

Fire: the ultimate quality of the yang shu points?

As early as in the Nei Jing a relation between the shu points and the five phases is suggested. In Chinese Medicine of today there is a broad consensus about this relation, which seems to be unquestionable. But is this status justified? This article contemplates some changes for the shu points of the yang meridians, changes that provide us with a new and promising point of view.

The classics

The issue of addressing the five phases to the shu points is mainly discussed in two places in the Nei Jing*. Ling Shu 1 mentions five shu points for the yin meridians and six for the yang meridians, adding the Yuan (source) point to the last ones. After this Ling Shu 2 states that the Jing (well) point of the yin meridians is related to wood, and the Jing (well) point of the yang meridians to metal. It does not give us any hint on the relation of the phases with the other shu points.

The general consensus we find in Nan Jing 64. It presents the relation between five shu points of the yang and yin meridians and the phases as mentioned in table 1. These relations are said to be based on *The Classic of Ten Changes*. When the question is asked why the phases are assigned differently for the yang and yin meridians, a complicated reasoning follows. One should look to the organ related to the different stems. As every organ belongs to a certain phase, one should relate for instance stem Yi (yin organ liver) to the Jing (well) point of the yin meridians (phase wood) and Geng (yang organ colon) to the Jing (well) point of the yang meridians (phase metal), considering the yang or yin character of the various organs. The yang and yin stem attributed in this way to the same shu point have their great movement in common.

Table 1: The relation between the shu points and the phases according Nan Jing 64

	Yin meridians	Yang meridians
Jing (well) point	Wood	Metal
Ying (spring) point	Fire	Water
Shu (stream) point	Earth	Wood
Yuan (source) point		
Jing (river) point	Metal	Fire
He (sea) point	Water	Earth

The problem

The explanation in Nan Jing 64 about the difference between the yang and yin meridians is rather complicated. Looking at the yin meridians the idea behind addressing the phases to the various points is quite simple. From distal to proximal the phases express a development from the start of yang, wood, to the ultimate yin, water. This might represent the idea that in the yin meridians qi entering from the hands (Heaven) and feet (Earth) is transformed into the yin quality that suits these meridians.

Ling Shu 2 confirms this idea of a development towards a quality of qi suitable for the yang and yin meridians, by addressing the phase metal to the Jing (well) point of the yang meridians. Metal is the start of yin, which following our reasoning would culminate into the extreme yang, fire. But according Nan Jing 64 it does not. Putting aside for a moment Nan Jing's explanation, it is rather clear why not: starting from metal the order of the five phases is followed, which leads to phase earth for the He (transport) point. Consequence: no role for fire as the ultimate yang quality suitable for the yang meridians.

A change of perspective

A simple change of perspective can help to find an alluring alternative for relating the phases to the shu points of the yang meridians. The core of this change in perspective is to consider earth the neutral phase in between the yang and yin phases. As such it has its place in the middle, on the border of yang and yin. Here it allows the transformation from yang into yin, and the other way around. As a consequence the phase related to the Shu (stream) point should be earth, on the border of the yin qualities metal and water on the one side, and the yang qualities wood and fire on the other. Automatically phase fire now relates to the He (sea) point, in its place as the ultimate yang (see table 2). According this new perspective, the relation of the phases and shu points for the yin meridians does not change; phase earth has already its place in the middle.

Table 2: The new relation between the shu points and the phases

	Yin meridians	Yang meridians
Jing (well) point	Wood	Metal
Ying (spring) point	Fire	Water
Shu (stream) point	Earth	Earth
Yuan (source) point		Earth
Jing (river) point	Metal	Wood
He (sea) point	Water	Fire

Looking at the phases related to the yin and yang meridians in this new arrangement we see a clear organization appealing to the eye. We see phase wood balancing phase metal in the Jing (well) points, phase fire and water balancing each other in the Ying (spring)points, et cetera. The yin meridians develop from wood to water, the yang meridians from metal to fire. And the earth takes the place in the middle.

New questions

But this new arrangement also raises new questions. Does this imply that there is a phase earth in between water and wood? Why do I relate two classical points to phase earth, and what does that mean? Is it justified to relate one of the phases to the Yuan (source) point? Exciting questions in my opinion, which I would be happy to discuss in the next edition.

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Note:

*There are three more places in the Nei Jing where a possible relation between the classical points and the phases is mentioned. In Nan Jing 63 the aspect of beginning of the Jing (well) points is expressed by stating that they are east and spring. But it is not specifically mentioned here that we should because of this relate to them as wood. In Nan Jing 73 the Jing (well) point is related to wood, and the Ying (spring) point to fire. In Nan Jing 74 the Jing (well) point is related to spring and liver, the Ying (spring) point to summer and heart, the Shu (stream) point to late summer and spleen, the Jing (river) point to autumn and lung, and the He (sea) point to winter and kidney.