HERBAL CROSSROADS

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ZHENG 证 / Penetrating the Essence of Diagnosis

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"Disease arriving is like a mountain crashing. Disease leaving is like silk unraveling" **Confucius**

Abstract

Our Chinese medical textbooks are replete with multiple patterns for medical conditions, but often do not really reflect our patient's unique conditions and discomforts. By contrast, real-time Chinese diagnosis is based on a logical deductive system that must be internalized and applied anew with every clinical encounter. In this article, we will discuss classical approaches to this logical system and its permutations, and how to practice an exacting yet spontaneous approach to diagnosis and treatment.

Introduction

Chinese physicians have over time developed different diagnostic strategies based on specific outlooks to time-oriented phenomena. Using unique numerological systems allows the physician to take a multi-faceted view of the human being, and then decide which strategy and approach is most suitable to the situation at hand. Strategies have been based on the numbers two (*Yin* and *Yang*), three (*san jiao* /Triple Burner), four (*si fen* /four aspect), five (*wu xing* /five phases), six (*liu jing* /six channel) and eight (*ba gang* /eight parameters) giving the possibility of a multi-dimensional approach to diagnosis and treatment. These strategies, or *bian zheng* 辨证 /pattern differentiation methods can be chosen according to case, or combined as needed. A mere didactic memorization of patterns is not sufficient to practice Chinese medicine unless it is backed up with the ability to practice an algorithmic approach to diagnosis, step by step.

One major difference between Chinese pattern differentiation and biomedical disease diagnosis is that Chinese medicine classifies disorders along a time/space continuum, in terms of original, development, and prognosis, not necessarily as fixed entities.

These numerical paradigms are embedded in the Chinese medical classics such as the *Shang Han Za Bing Lun* / **Treatise on Cold Damage and Complex Disease**, *Nan Jing* /**Classic of Difficulties**, and *Nei Jing Su Wen* / **Yellow Thearch's Simple Questions** and schools such as the Qing dynasty *Wen Bing pai* /Warm Disease current and *Pi wei pai* / Spleen Stomach current of the Jin/Yuan dynasty. Understanding them is one of the main keys to astute, precise diagnostic and treatment skills. Because of this, every great Chinese physician has continuously studied the classical medical literature in order to embody these principles. Often times, they will treat patients all day and study the classics every evening. For example, **Yue Mei-zhong**, one of the great physicians of the twentieth century, studied the **Shang Han Lun** for forty-five days every year for many years and found something new each time to inspire his practice.

Modern Chinese medicine relies largely on *zang fu* / viscera-bowel pattern differentiation, and it has been the subject of a vast amount of coverage in textbooks and articles. The purpose of this article is not to disparage its use in any fashion (it is, in fact, essential knowledge for the practice of Chinese medicine),

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but to expose our community to other sources and approaches for determining patterns of disharmony in our patients, so that we have a larger selection of tools at our disposal.

I. Time and pattern recognition

The physician always needs to reframe the patient's symptoms and signs into the paradigm or 'operating system' of Chinese medicine. Our patients have often been 'pre-diagnosed' by Western physicians, or understand illness in the modern biomedical sense. One major difference between Chinese pattern differentiation and biomedical disease diagnosis is that Chinese medicine classifies disorders along a time/space continuum, in terms of original, development, and prognosis, not necessarily as fixed entities. We can use either Chinese *bian bing* 辨 病 / disease differentiation or biomedical disease diagnosis to give us a fixed viewing point of a patient's condition, but especially with chronic disorders we must reframe the condition in terms of phase of development. According to **Liu Chong-lin**, "the time oriented system, therefore, embraces the dynamic flow pattern of the holistic body of nature, and from this general attitude derives the assumption that the whole determines and governs the parts"[1].

cinnamon tree (kuei) - Ch'ung-hsiu cheng-ho pen-ts'ao

A crucial part of the study of the **Nan Jing** and **Shang Han Lun** is learning how to view the world from this perspective, and absorbing this approach to medicine in order to practice it. This is where the aspect of self-cultivation through study, meditation and practice embodied in Chinese learning gives us the tools to be great clinicians, so that our knowledge base is not just data or intellectual knowledge, but rooted in how we view our life in this world.

Now let us examine how the **Nan Jing** and **Shang Han Lun** present their systematic approaches to diagnosis and treatment. Both texts are greatly influenced by classical Chinese philosophical texts such as the *Yi Jing* /**Classic of Change**, whose philosophical foundation is at the root of the life sciences as well as other domains such as cartography, weaponry, agriculture, calendars, and governance. This philosophical foundation is based on process, motion and change, and finding the patterns that grow, decline and change all around us. It is the rhythm and cadence of life itself, in constant flux, movement and change. The Confucian scholar/physicians who studied these texts were seeking *li* 理/principle, or what **Volker Scheid** calls 'the patterned regularity of existence'.[2] It is principle that is the cornerstone of Chinese medical practice, finding the unchanging beneath the ever-changing manifestations of symptoms that our patients present.

Several chapters of the *Nei Jing*, specifically chapters 69-77 in the *Su Wen*, discuss chronobiological methods of diagnosis and treatment, based on cyclical time patterns, such as the following:

1) solar cycles (season, daily)
2) lunar (monthly cycles)
3) 24 hour biorhythms
4) metabolism
5) respiration, heartbeat-circulation, bile, hormones
6) bowel rhythms
7) extraordinary channel/regular channel rhythms
8) menstruation
9) observations of birds and mammals biorhythms
10) reproduction

These in turn inform many of the diagnostic and treatment protocols in the **Shang Han Lun** and **Nan Jing**. For example, each channel pathology in the **Shang Han Lun** has a time when the disorder is contracted, worsens, weakens and resolves over a twenty-four hour or specific number of days.

II. Nan Jing strategies

The **Nan Jing** text is divided into six major sections, covering:

a) Pulse diagnosis
b) Channels and network vessels
c) Viscera and bowels
d) Diseases
e) Transportation holes/points
f) Needling patterns

[1] Chong-lin, Liu, Developing the Core Essence of Chinese Medical Science: An Interview With Liu Changlin, by Hiener Fruehauf
[2] Scheid, Volker, Currents of Tradition in Chinese Medicine, Eastland Press, Seattle, Wa., 2007, pg. 43.

Each of the eighty-one 'difficulties', which were written ideally as commentaries on difficult sections of the *Nei Jing Su Wen* and *Ling Shu* /**Divine Pivot**, deals with the theoretical foundations and critical issues that are essential to the practice of Chinese medicine, many often not covered in modern textbooks. According to Michael Broffman of Pine St. Clinic in San Anselmo, Ca., we can regard the **Nan Jing** as an "evolving blueprint of the development of Chinese medicine through generations of practitioners. The **Nan Jing** begins with a process of pattern recognition that leads the practitioner to a personal language of pulses (and other diagnostic methods) and what they mean."

Each difficulty contains a discussion on a foundational principle of Chinese medicine, such as:

a) Difficult issues 27-29: the extraordinary vessels

b) Difficult issues 62, 68: the *wu xu xue* /five transportation points

c) Difficult issue 8: severance of the vessels (loss of communication between the channels and the internal viscera)

d) Difficult issue 53: Progression of disease through five phases *sheng* and *ke* cycles

e) Difficult issues 69, 75: needling strategies, including supplementing the mother, drain the child points

f) Difficult issue 58: five types of cold damage and corresponding pulses (*zhong feng* /wind strike, *shang han* /cold damage, *re bing* / heat disease, *wen bing* /warm disease, *shi wen* /damp warmth)

g) Difficult issue 49: five evils attack the five yin viscera

h) Difficult issue 25: triple burner patterns

III. Synthesizing information from diagnosis

The **Nan Jing**, while centered on pulse diagnostics (the first chapter established the primacy of *cun /guan /chi* (inch/bar/cubit) palpation at the wrist for the first time in Chinese medical history), emphasizes the importance of synthesizing information from other forms of observation and diagnosis as well. Abdominal palpation was also developed in the **Nan Jing** as well.

1) palpation of skin along specific channels

2) color (se 色 or complexion)

3) sound (voice, mannerisms)

4) questioning

5) spirit

6) odor

7) time (season, time of day, monthly cycle)

8) abdominal palpation

The **Nan Jing** allows us to take all of these diagnostic factors and synthesize them by filtering this data through the physician's judgment. Through repeated study of these principles and patterns, one gains a logical and intuitive foundation that can be called up as needed in clinical practice.

IV. Shang han lun pattern differentiation

The **Shang Han Lun** is based on six channel pattern differentiation as the core method for determining herbal prescriptions for treatment of illness. Illness is seen as a continuum that progresses and transmutes along a 'sine wave' transmission from three yang channel patterns (*tai yang, shao yang, yang ming*) to three yin patterns (*tai yin, shao yin, jue yin*). Using this systematic approach, the Chinese physician can determine to a large extent the origin, development, and future course of an illness and choose treatment accordingly. Clause by clause, chapter by chapter, each nuance, each disease transformation is listed with its pulse, tongue, symptom pattern and herbal treatment. Over 160 prescriptions are listed, all of which are still used in modern practice. The author of the **Shang Han Lun**, Zhang Zhong-jing, was able to diagnose and carefully observe symptoms, determine causation, etiology, prognosis and treatment of a wide variety of infectious and autoimmune disorders known to modern medicine from a different perspective.

magnolias (hou-p'o) - Ch'ung-hsiu cheng-ho pen-ts'ao

The **Shang Han Lun** classifies eight different categories of treatment:

1) *Xia fa* /precipitation: this is a method based on causing bowel movements as a method of draining fullness. Examples would be coffee enemas and colonics. It is applied to yang ming repletion disorders, and to expel latent evils from the body.

2) *He fa* /harmonization: this is a method of resolving the interior and exterior, for shao yang disorders. It strengthens the correct qi while expelling pathogenic qi concurrently. It is also applied to harmonize the liver and stomach, liver and spleen, stomach and in testines.

3) *Bu fa* /supplementation: this method is used to supplement qi, blood, yin, fluids or yang, often as a method of dispelling pathogenic evils from the body. This is often referred to as *fu zheng* / support the correct qi, to help the body overcome illnesses.

4) *Han fa* /sweating: sweating pathogens or toxins out through the skin. This includes anything from saunas to herbal steam baths and sweat lodges. In Chinese herbal medicine, warm or cool, light and floating, pungent medicinals are used to release the exterior and expel sweat.

5) *Tu fa* /ejection: used to expel accumulated phlegm, food, or other harmful matter from the lungs, intestines, throat or stomach through the mouth.

6) *Qing fa* /clearing: this is designed to clear evil heat, damp heat or toxin from the body, using bitter cold or sweet cold medicinals.

7) *Wen fa* /warming: Any therapy used for cold disorders, including electric blankets, warm oil massage, heat lamp, moxabustion, or warming herbs, such as ginger, garlic or *fu zi* /aconite.

8) *Xiao fa* /dispersion: this method is used for food stagnation and abdominal masses by regulating qi and transforming stasis.

coptis rhizome (huang-lien)
T'u-hsiang pen-ts'ao meng-ch'uan

Each of these treatment methods are prescribed for illness patterns associated with the six channel progressions. Like an archer firing an arrow at a target, the Chinese physician uses his tools to aim an herbal prescription, acupuncture or moxabustion treatment at the pattern after carefully weighing where in the six channel progression the disease lies. For example, for cold damage, with aversion to cold, aching muscles, floating pulse, stuffy nose and difficult breathing, sweating formulas such as *ma huang tang* / **Ephedra decoction** will be chosen, associated with the *tai yang* channel. For a yang ming bowel disease, with hard, distended abdomen, streaming sweat, a deep, replete and rapid pulse, red tongue with yellow coating, and heat effusion, a formula such as *da cheng qi tang* /**Major Qi Coordinating Decoction**, which contains rhubarb/*da huang*, will be chosen. But if the formulas were reversed, an aggravation of the condition would result, the timing of treatment would be off.

V. Modern disease causative factors

As 'evolving blueprints', we also need to account for modern, 21st century factors of disease causation and reframe them in the context of classics such as the **Nan Jing** and **Shang Han Lun**. We can also include these modern causative factors of illness:

1) Pharmaceutical drug combinations, and side effects

2) Air conditioning and central heating

3) Toxins in air, water and food

4) Poor quality diet (junk food)

4) Vaccines

5) Sedentary jobs with high stress

6) Ambient noise levels

7) Relationship/marriage/family issues

8) Airplane travel, time zone changes

9) Frequent moves to new locations

10) Speed of technology

11) Long commutes to work by car or public transportation

12) Overcrowding in city life

13) Modern lifestyle issues

While these factors are significant, they can easily be reframed within the Han dynasty blueprints discussed above.

Conclusion

I hope I have been able to impress the reader of the great treasures that lie waiting in the classical Chinese medical literature. Although it is essential to learn the modern *zang fu* /viscera-bowel patterns in our modern textbooks, we will be able to understand and apply them much more efficiently and flexibly if we study these texts in order to develop the foundations on which modern pattern differentiation are based.