

## Sample material - On the Origins of Acupuncture and Chinese Medical Theory

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Why study the roots of acupuncture and Chinese medicine theory? For one, it is an intellectually stimulating subject as fascinating as pondering the back-story regarding the pyramids or Stonehenge. More important to those practicing Chinese medicine, however, is that exploring the roots of this great medical system helps us put the many current theories into perspective, develop our critical thinking skills, and better understand how to make sense of ancient literature.

I first became fascinated with the origins of Chinese culture including Chinese medicine when I met Taoist Master Hua-Ching Ni in 1978. Master Ni's Taoist tradition traces its roots back far into the pre-historic age. Being raised in Western culture, I knew that modern anthropology and other sciences had traced modern human roots back more than 2 million years. However, we in the West tend to not think of such "primitive" beings as part of our present culture. We understand ourselves to be descendants of those beings biologically but we know nothing of their personal struggles or think of them as beloved ancestors who graciously handed us down knowledge essential to our own present life struggles. Yet, that was exactly what the Taoist folk history I started to learn 35 years ago had to say about ancient Chinese culture.

While I found such assertions interesting, I remained skeptical that they could be accurate. As I slowly learned more about the concepts behind Taoist philosophy and their Holistic sciences, I began to warm-up to the possibility that this knowledge may have come from beings that lived and learned long before settled life began some 10,000 years ago. Why should this not be a possibility? Modern humans – Homo sapiens sapiens – complete with modern human brains, began their journey on this earth some 200,000 years before those first settlements. Does it not seem probable that 200,000 years of modern human brains could have learned some important insights regarding life and humankind's place within life that went beyond learning how to make tools and control fire?

Of course it is possible that our very ancient ancestors learned valuable lessons during their hundreds of generations of struggle but Western history only picks-up the story after the first civilizations began and written language eventually appeared. Other than perhaps tool-making ability, "pre-historic" knowledge was essentially lost to the West, but not, according to Taoist folk history, to the Chinese.

Taoist folk history, for example, does not just acknowledge the milestone developments of such things as when humans began to control fire or build dwellings or first began to herd animals or plant crops. Their legends actually give names to the people who first started these practices. They are seen as real people who made important discoveries that helped improve the lives of their fellow beings right down to the present age.

Many will scoff at these types of legends as being romantic notions with little basis in fact but we in the West need to also acknowledge that our own culture's legends of the past have prejudiced our

objectivity on this subject. I just today read a story of a U.S. Congressman, a high ranking member of the Congressional Science Committee, who had stated his belief that there was scientific evidence suggesting the earth is only about 9,000 years old. He further believed the earth was created as we see it by God in six days. Again, scoff if you will but the Congressman's thinking was accepted by the best minds in the West until the early 19th century when modern geology was first postulated but slow to catch-on. I contend that this type of thinking, still with us today although not accepted by most scientists, held sway in the West for so long it makes us hesitant to be open to the possibilities suggested in Taoist folk history. It certainly at first made me hesitate until I took the time to live with such notions and give them lots of thought. While no one knows for sure just when acupuncture or the concepts of qi, yin/yang, etc., first began, I do believe these go back much further in time than today's scholars tend to think.

The following material was taken from my first book "The Healing Power of Acupressure and Acupuncture – A Complete Guide to Timeless Traditions and Modern Practice". I wrote that book for the general public because I wanted to try to help the public see that acupuncture and its traditional theories were founded on rational principals. I have tried to rewrite this material for acupuncturists but some of the language used may still read as written more for the public than specialists.

I don't at all believe I have solved the mystery of acupuncture and Chinese medicine theories' origins but I hope I have put forward some detailed and rational ideas on the subject. I also hope others will find this subject of interest and value.

Matthew Bauer, 2012

## HOW OLD IS ACUPUNCTURE?

There are three dates often offered-up regarding when acupuncture first began:

5,000 years old – the dating most often cited in ancient sources. This date is also that of the Yellow Emperor – the leader called the "Father of the Chinese people" - and credited with developing such things as the compass and calendar and discovering the laws of Yin/Yang.

3,000 years old – the dating often cited by past Chinese scholars who began to question traditional dating.

2,200-2,300 year old – the dating generally used by modern scholars/historians based on available evidence.

The fact is no one knows for sure just when acupuncture first began. Complicating the question of when acupuncture began is the fact that no one seems to know how it first began. My research over the years has turned up five theories that pertain to the origin of acupuncture. There is an old legend that tells a tale of an ancient soldier who was cured of an illness after being shot with an arrow. A similar legend says some ailment was cured when an ancient primitive was stuck with thorns while foraging in the bush. A scholar who specializes in the study of Chinese medicine speculated that acupuncture might have its roots in a type of ancient exorcism in which a shaman uses a lance or sword to scare away evil spirits – this based on part of the Chinese written character for an acupuncture needle and the lance/sword being the same. This same scholar and others also think acupuncture may have evolved from the practice of bloodletting or lancing boils. And lastly, there is an obscure reference, credited to Lao Tzu, stating that the ancient Chinese noticed that when people became ill they developed sore spots that later vanished when their illness subsided.

The first theory - that of the ancient soldier and his lucky arrow - is the one found most often in non-scholarly sources. I have never run across any specific details associated with this theory such as what region of China this incident was supposed to have occurred in, when it may have happened, or what kind of problem was supposedly cured. Most legends of important people or events usually contain ample details to support the main theme – although these may vary as the legend is retold. The lack of details associated with this legend causes me to wonder if this theory might not have been a wild guess someone once made when trying to imagine how the idea of poking needles in people began. The same goes for the thorn theory. If no other credible theories were put forward to challenge these, they may have survived over time by default.

The theory that the inspiration for acupuncture may be traced to rituals utilizing swords or lances to chase evil spirits away was suggested by the historian Dr. Paul U. Unschuld in his fine book "Medicine in China a History of Ideas" (University of California Press, 1985). While Dr. Unschuld offered his theory as a possibility, he is not insistent on the idea and states flatly on page 94 of the same book that... "The

origin of acupuncture in China is not clear.” Dr. Unschuld also thinks the theory that acupuncture evolved from bloodletting is a viable possibility.

While not wishing to discount these theories entirely, I believe the theory attributed to Lao Tzu dealing with sore spots is the most plausible. The mystic sage Lao Tzu is well-known as the author of the great classic the “Tao Teh Ching”. Few people, however, are aware that there is another book attributed to Lao Tzu titled the “Hua Hu Ching” which translates as “The Classic of Refining and Transforming the Rough and Undeveloped” (sometimes translated as “Teaching the Barbarians”). I began my study of this book in 1978 when I took a series of classes on it from Master Ni as he was readying this work for publication. He published this 1979, together with his translation of the Tao Teh Ching under the title “The Complete Works of Lao Tzu.” Master Ni’s publication was the first English translation of the Hua Hu Ching and was perhaps the only complete copy of this teaching anywhere in the world.

The format of the Hua Hu Ching is that of a dialog between Lao Tzu and a bright student, very much like the dialog between the court physician and the Yellow Emperor in the Yellow Emperor’s Classic. In the 14th century, Emperor Shuen Ti ordered the Hua Hu Ching destroyed, as some believed the student being taught by Lao Tzu might have been the Buddha (although this is not stated in this book). As Buddhism was the prominent religion in China at that time, religious leaders felt such beliefs would undermine the authority of Buddhism and convinced the Emperor to destroy this ancient text. The Hua Hu Ching and the Buddhist classic the “Diamond Sutra” are virtually the same teaching except the Hua Hu Ching is more than twice as long covering many more topics including the inspiration for acupuncture. It was only through oral transmission within Master Ni’s Taoist lineage that he was able to translate and publish this work.

The Hua Hu Ching is a comprehensive treatise on profound spiritual concepts that form the core of Taoist philosophy. In one section of this work, Lao Tzu briefly describes twenty “Taoist Holistic Sciences” including “Yi Yau” – the science of healing. Here Lao Tzu was recorded as stating...

“The ancient sages intuitively discovered that there were certain points on the body which became tender when the person became ill. When the illness had gone away, the tenderness was also gone. They discovered that by manipulating these points they could influence the internal organs and thus cure the disease. This is how acupuncture and acupressure developed.” (P. 142, The Complete Works of Lao Tzu, by Taoist Master Ni, Hua-Ching, First Edition, The Shrine of the Eternal Breath of Tao, publisher)