

# Treating the Lower to Heal the Upper and Vice Versa: Traditional Approaches to Acupuncture and Chinese Herbal Medicine Treatment

## Abstract

Treating the lower part of the body to heal the upper and treating the upper to heal the lower ('上病下取, 下病上取', 'shang bing xia qu, xia bing shang qu' – literally, 'upper disease, below treat, lower disease, upper treat') has been a widely applied treatment principle in Chinese medicine since ancient times. This paper explores and analyses the features of this treatment principle based on classical Chinese texts, published clinical case studies and current research evidence, and aims to extend its clinical applications.

## Introduction

The concept of managing diseases by treating the part of the body opposite to where the disease is located was first proposed in the *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen* (*Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, Basic Questions*) in the chapter 'Wu Chang Zheng Da Lun' (Great Treatise on the Five Normal Rules):

'With counterflow qi, when the disease is in the upper, treat the lower; when the disease is in the lower, treat the upper.' ('气反者, 病在上, 取之下; 病在下, 取之上', 'Qi fan zhe, bing zai shang, qu zhi xia; bing zai xia, qu zhi shang'.)

Zhang Zhi-Chong (1630–1674CE) further commented on this treatment principle, stating:

'Qi counterflow is a disease of the upper and lower, inner and outer [where] the qi counterflows in the various directions. If [dealing with] diseases [where] the lower prevails and counterflows up, [one] should treat the lower; [in] diseases where the upper prevails and counterflows down, [one] should treat the upper.' ('气反者, 谓上下内外之病气相反也。如下胜而上反病者, 当取之下; 上胜而下反病者, 当取之上。', 'Qi fan zhe, wei shang xia nei wai zhi bing qi xian fan ye. Ru xia sheng er shang fan bing zhe, dang qu zhi xia; shang sheng er xia fan bing zhe, dang qu zhi shang'.)<sup>1</sup>

With abundant clinical application by past and present Chinese medicine practitioners, this treatment principle is well known and clinically well accepted by the TCM community. In general, the word 'upper' indicates the aspect of the body above the diaphragm, including the Lungs, Heart, head and five sense organs, while the 'lower' indicates the aspect below

the umbilicus, including the organs of the lower abdomen and lower limbs. This paper analyses and investigates this principle by reviewing the TCM literature, in order that practitioners are able to apply this treatment method with greater clinical efficacy.

## 1. Theoretical basis

Life has the capacity to self-organise, adapt and regulate; one manifestation of this is the human body's material and energetic exchange and communication with the outside environment. In terms of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), these characteristics are seen as the result of the coordination of various systems in the human body. When one part of the body (e.g. tissues or organs) is in a pathological state, the homeostatic ability of the body is disturbed, and this has a functional or structural knock-on effect on other parts of the body, eventually resulting in multiple disorders in different sites.

*If clear, light yang fails to rise, aspects of the body may collapse downwards ...*

### 1.1. Yin and yang

According to TCM theory, yin and yang represent the fundamental homeostatic system governing the universe and the human body. This system constantly regulates the functions of the human body to ensure it remains healthy and balanced. The ascent of yang and descent of yin represent the most fundamental motions: 'Pure yang issues through the upper orifices and turbid yin descends to the lower orifices. ('清阳出上窍, 浊阴出下窍', 'qing yang chu shang qiao, zhuo yin chu xia qiao').<sup>2</sup> This basic movement of yin

By: Tieguang Gu, Nick Li, Jian Jiang & Huiling Yao

Keywords: TCM treatment principle, upper and lower part of body, homeostasis, ascent and descent, acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine.

and yang facilitates the communication and coordination between organs in the upper and lower parts of the body. If clear, light yang fails to rise, aspects of the body may collapse downwards, such as with chronic diarrhoea or prolapse of the uterus due to Spleen qi deficiency; if the turbid yin fails to drain downward, it may cause symptoms due to qi rebelling upwards, such as with bad breath, nausea or mouth ulcers due to Large Intestine heat-type constipation.

### 1.2. Internal organs

According to TCM theory, the zang-fu in the upper body have a close relationship to those in the lower body in terms of their physiological functions and potential pathological changes. The *Yi Men Fa Lu (Precepts for Physicians)* stated that: 'Lung heat can transmit heat to the Bladder and cause painful and scanty urine.'<sup>3</sup> *Jing-Yue Quan Shu (Collected Treatises of [Zhang] Jing-Yue)* mentioned: 'When there is Heart fire, the spirit cannot be housed and floats upwards, thereby causing seminal emission in the lower body.'<sup>4</sup> *Lei Zheng Zhi Cai (Treatment Decisions Categorised According to Pattern)* described the following: 'The Heart relies on the Kidney; Heart disturbance may be caused by the Kidney, and Heart qi deficiency may be caused by weak Kidney essence.'<sup>5</sup> *Yi Xue Zhong Zan Xi Lu (Essays on Medicine Esteeming the Chinese and Respecting the Western)* further explained that, 'When the Kidney fails to receive qi, asthma and shortness of breath may present.'<sup>6</sup> All of the above explain the mechanisms of disease involving disharmony in the interaction between the zang-fu in the upper and lower body.

### 1.3. The channel and collateral systems

The channels and collaterals are passages for the circulation of qi, blood and essence throughout the body and connect the organs and tissues in the upper and lower body. Disrupted circulation of qi and blood in the channels and collaterals may cause various pathologies that may involve sinking, collapsing, rebelling, stagnation and stasis. These pathologies may also affect sites distal to the primary site of disruption via the associated channels. For instance, red eyes may indicate Liver fire as the Liver channel opens into the eyes; dry and sore throat may indicate deficient fire ascending upwards along the Kidney channel; bleeding gums and gingivitis may relate to disorders of the Stomach, as the Stomach channel opens into the mouth. One can use knowledge of the relationship between the zang-fu organs, their channels and related body parts to diagnose zang-fu pathology according to distal signs and symptoms.

## 2. Treatment principles: restoring harmonious ascending and descending

Abnormal ascending and descending reflects a dysfunction in the relationship between yin and yang, the zang-fu and the channels, and is the fundamental basis of disease transmission between the upper and the lower body. This can manifest as various functional disorders. For example, restlessness, anxiety or insomnia due to imbalance in the upper body may result from constipation in the lower body via the abnormal ascent of the heat from the Large Intestine; conversely, heat in the Heart may manifest in the lower body as painful and scanty urine via abnormal descent of heat. Although the treatment methods vary, restoring homeostasis via fostering balanced ascending and descending is the primary treatment principle for managing such disorders. This often involves focusing treatment on the opposite aspect of the body to where the symptoms are manifesting.

To restore homeostasis, different methods must be used, depending on whether the specific situation is one of insufficiency (不足, bu zu), excess (太过, tai guo) or counterflow (反作, fan zuo). For instance, Kidney essence may be insufficient to ascend to nourish the Heart 'shen', causing insomnia; or Lung qi may be insufficient to descend properly, resulting in sluggish bowel movements; or Liver qi may excessively ascend to the head and eyes, causing headaches and red eyes; or Heart fire may excessively descend to the Bladder via the Small Intestine causing dark/scanty urination; cough may due to counterflow ascending of dry heat due to constipation; or organ prolapse may due to counterflow descending due to deficient Spleen qi.

## 3. Clinical applications

The treatment principle of treating the lower to heal the upper and vice versa has been utilised by numerous past physicians, and can be applied in the treatment of a wide range of disorders, including asthma, abnormal uterine bleeding, dizziness, cough, constipation, dysuria, postpartum urinary retention, tinnitus, ear infections and toothache.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.1. Acupuncture and external herbal application

Various statements in the historical literature describe the clinical applications of this treatment principle. The *Ling Shu (Divine Pivot)* chapter 'Guan Zhen' ('On the Application of Needles') stated, '[in] distant needling, [when] the disease is in the upper, treat the lower' ('远道刺者, 病在上取之下', 'Yuan dao ci zhe, bing zai shang qu zhi xia'). This is the earliest record of the application of this treatment principle in acupuncture. The *Shang Han Lun (Discussion of Cold Damage)* mentions: '[When in] Shaoyin [in this case representing Kidney yang deficiency] disorders [there is] diarrhoea, a faint and rough pulse, vomiting and sweating, there will be

frequent bowel movements with little amount [of stools], one should warm the upper, [apply] moxa to it.' (Clause 325). Zhu Dan-Xi stated: '[In] chronic diarrhoea due to qi deficiency, the application of moxa at Baihui [Du-20] is indicated.'<sup>8</sup> In addition to utilising common acupuncture points like Baihui DU-20 to raise deficient qi, or Yongquan KID-1 to descend excess from above, other distal points mentioned in the literature include: Fengchi GB-20 to open the channels and regulate qi in the treatment of heel pain;<sup>9</sup> Renzhong DU-26 and Chengjiang CV-24 to regulate the menstrual cycle by acting on the Governing (Du) and Conception (Ren) vessels;<sup>9</sup> Taichong LIV-3 to descend fire to stop nosebleed;<sup>10</sup> and Sanyinjiao SP-6 and Taixi KI-3 to nourish qi and essence to treat dizziness.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of modern research, Quirico et al. (2014) investigated the influence of acupuncture at Taichong LIV-3 and Neiguan PC-6 on cerebral blood flow (CBF) in the middle cerebral artery (MCA) of normal subjects and migraine patients via transcranial doppler. Taichong LIV-3 was found to cause a more rapid and intense increase in the velocity of CBF ( $P < 0.01$ ) compared to Neiguan PC-6. The increase in velocity of CBF was taken as an expression of vasoconstriction in the MCA. This study shows that Taichong LIV-3, a point on the lower extremity, acts more specifically on cerebral circulation than Neiguan PC-6, a point on the upper extremity.<sup>11</sup>

Jiang (1996), drawing inspiration from the *Huang Di Nei Jing*, also tested the 'upper and lower opposite treatment method' in the acupuncture treatment of 30 chronic migraine patients, who were needled at Taichong LIV-3 and Zulinqi GB-41. The results showed that 40 per cent of patients reported significant improvement in their symptoms.<sup>12</sup>

The external application of medicinal herbs can also be conducted according to this treatment principle. The acupoints Baihui DU-20 and Yongquan KID-1 are commonly selected when applying external herbal treatment for disorders in the upper and lower body. For example, Wang Yan-Chang recorded the successful application of a mixture of Sheng Di Huang (*Rehmaniae Radix*) and egg yolk to the soles of the feet to treat eye infection, as well as the application of mashed Bi Ma Zi (*Ricini Semen*, castor bean) at the vertex of the head to treat prolapsed uterus.<sup>13</sup> Yu Chang-Rong used Huang Tu ('yellow earth', loess) and salt on the soles of the feet to descend pathogenic heat when treating nosebleed or fever; he also used the processed root of Di Jin (*Euphorbia humifusa* Willd) at Yintang (M-HN-3) to treat sudden difficult urination by unblocking the Governing vessel and circulating yang qi.<sup>14</sup> Other TCM practitioners have applied mashed Sheng Nan Xing (fresh *Arisaemae Rhizoma*) at the vertex of the head to treat rectal prolapse; the same physicians also blew *Tong Guan San* (Open the Gate Powder) into the nasal cavity to promote sneezing in order to treat urinary retention.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.2. Herbal medicine

This treatment method can also be applied to the internal use/administration of Chinese herbs. The purging method is often used to act on the lower part of body in order to descend excess ascending qi/yang/fire that may be manifesting as bleeding gums, headaches, loss of voice and restlessness. For example, the *Cheng Qi* (Order the Qi) category of formulas can be used to treat conditions manifesting in the upper body like asthma, headache or mouth ulcers. This treatment method, which purges heat/fire through the bowels, is traditionally described as working by 'taking away the firewood from under the pot' ('釜底抽薪', 'fu di chou xin'<sup>16</sup>). A similar example is the use of *Dao Chi San* (Guide Out the Red Powder) to promote urination in order to reduce Heart fire in the treatment of excess-type insomnia and restlessness.

*The acupoints Baihui DU-20 and Yongquan KID-1 are commonly selected when applying external herbal treatment for disorders in the upper and lower body.*

Employing a decoction of Sheng Di Huang (*Rehmaniae Radix*) for intermittently bleeding gums is an example of using the replenishing method to reinforce Kidney yin to treat the manifestation of empty fire in the upper body.<sup>17</sup>

Dispersing methods can be used to 'open' the circulation of Lung qi in the upper burner to treat lower burner disorders. For example, in *Qian Jin Yao Fang* (*Important Formulas Worth a Thousand Gold Pieces*) the use of powdered Xing Ren (*Armeniacae Semen*) and Zi Wan (*Radix Asteris Tatarici*) is recommended to treat women with postpartum retention of urine.<sup>18</sup> The combination of Xing Ren (*Armeniacae Semen*), Zi Wan (*Radix Asteris Tatarici*) and Pi Pa Ye (*Eriobotryae Folium*) to diffuse Lung qi so as to treat urinary retention was traditionally likened to opening the hole in the top of a teapot in order to allow tea to pour out. A similar principle was employed by Zhu Dan-Xi when he used the vomiting method to treat urinary retention with herbs such as Gua Di (*Melo Pedicellus*), Li Lu (*Veratri nigri Radix et Rhizoma*), Ai Ye (*Artemisiae argyi Folium*) and Luo Bo Zi (*Raphani Semen*). Using herbs to 'lift' the qi in the upper of body allows water to descend via urination in the lower.<sup>19</sup> Other past TCM practitioners have promoted sneezing by blowing *Tong Guan San* (Open the Gate Powder) into the nasal cavity in order to resolve urinary retention.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of modern research, Ji (1994) treated 50 patients with acute tonsillitis (accompanied by dry stool and constipation) with modified *Da Huang Tang* (*Rhei Radix et Rhizoma* Decoction), consisting of Da Huang (*Rhei Radix et Rhizoma*), Zhi Shi (*Aurantii Fructus immaturus*), Sheng Di Huang (*Rehmaniae Radix*) and Chi Shao (*Paeoniae*

Radix rudra). The therapeutic aim was to purge excessive fire and stagnation through the lower part of body. Based on changes in body temperature, severity of redness and swelling of the tonsils, and pain levels this herbal intervention was found to be extremely effective.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The treatment principle of addressing upper body diseases by treating the lower body and vice versa is based on the holistic approach of TCM and the principles of ascending and descending. By considering the multiple factors that constitute the root causes of disease, better treatment outcomes can be achieved. The authors propose the following steps when approaching a case in the clinic: 1) identify and correct the pathological changes at the site of the disease; 2) restore the appropriate ascending and descending motions; and 3) correct the manifestations of the disease in the 'opposite' aspect of the body. Although this paper has shown the applications of this treatment principle in historical literature, clinical records and modern research, scientific evidence for its effectiveness is still limited. Further studies are needed in order to develop a greater evidence base for its application in the treatment of difficult and complex diseases.

## Acknowledgements

We thank Professor Yuhao Li, SITCM, and Mr Reece Yao, Director of Doctor Earth Bondi Junction Wellness Clinic, for their valuable contributions to this article.

**Tieguang Gu (corresponding author):** Bachelor of TCM from Nanjing University of TCM, Master of TCM and PhD in Oriental Medicine. Associate Professor/Associate Dean of Sydney Institute of TCM (SITCM). Email: richard@sitcm.edu.au

**Nick Li:** Bachelor of TCM from SITCM, Associate Lecturer at SITCM.

**Jian Jiang:** Bachelor of TCM from Hubei University of TCM, Master of TCM and PhD in Oriental Medicine. Associate Professor/Dean of Sydney Institute of TCM (SITCM).

**Huilin Yao:** Bachelor, Master and PhD of TCM from Nanjing University of TCM. Clinic Educator of University of Technology, Sydney; Senior Lecturer at SITCM.

## References

- Zhang, Z.C. (1959). *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen Ji Zhu (Literature Study on the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, Basic Questions)*. Shanghai Science and Technology Press: Shanghai, p.294
- Su Wen, Yin Yang Ying Xiang Da Lun (Basic Questions, the Manifestation of Yin and Yang from the Macrocosm to the Microcosm)
- Yu, C. (1983). *Yimenfa lu (Precepts for Physicians)* (1658). Shanghai Science and Technology Press: Shanghai, p.268.
- Zhang, J.B. (1960). *Jing-Yue Quan Shu (Collected Treatises of [Zhang] Jing-Yue)* (1624). Shanghai Science and Technology Press: Shanghai, p.502
- Lin, P.Q. (1959). *Lei Zheng Zhi Cai (Treatment Decisions Categorized According to Pattern)* (1851). Shanghai Science and Technology Press: Shanghai, p.245
- Zhang, X.C. (1974). *Yi Xue Zhong Zhong Can Xi Lu (Essays on Medicine Esteeming the Chinese and Respecting the Western)* (1918-34). Hebei People's Publishing House: Hebei, p.13
- Yu, C.R. (1985). "Discussion of Preservation and Development of TCM Unique Features", *Fujian Journal of Chinese Medicine*, 4, 2-4
- Gao, S.Y. (1985). *Dan-Xi Zhi Fa Xin Yao (Essentials of (Zhu) Dan-Xi's Treatment Methods)* (1543). Shandong Science and Technology Press: Shandong, p.49
- Zhang, D.L. (1980). "A preliminary study on the relationship between the point of Cheng Jiang CV-24 and the uterus in the acupuncture treatment", *Zhejiang Journal of Chinese Medicine*, 11, 520-530
- Zhang, Z.B. (1986). "A case of epistaxis treated by puncture Tai Chong LIV-3", *Journal of New Chinese Medicine*, 2, 35-39
- Quirico, O.E. et al (2014). "Effects of the acupoints PC 6 Neiguan and LR 3 Taichong on cerebral blood flow in normal subjects and in migraine patients", *Neuro Sci*, 35 (Supp. 1), 129-133
- Jiang, Y.W. (1996). Treating upper portion disease via managing lower portion. *Journal of Clinical Acupuncture and Moxibustion*, 12(1), 19-20
- Wang, Y.C. (1983). *Wang Shi Yi Cun (Wang's Medical Records)* (1875). Jiangsu Science and Technology Press: Jiangsu, p.78
- Yu, C.R. et al. (1984). "Discussion and investigation on the treatment of Que Syndrome", *Heilongjiang Journal of Chinese Medicine*, 3, 19-22
- Zhan, Y.K. et al. (1984). *External Treatment of Traditional Chinese Medicine*. Hunan Science and Technology Press: Hunan, p.39
- Yu, C.R. (1962). "Discussion on 'Qi Fan'", *Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, 12, 35-39
- Luo, T.Y. (1959). *Wei Sheng Bao Jian (Precious Mirror of Health)* (1283). Commercial Press: Beijing, p.137.
- Sun, S.M. (1982) *Qian jin yao fang (Important Formulas Worth a Thousand Gold Pieces)* (650). People's Medical Publishing House: Beijing, p.380
- Zhu, D.X. (1982). *Dan Xi Shou Jing (Dan Xi's Hand Mirror)* (1312). People's Medical Publishing House: Beijing, p.175
- Yu, C. (1983). *Yi Men Fa Lu (Precepts for Physicians)* (1658). Shanghai science and Technology Press: Shanghai, p.268
- Ji, Y.H. (1994). "Modify Da huang decoction as a purgative method for the treatment of 50 cases acute tonsillitis", *Shanxi Journal of Chinese Medicine*, 15(2), 62-64