

On the Ren Vessel

Ren the Controller

任 (*ren*) means to be in charge of (*dan ren* 担任) or to guarantee (*dan bao* 担保).¹ *Elucidations of the Signs and Explications of the Graph* states that “Ren means to keep or protect.” In his commentary on the *Classic of Difficulties*, Yang Shang-Shan states that “Ren means to be pregnant; this is the root of human life and its nourishment” (任者妊也此是人之生養之本). Wang Bing’s commentary on Ch. 60 of *Basic Questions* states, “The reason that the *ren vessel* is called this is because it is the means by which women become pregnant. Therefore the Classic states, ‘[If] this channel is diseased, women will be infertile.’” The *ren* is therefore closely linked to fertility. Moreover, as the early 19th century Japanese commentator Mototane Take (1819) points out in *Subcommentary on Patterns in the Classic of Difficulties* (*Nan gyo so shou* 難經疏証), *ren* is similar in meaning to *ren* 衽, “the front of traditional garments,” also referred to as *jin* 襟. Thus the *ren vessel* travels upward from the lower abdomen along the anterior of the body, contacting the same area as the front of the clothing. Insofar as each yin channel travels along the abdomen and connects with the *ren vessel*, Yang Shang-Shan observes, “the *ren* networks with all the channels [on the front of the abdomen] and, therefore, it is called the *ren vessel*.”² This is another reason that the *ren* is called the sea of the yin channels. Each of these ideas points to some aspect of *ren* function, some more obliquely than others.

The Sea of Yin

Given the importance of the *ren vessel* in clinical practice, it is remarkable how little Li Shi-Zhen has to say about either its physiology or its pathology. As the most basic regulator of yin within the body, the *ren vessel* is the obvious candidate for the title of “sea of yin.” Yet some sources accord this honor to the *chong* by virtue of this vessel’s influence on the blood. The *Pulse Classic*, in the chapter entitled “On Balancing Diseases of the Eight Extraordinary Vessels” (*Ping qi jing ba mai bing* 平奇經八脈病), and Lu Guang’s comment on the 28th Difficult Issue in the *Classic of Difficulties*, both state: “The *chong vessel* is the sea of the yin vessels.”³ Li is evidently in agreement with Yang Xuan-Cao, who observes: “The Classic states that the *chong vessel* is the sea of the twelve vessels, hence it cannot only be the sea of the yin vessels. I am afraid that Mister Lu is in error.”⁴

Trajectory

The trajectory described in the *Exposition* is somewhat more complex than the one sketched out in Ch. 60 of *Basic Questions*, which simply states:

The *ren* vessel arises below Central Pole (CV-3) and ascends to the border of the [pubic] hair, proceeding along the interior of the abdomen upward to Pass Head (CV-4) arriving at the throat, ascending to the corners of the jaw and proceeding [up] the face to enter the eyes.⁵

The 28th Difficult Issue of the *Classic of Difficulties* contains the same passage; however, it does not describe the *ren* as entering the eyes. Although it too begins “below” Central Pole (CV-3), Li’s trajectory first travels interiorly downward to Meeting of Yin (CV-1) where it differentiates itself from the *chong* and *du* prior to ascending via Curved Bone (CV-2) to Central Pole (CV-3).

The *ren* vessel is the sea of the yin vessels. Its vessel arises below Central Pole (CV-3) from within the lower abdomen; it divides [from the *chong* and *du* vessels] at Meeting of Yin (CV-1) (between the two yin [orifices]). It ascends and emerges, proceeding to Curved Bone (CV-2) (in a depression above the border of the [pubic] hair on the pubic bone), ascending from the border of the pubic hair to arrive at Central Pole (CV-3) (four *cun* below the umbilicus; it is the alarm [hole] of the urinary bladder), where it meets with the foot reversing yin, greater yin, and lesser yin inside the abdomen.

As the intersection of the three leg yin channels, Central Pole (CV-3) is indeed a central axis of communication between the lower extremities and the rest of the body. Its position on the *ren* is juxtaposed with Great Hammer (GV-14) on the *du*, which is a meeting hole of all the yang channels. Whereas the yang exteriorizes at Great Hammer (GV-14), the yin moves into the abdomen and the interior at Central Pole (CV-3).

The Systematic Classic, one of Li’s primary sources, describes a secondary network vessel as issuing from Meeting of Yin (CV-1), which hugs the *du* and meets the *chong*. “[From here] a branching network [vessel] of the *ren* vessel hugs the *du* vessel. It is a meeting hole of the *chong* vessel.”⁶

Li makes no mention of this internal branch.⁷ From here, the trajectory of the *ren* passes upward in the conventional manner to a slightly novel terminus on the head.

[The *ren* vessel] ascends to the jaw and proceeds to Sauce Receptacle (CV-24) where it meets with the hand and foot yang brightness and the *du* vessel (located in the depression below the lip). It encircles the lips and reaches

downward to Gum Intersection (GV-26). From here, it emerges and its trajectory splits, traversing the face and linking to the center [line] below both eyes to reach Tear Container (ST-1) and terminates (located seven *fen* below the eye in a depression directly [below] the eyeball, there are two holes). In all, there are 27 holes. Neither the *Classic of Difficulties* nor *The Systematic Classic* asserts that [the *ren* vessel] “traverses the face.”

Li’s interpretation of the distal trajectory of the *ren* is as obscure as his description of its origins. *The Systematic Classic* describes Sauce Receptacle (CV-24) only as “a meeting of the foot yang brightness and *ren* vessel.”⁸ Yet Li identifies this hole as a point of intersection between the *ren* and *du* vessels. From here, Li’s trajectory encircles the lips and communicates with Gum Intersection (GV-28) where it bifurcates to reach Tear Container (ST-1). Contrary to Li’s claim, *The Systematic Classic* does indeed trace the trajectory of the *ren* across the face. Li has merely specified where the *ren* terminates. This, of course, begs the question of why the *ren* should terminate at Tear Container (ST-1) as opposed to Bright Eyes (BL-1). Were the *ren* to terminate at this hole, its trajectory would more likely have been described as “traversing the nose” (*xun bi* 循鼻). By including Gum Intersection (GV-26) and the two Tear Container (ST-1) holes on its trajectory, Li effectively increased the number of holes on the *ren* vessel from 24 to 27.

Branches

While Li ignores the network vessel associated with the Meeting of Yin (CV-1), he specifically identifies Turtledove Tail (CV-15) as such, citing a passage from Ch. 10 of the *Divine Pivot*. The word *bie* 别, ‘branching’, is an addition by later editors.⁹ Because it scatters into the abdomen, it treats abdominal pain when excessive, and when deficient, it treats itching and scratching, presumably also occurring on the abdomen.

The branching network of the *ren* vessel is named Tail Screen. It descends from the xiphoid process and disperses throughout the abdomen. When it is excessive, the skin of the abdomen is painful, and when it is deficient, there is itching and scratching.

In his closing statement regarding the trajectories of the *ren* vessel, Li quotes another passage from Ch. 2 of the *Divine Pivot* that enumerates what are often referred to today as the Windows of the Sky holes.¹⁰

[Ch. 2 of] *Divine Pivot* classic states: “Between the supraclavicular fossae is the *ren* vessel. [Its hole here] is called Celestial Chimney (CV-22). ... It [moves to] the pulsing vessel on the sides [of the throat] at Man’s Prognosis (ST-9) on the foot yang brightness.”

Li's rationale for including this line is somewhat perplexing. He has already informed us that Celestial Chimney (CV-22) is on the *ren* channel in his earlier discussion of the *ren* trajectory, and there is no apparent reason for repeating this fact in a slightly different context. Li has also made a slight change in the wording of the passage that he quotes. The original text in the *Divine Pivot* reads as follows: "The first line beside it [the *ren*] is the pulsing vessel Man's Prognosis (ST-9) on the leg yang brightness [channel]."

Ch. 2 of the *Divine Pivot* then goes on to enumerate eight other holes, listing them in the order of their distance from the *ren*.¹¹ In this listing, the text is not suggesting that these other points have any relation to the *ren* vessel per se. For instance, Wind Abode (GV-14) on the *du* vessel is described as the seventh line posterior to the *ren*. "The seventh vessel [posterior to the *ren*], on the midline of the neck, is the *du* vessel. [The place where the vessel moves] is called Wind Abode (GV-14)."

It appears that the *ren* is merely a landmark, a topological starting point for enumerating these holes. That begs the question of why these holes are enumerated in terms of their orientation to the *ren*, or for that matter, why they are enumerated at all. Premodern commentaries on this passage offer little explanation as to what these holes are for or what this list is doing in this passage of the *Divine Pivot*. Man's Prognosis (ST-9) is the only hole that is described as a pulsing vessel, and indeed it is the only hole on the list at which a pulse can be found. It is therefore unlikely that they were all used for diagnostic purposes. Modern commentators interpret this list of holes as facilitating communication between the head and torso and often attribute esoteric qualities to them.¹² Yet none of this information sheds any light on why a reference to Man's Prognosis (ST-9) appears at the end of Li's chapter on the *ren*.

Li makes no similar reference to other holes when he cites a line from the same passage in the *Divine Pivot* in his discussion of the *du*. It makes no sense for Li to include Man's Prognosis (ST-9) in the discussion unless he believed that it had some direct relevance to the *ren*. Although there is no definitive way to answer this question, a few possibilities come to mind.

Li may be intimating that he believes Man's Prognosis (ST-9) is actually on the *ren* channel. He clearly states that there are 27 holes on the channel. These include the standard 24 holes we recognize today, plus Gum Intersection (GV-27) and Tear Container (ST-1). So to reach a tally of 27, we must count Tear Container (ST-1) twice, or we have to add another hole, the most likely candidate being Man's Prognosis (ST-9).

It is also worth considering where the line in question is situated in the chapter, appearing as it does at its end, following Li's reference to a branching network vessel associated with the *ren*. By placing this passage where he has, Li may be associating Man's Prognosis (ST-9) with the *ren* in a manner that is purposefully vague. Still, given the well-established use of Man's Prognosis (ST-9) for pulse diagnosis in Ch. 48 of the *Divine Pivot*, and the pervasive influence of the *ren* as the sea of yin, it is not surprising that Li linked the two in some way.

Man's Prognosis (ST-9) may not rise to the level of a legitimate meeting hole of the *ren*, but it is worth noting that an alternate name for this hole is Heaven's Five Meetings (*tian wu hui* 天五會) or just Five Meetings (*wu hui* 五會). Yet the only other channel that this hole is known to communicate with is the leg yang brightness gallbladder channel. Perhaps Li knew something we do not about the meaning of this alternate name.

Finally, it is possible that this is a transcription error of sorts; Li may have inadvertently extended his quotation of the passage beyond his intended stopping point. Alternatively, he may simply have considered the reference to Man's Prognosis (ST-9) to be part of the same thought pertaining to the *ren* and therefore a part of the same sentence. These possibilities are merely conjecture. In the final analysis, the presence of these nine characters at the end of Li's chapter on the *ren* remains a conundrum.

Summary

Li Shi-Zhen's primary contribution to the *ren* lies in his refinements at both ends of its trajectory. In his discussions of the *du*, *chong*, and the *yin qiao*, Li repeatedly alludes to the triune relationship between *ren*, *du*, and *chong* as three branches of a single functional unit. It is necessary for the *ren* to communicate with Meeting of Yin (CV-1) not only because we recognize that hole as the first on its trajectory, but because it is here that it communicates with the *du* and the *chong*. There is no need to posit a separate network vessel that connects to the *du* and the *chong*, as *The Systematic Classic* has, because they are all fundamentally the same channel. It certainly makes sense to include the area around the mouth in the trajectory of the *ren* because it, along with the *chong*, is so influential in the growth of facial hair. Yet Li's reasons for including Man's Prognosis (ST-9) and Tear Container (ST-1) on the trajectory of the *ren* are less clear.

Endnotes

- 1 Wang Luo-Zhen and Li Ding, eds., 1985, p. 76.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Wang Shu-He, Fuzhou shi ren min yi yuan, eds., 1981, p. 87.
- 4 Wang Luo-Zhen and Li Ding, eds., 1985, p. 71.
- 5 Basic Questions, 1980, vol. 2, p. 741.
- 6 Huang-Fu Mi, 1981, vol. 1, p. 406.
- 7 Li's reference to *hui yin zhi fen* 會陰之分 may also simply refer to the location of Meeting of Yin (CV-1). If this is indeed the correct reading, then Li has deemed it necessary to include the words "between the two yin orifices" (*zai liang yin zhi jian* 在兩陰之間) to clarify the ambiguity of his own prose.
- 8 Ibid., p. 370.

- 9 *Divine Pivot*, 1980, vol. 1, p. 277.
- 10 The term 'Windows of the Sky' is a modern invention of the French school of meridian therapy. John Pirog, 1996, pp. 149-150.
- 11 Some editions of the *Divine Pivot* punctuate the text differently, placing the enumeration at the end of each preceding sentence. This makes the Celestial Chimney (CV-22) the first or primary channel. See, for example, Guo Ai-Chun, ed., 1992, p. 24.
- 12 Pirog, pp. 149-50.