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, also in two parts, 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 material has been added from the original article. Part One of this new article appeared in The Journal of Chinese Medicine Number 29, January 1989.

The Penetrating Vessel

Opening point: Gongsun SP-4
Coupled point: Neiguan P-6
Starting point: Huiyin REN-1
Area of body influenced: abdomen, uterus, chest, heart.

The Penetrating Vessel is very complex as it has many different functions at different levels. In a way, it could be considered to be the origin of the other extraordinary vessels (excluding the Governing and Directing Vessels) as it originates in the Kidneys and spreads its Qi all over the body at the Defensive Qi level. When this energy arrives at the relevant starting points, it gives rise to the Yin and Yang Linking Vessels, the Yin and Yang Heel Vessels and the Girdle Vessel.

The Penetrating Vessel is described as the “Sea of the 5 Yin and 6 Yang organs” and also as the “Sea of the 12 channels”. It is described as the Sea of the 5 Yin and 6 Yang organs as it is a fundamental vessel which connects the Pre-Heaven and Post-Heaven Qi, due to its connection with the Kidneys and Stomach. It is connected to the Kidneys as it originates in them and it distributes Essence all over the body. It is connected to the Stomach as it passes through the point Qichong ST-30 which is a point for the Sea of Food. Furthermore, the Penetrating Vessel is connected to the Spleen channel along which it flows on the inner aspect of the thigh, down to the big toe.

It is called the “Sea of the 12 channels” because it branches out in many small capillary-like vessels that circulate Defensive Qi over the abdomen and chest. The functions and clinical use of the Penetrating Vessel can be summarised as follows:

1. The Penetrating Vessel is excellent in cases of rebellious Qi, and is therefore often used to move Qi and Blood when they stagnate in the abdomen and chest, for such cases as dysmenorrhoea, flatulence, borborygmi, abdominal distention or abdominal masses. In this respect, it is used mostly for Excess patterns characterised by stagnation and obstruction with a characteristic feeling of fullness of the chest or epigastrium. It is effective in Liver-Spleen disharmony where Liver-Qi invades the Spleen, and for asthma due to Stomach-Spleen-Lung disharmony, but not for Kidney-
Lung disharmony for which the Directing Vessel is indicated.

2. The Penetrating Vessel, together with the Directing Vessel, regulates the uterus and menstruation and it nourishes Blood. It can be used for such conditions as dysmenorrhoea, amenorrhoea and menorrhagia. The main differences between the Penetrating Vessel and the Directing Vessel in relation to menstruation is that the former controls Qi and can be used to tonify and nourish, whereas the latter controls Blood and is mostly used to move Qi and Blood and remove obstructions.

3. Since the Penetrating Vessel provides the link between the Pre-Heaven and Post-Heaven Qi, it can be used in all cases of weak constitution with digestive symptoms such as poor appetite, abdominal distention and poor assimilation of food.

4. The Penetrating Vessel exerts an influence on the heart, as it flows through it, and it can be used to move the Blood of the Heart in cases of pain in the chest, stuffiness of the chest and palpitations.

Comparison and Differentiation between the Directing and Penetrating Vessels

1. The Directing Vessel corresponds to Qi, the Penetrating Vessel to Blood. The Directing Vessel is therefore used in problems due to deficiency or stagnation of Qi, or rebellious Qi, whereas the Penetrating Vessel is used more in problems due to stagnation of Blood. This does not mean, however, that the Directing Vessel is not used in Blood problems, since they are often due to Qi problems.

2. As a consequence of the above, the Directing Vessel corresponds to the Lungs (= Qi) and the Penetrating Vessel corresponds to the Heart and Spleen (= Blood). One would therefore use the Directing Vessel more for Lung problems and the Penetrating Vessel for Heart and Spleen problems.

3. The Directing Vessel is more used in cases of deficiency of Qi or rebellious Qi, whereas the Penetrating Vessel is more used when there is an actual material accumulation (of food or phlegm).

4. As a consequence of the above, the Directing Vessel is more used when the pulse is Weak, Short or Fine (all signs of Qi deficiency), whereas the Penetrating Vessel is more used when the pulse is Slippery and Full or Long (all signs of Excess of material accumulation).

5. The Directing Vessel has more of a circular action on the median plane of the body, whilst the Penetrating Vessel has more of a dispersing action. What is meant by this is that the Directing Vessel is more used in cases of stagnant Qi in the centre line of the body (in any of the three Burners). It thus acts on the central Qi (i.e. the Qi of the median line) by stimulating the circulation along the centre, like a wheel. The Penetrating Vessel is more used in cases of stagnant Qi and/or Blood spreading horizontally and creating obstruction in the chest and abdomen.

6. To use asthma as an example, both vessels are effective in this condition. The Directing Vessel is used when the asthma is due to rebellious Qi, while the Penetrating Vessel is more used when the asthma is due to stagnation of phlegm (and therefore presents with copious expectoration, a Slippery pulse and a thick tongue coating).

Case history

A man of 45 suffered from chronic indigestion with a sensation of fullness of the epigastrium, belching and nausea. His pulse was Full and Tight especially in the middle position, and his tongue had a thick white coating. The clinical manifestations point to retention of food in the Middle Burner. The opening and coupled points of the Penetrating Vessel (Gongsun SP‘-4 and Neiguan P‘-6) were used, producing a complete recovery after several treatments.

GIRDLE VESSEL

Opening point: Zulinqi GB–41
Coupled point: Waiguan SJ–5
Starting point: Daimai GB–26

Area of body influenced: genitals, waist, hips. The Girdle Vessel is the only horizontal vessel of the body. It divides the body into two halves and flows through Zhangmen LIV–13, Daimai GB–26, Wushu GB–27 and Weidao GB–28. It is closely related to the Liver and Gall Bladder and it connects with the Kidney divergent channel. The functions and clinical use of the Girdle Vessel can be summarised as follows:

1. It can be used to harmonise the Liver and Gall Bladder, particularly in Excess patterns of the Liver, when the Gall-Bladder pulse is Full and Wiry, for such symptoms as temporal headaches.

2. The Girdle Vessel can be used to disperse damp-heat in the genitals, causing such symptoms as burning and difficult urination.

3. The Girdle Vessel encircles the leg channels and it affects their circulation. Disorders of this channel can therefore impair the circulation of Qi in the leg channels, resulting in such symptoms as cold legs and feet (“like sitting in cold water”), purple feet or tense outer leg muscles (due to Liver-Blood not moistening the sinews).

4. The Girdle Vessel particularly affects the circulation of Qi in the Stomach channel and can cause weakness of the leg muscles, and in severe cases, atrophy. In these cases the opening and coupled points of the Girdle Vessel can be used to ease the vessel and tonify the Stomach and Spleen channels.

5. The Girdle Vessel flows through the waist and...
Influences the hip. It can therefore be used for hip pain, particularly when there is a condition of deficiency of Liver-Blood and excess of Liver-Yang, with Liver-Blood deficiency leading to malnourishment of sinews and joints.

The Yin and Yang Heel Vessels are closely related, especially in their relation with the eyes. They both flow up to the eyes, the Yin Heel Vessel bringing Yin energy to them, the Yang Heel Vessel bringing Yang energy to them. When the Yin Heel Vessel is diseased, the eyes cannot stay open and tend to close all the time, i.e. the person always feels sleepy. When the Yang Heel Vessel is diseased, the eyes cannot close and tend to stay open all the time, i.e. the person cannot sleep.

The Yin and Yang Heel Vessels also exert an influence on the tone of the leg muscles. When the Yin Heel Vessel is in excess, the inner leg muscles are tight and the outer leg muscles loose. When the Yang Heel Vessel is in Excess, the inner leg muscles are loose and the outer ones tight.

The Yin Heel Vessel is an offshoot of the Kidney channel, while the Yang Heel Vessel is an offshoot of the Bladder channel. The clinical uses of the Yin Heel Vessel can be summarised as follows:

1. Because of its relation with the eyes, it can be used in disturbances of sleep, whether insomnia or somnolence. In this context, it is often used in conjunction with the Yang Heel Vessel. In cases of insomnia, the Yin Heel Vessel is tonified (by tonifying Zhaohai KID-6) and the Yang Heel Vessel sedated (by reducing Shenmai BL-62). In cases of somnolence, the Yin Heel Vessel is sedated (by reducing Zhaohai KID-6) and the Yang Heel Vessel is tonified (by reinforcing Shenmai BL–62). In both cases, the point Jingming BL-1 can be added to establish a connection between the Yin and Yang Heel Vessels, so that Yin and Yang energy in the eyes can be balanced.

2. The Yin Heel Vessel can be used in certain cases of Wei (atrophy) syndrome, when the muscles of the inner aspect of the legs are loose and the foot turns inwards, partly pulled by the tight outer leg muscles. This makes walking very difficult and a person prone to tripping. The Yin Heel Vessel opening and coupled points (Zulinqi GB-41 and Waiguan SJ-5) were used several times in successive treatments producing a complete cure.

3. The Yin Heel Vessel extends its range of action to the abdomen, and can be used in Excess patterns of the Lower Burner in women, for such symptoms as abdominal distention, abdominal masses, lumps, fibroids, difficult delivery or retention of placenta.

4. Finally, the Yin and Yang Heel Vessels can harmonise left and right, and can therefore be used in structural imbalances between the left and right sides of the body.

Case history

A man of 28 suffered from continuous somnolence. This followed a car accident during which he suffered a fracture of the skull. He came for treat-
ment as he was studying hard for an exam and could not keep awake. The point Shenmai BL-62 on the left side was reinforced to stimulate the Yang Heel Vessel, Zhaohai KID-6 on the right side was reduced to sedate the Yin Heel Vessel, and the point Jingming BL-1 was used bilaterally with even method. After only one treatment the somnolence completely disappeared and he could not actually sleep for two days!

Fig. 3 The Yin Heel Vessel

YANG HEEL VESSEL

Opening point: Shenmai BL-62
Coupled point: Houxi SI-3
Starting point: Shenmai BL-62
Accumulation point: Fuyang BL-59
Area of body influenced: lateral aspect of leg, back, neck, head, eyes.

The Yang Heel Vessel is an offshoot of the Bladder channel and it brings Yang energy up to the eyes. Its influence on the eyes and the muscle tone of the lateral side of the legs has already been mentioned in the discussion on the Yin Heel Vessel.

Although the Yin and Yang Heel Vessels are somewhat symmetrical in their functions, there are some differences in their practical use.

Whilst the Yin Heel Vessel’s sphere of influence is mostly in the lower abdomen and genitals (apart from its action on the eyes), the Yang Heel Vessel’s sphere of action is mostly in the head, absorbing excess Yang energy or stagnation in this area. For this reason, it is used for Wind-stroke, hemiplegia, aphasia and facial paralysis. The functions and clinical use of the Yang Heel Vessel can be summarised as follows:

1. It absorbs excess Yang energy from the head, and it is therefore used to subdue internal or external Wind (Wind is a Yang pathogenic factor), in such conditions as facial paralysis (external Wind), Wind-stroke, severe dizziness and aphasia (interior Wind).

2. It is used to expel exterior Wind and release the Exterior in invasions of exterior Wind-Heat or Wind-Cold, causing such symptoms as sneezing, headache, stiff neck, runny nose and Floating pulse. It is particularly indicated if the exterior attack is accompanied by severe headache and stiff neck.

3. It is extremely effective for lower back ache with pain along the Bladder channel of the leg, but only if this pain is of excess nature, i.e. acute in character and due to sprain or invasion of Cold. It is only used if the pain is unilateral.

4. The Yang Heel Vessel is also very useful in cases of extreme nervous tension, particularly in young men, when the pulse is very Wiry and the face is red (showing excess Yang energy in the head). Classically it is indicated in cases of “attraction to ghosts and demons”, bereavement and “missing a dead relative excessively”.

5. As the Yang Heel Vessel flows through the point Juliao GB-29, its opening and coupled points can be useful as distal points for the treatment of pain in the hip.

Fig. 4 The Yang Heel Vessel
Case history

A man of 43 suffered from giddiness and an ache on the lateral side of the legs. His blood pressure was high. His face was red and the muscles on the lateral side of the legs were very tight. He appeared very tense. His pulse was Full, Rapid and Wiry and his tongue was red. The Yang Heel Vessel was chosen to calm the Yang, relax the muscles on the lateral side of the legs, subdue interior Wind (manifested by giddiness) and calm the mind. The successive use of its opening and coupled points (Shenmai BL-62 on the left and Houxi SI-3 on the right) produced a marked improvement.

YIN LINKING VESSEL

Opening point: Neiguan P-6
Coupled point: Gongsun SP-4
Starting point: Zhubin KID-9
Accumulation point: Zhubin KID-9
Area of body influenced: chest, heart.

The Yin Linking Vessel connects all the Yin channels. This is partly due to the fact that its opening point is Neiguan P-6 pertaining to the Terminal (Jue) Yin which is the ‘hinge’ of the Yin channels. Its functions and clinical use can be summarised as follows:

1. Since it connects all the Yin channels it can be used for deficiency of Blood and/or Yin, especially if accompanied by psychological symptoms such as insomnia, anxiety and mental restlessness, thinking too much, obsession, loss of will and lack of self-control. In this context, it has a remarkable effect in calming the mind, especially in women.

2. Since it tonifies Blood, it has a tonifying action on the Heart and can be used for such symptoms as chest pain or a feeling of stuffiness, oppression or tightness of the chest, anxiety, apprehension, depression or nightmares.

3. The Yin Linking Vessel is effective in treating headaches from deficiency of Blood, especially if they are at the back of the neck. This is due to the fact that it nourishes Blood and its opening point Neiguan P-6, being also the Connecting point of the Pericardium channel, affects the Triple Burner channel area on the neck.

Case history

A woman of 54 suffered from severe anxiety and claustrophobia. She was afraid to go to the theatre, church or in the underground. She was anxious when alone at home and felt a tight gripping sensation in the chest. Her pulse was Choppy and her tongue pale, but with a red tip. The clinical manifestations were due to deficiency of Blood, depriving the mind of its residence and resulting in severe anxiety. Due to the deficiency of Blood and the typical sensation of tightness in the chest, the Yin Linking Vessel was used (Neiguan P-6 on

the right and Gongsun SP-4 on the left) producing excellent results.

YANG LINKING VESSEL

Opening point: Waiguan SJ-5
Coupled point: Zulinqi GB-41
Starting point: Jinmen BL-63
Accumulation point: Yangjiao GB-35
Area of body influenced: lateral aspect of leg, sides of body, lateral aspect of head and neck, ears.

The Yang Linking Vessel connects all the Yang channels. Its functions and clinical use can be summarised as follows:

1. It is used for intermittent fevers and alternation of chills and fever. These are symptoms of affection of the Lesser (Shao) Yang stage in the 6-Stage patterns of penetration of exterior pathogenic factors. The chief symptom at this stage is alternation of chills and fever because the pathogenic factor is lodged half in the Interior and half in the Exterior.

2. The Yang Linking Vessel exerts its influence on the sides of the body and is used for such symptoms as hypochondriac pain, pain in the lateral aspect of the leg (such as sciatica along the Gall Bladder channel) and pain in the lateral side of the neck.

3. The Yang Linking Vessel affects the ears and can be used for ear problems due to the rising of Liver-Fire, such as tinnitus and deafness. It can also be used in any
ear diseases caused by Gall-Bladder disharmony.

Case history
A boy of 12 had a middle-ear infection and the Yang Linking Vessel was used (Waiguan SJ-5 on the left and Zulinqi GB-41 on the right), producing a complete cure.

Fig. 6 The Yang Linking Vessel

EXTRAORDINARY VESSEL TYPES

Apart from symptomatology, the extraordinary vessel to use can also be chosen on the basis of certain physical and emotional 'types' of patients. The following is based on my experience and is given here for discussion. I would like to stress that these types are by no means the only cases when I suggest an extraordinary vessel should be used. The pulse is given wherever possible.

Governing Vessel
This vessel seems to be particularly effective in quite muscular men with spinal problems. It is indicated in all problems of the spine and backache. The use of this vessel combined with Taibai SP-3 will straighten the spine, even without using local points on the spine itself. The reason for this is that, apart from the Governing Vessel itself, the Spleen controls the spine (according to the Nei Jing), and I find Taibai SP-3 the best point to affect the spine itself. When the spinal problem is associated with nervous tension and overwork, I find the combination of Houxi SI-3 and Shenmai BL-62 with Shenmen HE-7 and Taibai SP-3 very effective. The Governing Vessel opening and coupled points will treat the spine and move the Qi in the back, Taibai SP-3 will also treat and straighten the spine as well as tonifying the Spleen which is overtaxed by the excessive mental work, and Shenmen HE-7 will relax the nerves and calm the Mind.

Directing Vessel
Very effective in women, particularly young women with menstrual problems deriving from weak or stagnant Qi. Also for women over 45 with menopausal problems and very weak Kidney energy. The pulse is usually Weak or Short.

Penetrating Vessel
This patient is a man, rather fat, with a hard and swollen abdomen, flatulence, and urethra or prostate problems. The pulse is usually Slippery in the Middle position.

Girdle Vessel
There are two types of patients who respond well to this vessel:
i. Young women with headaches, menorrhagia, cystitis, eczema and a Full pulse, especially in the Liver position.
ii. Old women with arthritis of the hip and a very Full and Hard pulse in the Gall Bladder position.

Yin Heel Vessel
Very useful in middle-aged women with stagnation of Qi and Blood causing gynaecological problems. One could use the Yin Heel Vessel for older women as the counterpart of the Directing Vessel for younger women. The pulse is usually Firm and the Kidney pulse very Deep.

Yang Heel Vessel
This is the vessel for the “angry young man”, thin, nervous and with a very Wiry pulse.

Yin Linking Vessel
The mental/emotional picture is the clearest of all the extraordinary vessels: for women with emotional problems, sadness, depression, headaches, palpitations, feeling of oppression in the chest. The pulse is Choppy or Fine.

Yang Linking Vessel
For strongly built, middle-aged men with articular or ear problems.

NOTES
1. Spiritual Axis, ch.38, p.79.
4. Spiritual Axis, ch.21, p.56. Also ch.17, p.50.
5. Classic of Difficulties, ch.29, p.73.