluids. This reflects the very close relationship between the Lungs and the Bladder. They are at opposite ends of the body and therefore in a sense touching like two ends of a sheet of paper when it is rolled. There are several reasons for this:

i. The Lungs and Bladder are respectively the first and last stages of fluid transformation.

ii. They are related in the Chinese clock, being at opposite poles i.e. 3-5am and 3-5pm.

iii. The Lungs are the mother of the Kidneys and hence also of the Bladder.

iv. The Lungs are at the very top and the Bladder at the bottom hence by Chinese logic they must be related.

v. The Lungs correspond to Greater (Tai) Yin which ‘opens’ the Yin, and the Bladder to Greater (Tai) Yang which ‘opens’ the Yang.

In order to affect the Directing Vessel’s function of body fluid distribution, it is essential to use points on the lower abdomen, particularly Zhongji REN-3 and Guanyuan REN-4 as well as Shuifen REN-9 in addition to its opening and coupled points.

CASE HISTORY

A man of 37 suffered from chronic asthma characterised by difficulty in inhalation. There was no sputum and he felt very tired generally. His voice was low and his complexion pale, he also had a lower backache and felt cold. His pulse was Deep and Weak and his tongue was pale. These manifestations clearly point to deficient Kidney-Yang unable to hold Qi, resulting in asthma. Besides this, there was also a Lung-Qi deficiency as evidenced by the low voice and pale complexion.

The opening and coupled points of the Directing Vessel (Lieque LU-7 on the left and Zhaohai KID-6 on the right) were used to tonify the Lungs and to stimulate the descending of Lung-Qi and the Kidney function of reception of Qi.

CASE HISTORY

A woman of 41 had a large fibroid in the uterus for several years. Her periods were very heavy and painful and the menstrual blood was dark. Her lower abdomen was extremely hard and the fibroid was clearly felt on palpation.

She was treated several times using the opening and coupled points of the Directing Vessel, producing a complete normalisation of her periods and a very marked softening of her lower abdomen. The size of the abdominal swelling was also markedly reduced. Obviously a fibroid of that size cannot be dissolved, but the use of the Directing Vessel at least normalised her periods and a very comfortable abdomen much more comfortable.

Notes
2. Simple Questions, p.4-6.
4. Classic of Difficulties, ch.29, p.73.