

## Chapter 1

# The origins of acupuncture – a unique synthesis of Chinese culture

**‘The Tao of Needling is modeled after Nature.’**

*Lingshu*

Acupuncture, the most important system of treatment in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), has a recorded history that reaches back more than 2000 years. However, strangely enough there are no definitive historical or archeological records of its origins. It is as if acupuncture appeared out of nowhere, like a phenomenon of Nature. Many questions exist concerning this unique healing method. When and how did it first appear, develop, and mature into a complete therapeutic system? What were the conditions that resulted in its development only in China, and nowhere else in the classical world? This chapter presents a new theory concerning the origins of acupuncture, based on a new approach to the archeological evidence and the author’s unique analysis of China’s ancient system of flood control, as well as an exposition of the groundbreaking concept of acupuncture as visible holism.

### Unique characteristics of acupuncture

Acupuncture is often used in conjunction with moxibustion in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). The two techniques are so closely related that they are referred to in Chinese with one compound word, *zhenjiu* – acupuncture (*zhen*, needle) plus moxibustion (*jiu*, to burn). A new English word containing these two meanings, *acumoxa*, has recently been coined. However, the intrinsic differences between acupuncture and moxibustion make it necessary to consider their origins separately.

Moxibustion is a type of traditional Chinese medicine that treats disease and disorder by stimulating the acupoints and meridians with heat. The invention of moxibustion was directly related to the discovery and use of fire by prehistoric humans approximately 500 000 years ago, during the Paleolithic Age (c. 2 000 000–8000 BC). All animals, people included, instinctively prefer warmth and dislike cold. Even plants exhibit phototaxic or thermotaxic properties. The application of heat for healing is universal and has been part of numerous recorded medical traditions, including those of classical Greece and Rome. At some point in prehistory, our ancestors discovered that fire could be used not only to cook their food and warm their bodies, but also to relieve or even cure their ills.

Acupuncture, which treats disease and disorder by puncturing the acupoints with needles, differs from moxibustion in the following ways.

### **Acupuncture is inherently traumatic**

Many methods of pain relief, including the application of heat, have developed from instinctive human reactions, and appear imminently logical:

An individual hurts his leg and spontaneously without thinking he rubs it . . . . Another individual suffers from lumbago, crawls to the fire and as soon as he feels the heat the pain becomes more tolerable . . . . We can well imagine that early man suffering an acute pain in the stomach felt impelled to act, pressed his epigastrium with both hands, applied heat or cold, or drank water or some decoction until he felt relieved. Pain, in other words, released a series of instinctive reactions, some of which were more effective than others. With developing civilization men learned to differentiate between treatments, became aware of them, remembered them and passed them on. Sigerist, 1983<sup>1</sup>

On the contrary, puncturing the body with needles is by no means an instinctive reaction when sick or in pain. Most people do not like needles and would prefer to avoid them. Many plants and animals have taken advantage of this natural response, and evolved thorns or quills as weapons to protect themselves from attack. Needling will cause some degree of physical trauma, no matter how fine the needle or skillful the practitioner. A modern report shows that when a needle 0.2 mm in diameter (the size of modern acupuncture needles) is used to puncture a rabbit, four to twenty muscle fibers and ten to twenty nerve fibers are damaged<sup>2</sup>. The degree of trauma was much greater in antiquity, when needles were much larger. Even in the more recent past acupuncture needles as thick as 2 mm in diameter were still occasionally used; in the late 1960s, the folk practitioner in my home village commonly used needles of this size. In the early 1980s, when I was an undergraduate student, I personally observed him insert this type of needle with both hands to treat a case of epigastric pain.

What seems even more illogical is that acupuncture is often applied distally, rather than locally. It is clear that the direct application of warmth can relieve local discomfort. It is also clear why it may be necessary to cause further trauma to an injured area in certain situations, such as when surgery is required or a broken bone must be set. It is however by no means obvious why acupuncture often calls for needling points far distant from the location of the problem. One of the principles of acupuncture instructs: 'Needle the lower to cure the upper'<sup>3</sup>. For instance, a common acupuncture treatment requires needling LI4-Hegu, located on the hand, to relieve toothache. It would seem to the layperson that the healthy hand has nothing to do with the diseased head, so why should it be traumatized? But once the principles of the meridians are understood, it becomes clear that the body is an integrated system, and that the trauma of inserting needles in one area of the body can produce the holistic effect of relieving problems elsewhere.

Although acupuncture can sometimes be painful, it causes no serious or lasting injury when carried out correctly. Many people are willing to endure the minor pain of needling in order to relieve a major problem. Unfortunately acupuncture may seem frightening to some, especially in the West where it is often misunderstood and misrepresented. For instance, the entry for acupuncture in as respected a source as the *Encyclopedia Americana* contains a picture of a man's head punctured with over seventy needles<sup>4</sup>, although a properly trained and experienced acupuncturist would never needle in such an exaggerated and excessive manner.

### **Acupuncture is of uniquely Chinese origin**

Among all the systems of holistic healing invented in the classical world, acupuncture alone was unique to China. There are no corresponding or even similar healing systems

in the early medical traditions of other cultures. The four great inventions of ancient China (paper, the printing press, gunpowder and the compass) were all eventually duplicated independently in other parts of the globe. Even if these inventions hadn't first been made in China, compact discs, laser printing, nuclear weapons and global positioning satellites would still have been developed from these fundamental breakthroughs. However, without the invention of acupuncture in ancient China there would be no needling therapy today. Acupuncturists today still adhere to the same doctrines and manipulate needles in the same ways as their counterparts in the days of the *Neijing*, or *Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic of the Medicine*, the earliest known treatise on acupuncture (c. 104–34 BC). Despite the introduction of painless and non-invasive methods such as acupressure or point stimulation using electricity or short waves, needling has remained the primary treatment method in acupuncture.

## The origins of acupuncture: challenging the accepted theory

The uniqueness and stability of acupuncture are unparalleled in the history of science throughout the world. Although many ancient civilizations besides China developed methods for treating disease and maintaining health, these ancient medical traditions have either been lost or survive only as remnants in modern alternative medicine. For example, it is said of Greek medicine that 'Ironically, the man who today is called "the father of medicine" [Hippocrates] has little influence over modern medical thinking. He is more apt to be cited as an inspiration by practitioners of alternative medicine, many of whom regard his fundamental precepts as still valid'<sup>5</sup>.

The question that now arises is, how was acupuncture invented? Standard theory assumes that acupuncture had its origins early in the Late Stone Age (the Neolithic Age, c. 8000–3500 BC), and developed gradually over many thousands of years through a process of trial and error and empirical experience. The following is a typical explanation of the genesis of acupuncture, taken from a popular textbook on traditional Chinese medicine<sup>6</sup>:

Acupuncture and moxibustion . . . originated as early as China's clan period in the Late Stone Age. During the Early Stone Age [Paleolithic Age, c. 2 000 000–8000 BC], from remote prehistory to [approximately 8000 BC], stone knives and scrapers [were used] to incise abscesses, drain pus, and let blood for therapeutic purposes . . . During the Late Stone Age, improvements in stone working techniques allowed the development of *bian* stones as specialized medical instruments . . . With the introduction of iron working during the feudal period [c. 500 BC–25 AD], *bian* stones were replaced by metal medical needles.

Although this depiction seems plausible, it is not based on factual evidence. Furthermore, it does not address several important questions.

### Does the invention of acupuncture date from the Neolithic Age (c. 8000–3500 BC)?

Prior to the 1970s, the earliest references to acupuncture were found in China's oldest known medical treatise, *The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huang Di Neijing*, hereafter referred to as the *Neijing*) (c. 104–34 BC). The *Neijing* consists of two parts: *Suwen – the Simple Questions*, and *Lingshu – the Spiritual Pivot*, also known as *The Classic of Acupuncture (Zhenjing)*. Although authorship of the *Neijing*

is attributed to the legendary Yellow Emperor, Huang Di (c. 2650 BC), most scholars consider that this master work, which contains excerpts from more than twenty pre-existing medical treatises, was actually compiled between 104 BC and 32 BC, during the latter part of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–24 AD)<sup>7</sup>. In part because of the comprehensive and highly developed nature of the medical system presented in the *Neijing*, scholars of acupuncture have assumed that needling therapy has an extremely long history, probably reaching back to prehistoric times. Furthermore, the original versions of the ancient texts used in the compilation of the *Neijing* have been lost, and with them the opportunity to further illuminate the question of when acupuncture actually first appeared.

However, startling new archeological finds were made in China in the early 1970s, revealing the true state of medicine prior to the *Neijing*. In late 1973, fourteen medical documents known as the *Ancient Medical Relics of Mawangdui* were excavated from Grave No. 3 at Mawangdui on the outskirts of Changsha, Hunan Province. Ten of these

**Figure 1.1** Meridians of the Earth: the meridians of the body in macrocosm.

This map shows the correspondence between the rivers of ancient China and the distribution of the meridians, as described in Chapter 12 of the *Lingshu*, 'Regular Watercourses'. It is based on a geographic map entitled *Yuji Tu* (*Map of Yu's Traces*), which was engraved on stone in 1136 AD. The stone map, a representation of the watercourses of ancient China, is named after the legendary Great Yu to commemorate his unparalleled accomplishments in flood control. This map was considered the most outstanding cartograph in the world at the time it was engraved. It is divided into a grid of 5110 equal squares. Each square is approximately 1.2 cm to a side, and corresponds to an area of approximately 10 000 square *li*, or 2500 square kilometers, a scale of approximately 1:4 500 000. The drawing of the coastline and main watercourses is quite exact, even when compared with modern geographic maps drawn using the global positioning system (GPS).

The birthplaces of eminent ancient physicians and philosophers and sites of recent archeological finds related to traditional Chinese medicine, particularly acupuncture and moxibustion, are marked on the map as follows:

1. Nine metal acupuncture needles (c. 113 BC), Mancheng County, Hebei Province, excavated in 1968
2. Bian Que (Qin Yueren) (c. 407–310 BC), legendary inventor of acupuncture. His name means Wayfaring Magpie, a bird which symbolizes good fortune. Renqiu County, Hebei Province
3. Sunzi (c. contemporary of Confucius, 551–479 BC), famous philosopher and military strategist. Huimin County, Shandong Province
4. Cang Gong (Chunyu Yi) (c. 215–140 BC), earliest recorded Chinese medical practitioner. Zibo, Shandong Province
5. Kongzi (Confucius) (551–479 BC), philosopher and founder of Confucianism. Qufu County, Shandong Province
6. Mengzi (Mencius) (c. 385–304 BC), philosopher and follower of Confucius. Zhou County, Shandong Province
7. Xunzi (c. 298–238 BC), philosopher. Changshan County, Shandong Province
8. Huangfu Mi (c. 215–282 AD), acupuncturist and author of the *Systematic Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion*. Lingtai County, Gansu Province
9. Sima Qian (c. 135–???), eminent historian and author of the *Historical Records*. Hancheng County, Shanxi Province
10. Zhuangzi (c. 369–286 BC), philosopher and follower of Laozi. Shangqiu, Henan Province
11. Hua Tuo (c. 150–208 AD), famous surgeon and acupuncturist. Bo County, Anhui Province
12. Laozi (Lao Tzu) (c. sixth century BC), philosopher and founder of Taoism. Luyi County, Henan Province
13. Guanzi (c. 725–645 BC), earliest recorded Chinese philosopher. Yingshang County, Anhui Province
14. Zhang Ji (Zhang Zhongjing) (c. 150–219 AD), sage of Chinese medicine and author of *Discussion on Cold Induced Diseases*. Anyang, Henan Province
15. Lacquered wooden figure showing meridians (c. 100 BC). Mianyang, Sichuan Province, excavated in 1993
16. Guo Yu (c. 60–125 AD), early imperial acupuncturist. Guanghan County, Sichuan Province
17. *Book of the Meridians (Mai Shu)* (c. prior to 179 BC), written on bamboo slips. Jiangling County, Hubei Province, excavated in 1983
18. *Ancient Medical Relics of Mawangdui* (c. prior to 168 BC), written on silk and bamboo slips. Changsha, Hunan Province, excavated in 1973.

