

This article was originally published in a similar form in the Traditional Acupuncture Society Journal. The full citation is: Jarrett, LS, (II): Myth and meaning in Chinese medicine, Traditional Acupuncture Society Journal, England, No. 11, April,'92, p. 45-48 No part of this article may be reproduced without a full citation.

## Myth and Meaning in Chinese Medicine

All models of medicine are based on world views which reflect the underlying beliefs and assumptions about life inherent in the culture in which they are formulated. The ways of knowing in ancient China focused on understanding the movements of dao as they are represented externally in the universe and internally in human beings. The acupuncture meridians and points reflect the way in which the Chinese saw the macrocosm of the universe as it is mapped onto the microcosm of the body. This map guides us to the relative balance of the functional relationships which maintain the integrity of the human body/mind/spirit. The Yijing may be considered a tool which guides our intuition to an understanding of the dao's implicit movement in the world. Similarly, a knowledge of the imagery of the acupuncture points gives us access to the ways in which the dao is striving to express itself through each individual and the ways in which that effort is blocked, resulting in imbalance and ill health.

For the practitioner of traditional acupuncture, the patient is like a pointalist painting. During each treatment the practitioner uses their diagnostics to comprehend the patients energetic portrait. The practitioner in choosing a treatment is concerned with where in the portrait to place a dot (acupuncture point) and what color to make it (quality of energy) so that the picture is complete in the moment.

In order to truly appreciate the function of the points it is helpful to understand how the ancient Chinese thought about their world. The early Chinese conception of the universe is well reflected in their mythology. It is through understanding this mythology [shen hwa] (1), that the spirits of the points come alive and talk to us.

In this article I will explore one of the fundamental myths of Chinese culture as it relates to the spirit of the acupuncture point Governor Vessel-20 and the inner tradition of healing in Chinese medicine.

## The Myth of Gun and Yu

"The great dao floods over" (2)

The Dao De Jing (DDJ) characterizes the dao as a vast whirlpool constantly "moving away" from and "returning" to its source in the process of its own "self becoming" (ziran).(3) Chapter 25 of the DDJ calls the fundamental nature of dao chaotic [hun] and the sage, in aligning himself with the dao, "steers by the torch of chaos and doubt". (4) In the words of Lagerwey:

"If chaos is eternal, the order introduced into chaos of the universe has an end, as it has a beginning. This is because slowly names given cease to fit; political systems invented in simpler times cease to function; old irrigation ditches get choked up with new vegetation; the waters of chaos begin to mount." (5)

The dao is like a river whose waters are constantly rising and the DDJ is a survival manual informing us that, through the cultivation of virtue [de] (6), we may channel the flood and avoid being inundated by it. Hence, Zhuangzi states: "Though flood waters pile up high to the sky, he {the sage} will not drown". (7)

Controlling the floods was a continual problem for the early Chinese and the imagery and theme of a brother and sister surviving a great flood to land on Kun lun mountain and give birth incestuously to the human race is pervasive in early Chinese mythology. The flood itself represents the dao's efforts to assert its original, spontaneous, nature in human society where it has been "civilized" and to wipe the slate clean for a new beginning. This drama is played out eternally as humans lose their original natures of self-becoming, and seek to control the ensuing chaos. The theme of the flood is well represented in the myth of Gun and Yu which lays the foundation for understanding the inner tradition of healing in Chinese medicine.

During the time of Yao (circa. 2356 b.c. during the legendary period) the overflowing waters reached up to the sky and Yao enlisted Gun, the great grandson of Huangdi, to control the flooding. (8) Gun set about building dams out of "swelling mold" which he stole from Huangdi. The dams, however, continually collapsed under the weight of the flood. For his "neglect of orders" [fang-ming: ] in failing to control the floods, Gun

was executed by Huangdi's heavenly executioner Zhurong, the spirit of fire, on feather mountain.(9) Finally, Gun fell into feather abyss becoming its spirit in the form of a tortoise.

Gun's son Yu, founder of the Xia dynasty (2205-1766 B.C.) was then appointed to the task of controlling the floods in Gun's place. Yu worked devotedly for thirteen years cutting ditches and tunneling through mountains to provide a way (dao) for the water from the rivers to be channeled to the sea. Here, the sea is that great abyss [tai yuan] (10) which, like the dao, can receive all things without being filled yet is never depleted though used constantly.

This myth serves as metaphor for several fundamental principles of Chinese medicine. In describing the way of Heaven the DDJ states: "What has surplus is reduced, what is deficient is supplemented."(11)

This same notion is expressed nicely by Chang Ts'ung-cheng in the Ju-men Shih-ch'in (Circa. 1228) :

"(Physicians who) consider a supplementing (therapy) for persons who have been affected by evil (influence) accumulations (already) are followers of Gun who drowned in the great flood (because he applied the wrong method to drain it.)." (12)

Gun, In trying to directly suppress the symptom of the dao's imbalance (flooding) by blocking its expression, was unsuccessful. By suppressing any symptom it , like the dao, will eventually express itself, breaking any barriers placed in its path. Only by opening the channels and assisting the patient in bringing life's energy through themselves can treatment be successful. Zhuangzi informs:

"In all things, the way does not want to be obstructed, for if there is obstruction, there is choking; if the choking does not cease, there is disorder; and disorder harms the life of all creatures."

" All things that have consciousness depend on breath. But if they do not get their fill of breath, it is not the fault of Heaven. Heaven opens up the passages and supplies them day and night without stop. But man on the contrary blocks up the holes. "(13)

This channeling of energy is well expressed in the the Chinese word ming [ :destiny] .(14) Scholar Tang Chun-I defines ming as existing: "In the mutuality of heaven and man, i.e., in their mutual influence and

response, their mutual giving and receiving." Mencius states: "What I command to myself is what heaven intended to command to me; thus, the heavenly ming is established through me"(15) For Mencius " the way to understand heaven is through understanding ones own [original] nature, which, in turn, is known through the exhaustion or utmost devotion of one's heart; on the other hand, the way to serve heaven is to preserve ones heart within and nourish one's own [original] nature."(16) It is through acting as a vessel for the dao, and bringing the heart of heaven into the world, that one fulfills one's destiny. The Tso Chuan warns that he who ignores his own ming (Destiny) "Probably will not return home again." (17) Gun, who ignored his ming, died in feather abyss never to return home. Yu, the heart of commitment, though he passed his doorway three times, returned to his home only after fulfilling his ming and controlling (zhi) (18) the floods. The author of the Shen Nung Ben Cao, China's oldest herbal text, tells us clearly that: "The upper class of medicines.....govern the nourishment of destiny and correspond to heaven..." (19) It is the highest healing which helps people fulfill their destinies, bringing their heart and the heart of heaven fully present, so that they may again return home.

During the time Yu was busy channeling the waters he was also compiling "The Scriptures of the Mountains and Seas":

"Whenever he came to a famous mountain or a big swamp, he would summon its spirit and ask it concerning the deep structure of the mountains and rivers, about the kinds of precious stones, of birds, beasts, and reptiles found there, as well as concerning the customs of the people on all eight sides and the boundaries, soil quality, and size of the various states. He and Yi and K'uei wrote all this down and called it "The Scripture of the Mountains and Seas."(20)

Just as Yu becomes familiar with the "Hundred demons", or spirits of the deep structures, so to must the acupuncturist know intimately the nature of the spirit present in each acupuncture point. The meridians [mai] are the internal rivers of the microcosm, each acupuncture point representing a specific aspect of being in the individuals inner kingdom.

According to myth, after taming the floods Yu became emperor and founded the Xia dynasty (2205-1766 B.C.):

"After three years he examined the merit [of his ministers]; within five years his government was securely established. He went on tour of all under heaven, and when he came back to Great Yueh, he ascended Mount Mao

in order to receive in audience his subjects from the four directions and to inspect the feudal lords of the Central Province. When Oppose-the-Wind arrived late, Yu beheaded him and displayed [his head] to the multitude in order to make clear that all under heaven belonged to him. Then he had a great assembly (hui) to decide (chi) how to rule the state. Inside, he praised the merit (kung) of [the text found on] Mount Cauldron [by means of which he had] stabilized the land; outside, he displayed the saintly virtue (de) which made him a man after Heavens heart. Then he changed the name of Mount Mao to the Mountain of the Assembly (hui) of Accounts (chi)." (21)

In convening the "hundred demons" on top of Mount Mao, Yu is able to bring spiritual unity to ancient China. Oppose-the-wind is "not a loyal subject but a rebellious energy "one who will, like the "stellar winds," prevent the communication that is to occur during the ritual". In the microcosm of the body the acupuncture point Governor Vessel 20 (GV-20), located on the vertex of the head, is named the hundred meetings [bai hui: 百会]. The Daoist text the Dao Zang (hidden dao) states that the head is the meeting point of the hundred spirits. (22) Governor-20, then, is the place on top of the head (Mount Mao) that the 100 spirits meet. The traditional function of GV-20 in draining wind from the head is implied in the "beheading" of Oppose-the-wind, the influence that threatens the integrity of the kingdom by opposing Yu's rule. For it is Yu who establishes harmony by controlling the rising waters of chaos.

Wind in Chinese medicine is seen as any sign or symptom in an individual which changes location and severity quickly. Its general presentation is that of chaos and is exemplified by muscle spasms, seizures, violent outbursts of anger, or headaches. The point GV-20 can help center on the most basic level, restore control, and marshal the patients resources to quell the chaos.

Governor 20 is the point that aligns us with the polestar, (23) to which "all the lesser stars do homage" (24) and it is Yu's virtue in being a man after heavens heart that allows him to gain control of the kingdom. It is his power of intention in visualizing the spirits that allows him to summon and transform them into one body, an assembly (hui) of all under heaven. Yu's intimate knowledge of the spirits of the rivers and mountains (mai-li : 脉之 -veins of the earth) enabled him to draw the waters off out of the door of the southeastern "door of the earth" and out to the abyss of the sea. (25) Lagerwey points out the similarity between the function of the priest in Daoist ritual and that of Yu in taming the floods and uniting the empire. What Yu did for ancient China in controlling

the floods and uniting the kingdom the traditional acupuncturist does for each patient. By learning intimately the nature of the spirits living in the internal structures of the patient's being, and channeling off the excess and supplementing the deficiencies, traditional acupuncture is able to maintain and restore harmony in the kingdom of the Body/Mind/Spirit.

## Endnotes

- 1) Shen hwa means, literally, "spirit talk".
- 2) DDJ Ch.34 in: Chen, P. 137
- 3) DDJ ch. 4 and 25 in: Chen, P.60 & 117. Interestingly, the marxists adopted this term to indicate dialectical materialism.
- 4) Watson, B., P.38
- 5) Lagerwey, J., P.11
- 6) The Character de is translated as virtue and is composed of three key components. The first is a picture of a man walking and implies movement or action. The second means "perfectly right" and suggests that a thing scrutinized by the eye from all directions, has shown no deviation. The last component denotes the heart . It may be interpreted to mean that the virtuous man's behavior perfectly reflects his heart which, under scrutiny, shows no deviation. Chen (p.184) defines de as "The original endowment of nature prior to moral distinctions and conscious effort."
- 7) Watson, B., P.27,-words in italics added by author.
- 8) See Girardot, N.J.
- 9) Christie, A., P.87
- 10) Lagerwey supposes that feather mountain is mountain of the bird-men as daoists are often called.-Lagerway, J., P.41
- 11) Tai yuan or great abyss is the name of the acupuncture point Lung-9.
- 12) DDJ Ch.77 in: Chen, E. M., P. 223.
- 13) Ju-Men shih Ch'in, ch.2 in: Unschuld, P.U., P.216.
- 14) Watson, B. P.138.
- 15) According to Wieger, this character is a picture of a written order, with a seal of authority fixed upon it, and the mouth of heaven dictating to man his destiny between heaven and earth. Weiger, L., P.47.
- 16) T'ang, Chun-I, The T'ien Ming [Heavenly Ordinance] in Pre-Ch'in China, Philosophy and Culture: East and West, Vol. 12, Apr. '62, P.34
- 17) Ibid. Page 33
- 18) T'ang Chun-I, Jan. '62, P.208.
- 19) The character zhi [ 𠄎 ] meaning "to set in order", is used in

medical literature with the meaning "to heal" or "to treat". The name of emperor Yu is a homophone for the modern character yu meaning "To heal" which is a picture of a boat over that for heart . Another homophone is found in the word yu meaning "to meet".

20) "Shen Nung Ben Tsao", Chung I Ku chih Chu Bian She, Bei Jing, 1982.

21) Annals of Wu and Yueh 2.3b in: Lagerway, J., P.160.

22) Ibid. P.151

23) Ellis, A., Wiseman, N., and Boss, K., P. 344.

24) The pole star, ti [ 天 ], is the heart of heaven as the emperor Ti [ 帝 ], is the heart of the nation. The pole star is the center of the universe and the governor vessel is the meridian which centers the functions of the body/mind/spirit to the axis of heaven. Chan, Wing-Tsit, P.22.-Most notable of these stars is the great dipper which is the giant spoon circling around the polestar churning us along through the whirlpool of life. The big dipper is the central administration of heaven in which live the primordial gods of fundamental destiny (See Anderson, P.61). The alchemical texts refer to the process of being distanced from one's original nature [de] which leads to illness as "going along". Restoration of original nature is referred to as "reversing the course of the dipper's handle."

25) Lagerway, J., P.11.

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Lonny S. Jarrett, M. Ac., is a graduate of the Traditional Acupuncture Institute (1986) and holds a Masters Degree in neurobiology. He practices traditional acupuncture and herbalism in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.