

East Meets West

By Richard Esquivel, L.Ac., MTCM

This is the eighth in a series of articles designed to educate the reader on Traditional Chinese Medicine.

I have heard that the sages of ancient times understood the logic of the human body and classified and differentiated the viscera and bowels. They also understood the principles of collateral and distribution vessels.

-Yellow Emperor, Nei Jing Su Wen 5

Zang-Fu (Internal Organs and Bowels) of Chinese Medicine

Chinese medical theory recognizes a number of important organs, which work in unison with each other and with the qi, blood and vital substances. This network of organs and substances sustains the body activities of storing and spreading, preserving and transforming, absorbing and eliminating, ascending and descending, activating and quieting. When all these activities take place harmoniously, the body is healthy and in balance.¹

The tendency of Chinese thought is to seek out dynamic functional activity of the organs rather than to study the anatomy of the structures themselves. While the ancient understanding of the internal organs is similar to modern understanding, there are important differences involving assigned functional responsibilities for each organ. Viewing the internal organs in terms of physiological features provides a consistent model for describing organ and body functions and pathology. For example, the Heart, which controls blood circulation as in the Western medical view, also stores the mind (or spirit), manifests on the face and opens into the tongue. In order to distinguish between the organs of Chinese medicine versus the organs as understood from the Western medical perspective, I will capitalize the former.

Chinese medicine recognizes five Yin organs (Zang) and six Yang organs (Fu). The Yin organs are the Heart, Lungs, Spleen, Liver and Kidneys. The function of the Yin organs is to produce, transform, regulate and store the qi, blood and vital substances. The six Yang organs are the Stomach, Small Intestine, Large Intestine, Urinary Bladder, Gall Bladder and Triple Burner. The Yang organs receive, break down and absorb that part of the food that will be transformed into the blood and vital substances and transport and excrete the unused portion. The functions of the Yang organs are very similar to the understanding of those organs in Western medicine. However, the Yin organs typically have a much broader functional relationship to other systems and tissues of the body. I will attempt to summarize the functions and associated relationships of the Yin organs.

The Lungs: Control respiration and circulation of vital air, dominate the pores, regulate the water passages, manifest in the skin and body hair and open into the nose.

The Spleen: Governs digestion, keeps blood in circulation, dominates muscle tissue, is the prime organ of the immune function, opens into the mouth and manifests on the lips.

The Heart: Controls blood circulation, houses the mind, manifests on the face and opens into the tongue.

The Kidneys: Dominate growth, development and reproduction, store refined substances, control water metabolism, dominate the bone and teeth, manifest in the hair on the head and open into the ears.

The Liver: Disperses nutrients, stores blood, maintains functional activity, dominates the tendons and fascia, manifests in the nails and opens into the eyes.²

Richard Esquivel is a Licensed Acupuncturist, trained in Traditional Chinese Medicine. He practices in Evergreen at Healing Touch Acupuncture Clinic, 2724 Aborn Rd. (at White Rd.), San Jose, CA 95121. ph: 408-528-7024, fax: 408-528-8557, email: richard@essentialhealthcare.com

Future articles in this series will discuss different diseases or disorders and look at how they are treated with Eastern and Western medicine, the possible therapeutic benefits of each as well as possible risks or side-effects. They will be co-written with Marvin Masada, MD, a family practitioner in Evergreen. The first in this series will discuss menopausal syndrome.

¹ Kaptchuk, Ted; The Web that Has No Weaver, Congdon & Weed, 1983.

² Kendall, Donald; Dao of Chinese Medicine, Understanding an Ancient Healing Art; Oxford University Press, 2002.