

Tending the Wind – Chapter 14  
Chinese Medicine – Part 6  
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The five phases describe the workings of ten organs (five yáng and five yīn), each with its own acupuncture meridian, accounting for ten bilateral meridians. However there are twelve main meridians in the body. The last two belong to the triple heater (yáng) and pericardium (yīn). The triple heater is usually listed as the sixth yáng organ, but the pericardium is often not included among the yīn organs. And as there is no sixth phase in TCM, these two “organs” are usually lumped into the fire or water phases to describe their functions. The reason for these vague assignments is the unique nature of these two structures – a nature that is crucial to the comings and goings of one’s original qì.

The other ten organs have a name and a form. The triple heater and pericardium are described as having a name but no-form: wúxíng, which like wúwèi refers to something that isn’t restricted to any specific habit and changes with the ease and effortlessness of the Dào. They accommodate the dé (inner nature) of things. This concept fits with the idea of these organs as membranes that don’t have a fleshy form but rather accommodate their shape to the form of those organs they line and envelop. They represent a kind of pre-organ.

The meridians of these organs are also unique. Unlike the other ten meridians which travel toward their respective organs to permeate them with qì, the meridians of the triple heater and pericardium are said to travel into the chest, through the diaphragm, and then spiral throughout the abdomen as they intertwine to become one. In this way they perfuse the entire abdomen, which is often described as the sea of qì. Like the other ten meridians, those of the triple heater and pericardium are also rooted at the source, mìngmén.

The functions of the triple heater are well described in the classical literature. It carries yuán (source) qì to all the organs of the body and serves as their connection to mìngmén. It helps to regulate all the body’s waterways (fluid compartments), an important physiologic function of membranes. And it is said to differentiate the flesh: “[When] thinking about the triple heater’s unusual doings, then you can understand the yīn organs and yáng organs are the same, or you can distinguish the differences between them.” As discussed before, the primordial connective tissues of the embryo help determine the destiny of its germ layers, and electrical polarities created along connective tissue planes may guide the growth of embryonic structures.

These functions involving the ignition and regulation of transformation are suggested by the Chinese characters for the triple heater (sān jiāo). Sān means *three*, alluding to three compartments in the body; in the classical literature these are the upper burner (above the stomach and dispersing through the chest), the middle burner (epigastric area), and the lower burner (beneath the umbilicus). [These are not the same as the three cinnabar fields (dān tián) important in Daoist meditation practices (inside the head between the eyebrows, in the heart, and in the abdomen at mìngmén).] Another interesting interpretation of the sān jiāo compartments derives from our understanding of water regulation by membranes; the three could be equated with the three physiologic fluid compartments: intracellular fluid, and the two types of extracellular fluid – plasma and interstitial fluid. Jiāo (short-tailed bird + fire) literally means *roasted bird*, but in this context refers to a phoenix rising from the flames. It represents death and rebirth, transformation and purification.

The functions of the pericardium are much more obscure, receiving sparse attention in the classical literature with inconsistent roles assigned to it. Some authors say its only service is to the heart, protecting it and carrying out its orders. Others say it is the master of all the yīn organs (the triple heater being master of the yáng organs). And still others describe it as simply that which is any empty space in the body. More may be gleaned by examining the pericardium’s Chinese characters.

Two terms appear in reference to the pericardium, xīn bāo and xīn zhǔ. Xīn is a pictograph of a heart with three beats, translated as *heart, mind, feelings, center, or middle*. Bāo combines a pictograph of a person bent over something (to envelop) with a pictograph of a snake/dragon or fetus/embryo. It is commonly translated as *to wrap, include, contain, surround, bundle, or pregnant*. Zhǔ is a pictograph of a lamp and flame, commonly translated as *flame, master, owner, main, primary, or advocate*. Combining these, xīnbāo suggests that which not only wraps the heart, but also brings it into being and collects all that the heart/mind entails into one presence. Xīnzhǔ suggests that which brings one's personal flame into the heart to act as master and guide manifestation. These meanings are supported by the symbology of the dragon in Chinese creation myth who caused the gathering of clouds followed by lightning, thunder, and the "big rains" – the first material substance from the Dào. A Hàn era text, the Huáinánzǐ, states that the child of wúxíng is light, and its grandchild is water. The pericardium is functionally similar to the dragon, capable of bringing the mystery of the Dào into physical form. As a natural metaphor, the process of physiologic becoming involves the gathering of one's personal mystery like a cloud into the empty space of the pericardium, followed by the spark of light at míngmén (described as immaterial fire fueled by immaterial water), and then the emergence of the first material phase, water, at the kidneys where original yīn and yáng reside.

The physical pericardium does of course protect and anchor the heart as well as the roots of its great vessels, and its interstitial fluid layer helps prevent friction during heart pumping. However, this is only the densest form of pericardium qì. Its more subtle forms flow throughout the body, aiding the ongoing process of emergence of one's un-namable self into a focused area of manifestation. One can then be present, and proceed with the business of personal transformation. As a hologram, each individual organ can then proceed with its own physical and subtle transformations. The heart still retains its primacy as the seat of shén, but that awareness must be continuously buffered, nourished, and guided by one's un-namable mystery. From this understanding the medical applications of the pericardium meridian are predictable.

In the classical literature, the pericardium meridian is needed for physical issues like angina, palpitations, stroke, fainting, fullness of the chest, phlegm affecting the cardiopulmonary system, pleuritis, and "hot blood" (e.g. nosebleeds, coughing or vomiting blood), and for mental/emotional issues like restlessness, anxiety, fear of others, insomnia, difficulty speaking, and depression. (In this case depression is due to an insufficient presence of self, or lack of inspiration, whereas depression connected to the liver is due to chronic constraint and repression.)

Many medical applications of treating the triple heater overlap with those of the pericardium since their functions are intertwined just like their meridians. (And of course all the membranes of the body are connected to one another from the deepest to the outermost layers.) Both systems are used to treat problems involving the connective tissues of the body (e.g. wrist sprain, carpal tunnel syndrome), applicable issues in the chest and abdomen, phlegm accumulation in the body's waterways, certain mental or emotional disorders, and sudden invasion past the protective layers of the organs or the psyche by outside forces. The pericardium applies to functions and areas that are more yīn in nature, and the triple heater to those that are more yáng in nature. The pericardium is also more involved in preparation and gathering, and the triple heater in activation and spontaneous transmission.

If the pericardium and triple heater had their own phase based on natural metaphors, it would be lightning, shǎndiàn. Shǎn is a pictograph of a person standing in a doorway (*glimpse, flash*); diàn is a pictograph meaning *extending down from a raincloud*. The two together are commonly translated as *lightning*, which serves as the perfect image for the combined functions of the pericardium and triple heater – a sudden flash of light extending down from the clouds toward earth. Unlike regular fire, which is quelled by water, lightning appears only when there is water vapor in the sky (clouds). Lightning is

attracted by metal (the lungs' purity and constancy guide new emergence, and meditative breath creates the space for emergence). And lightning creates a spark (an ancient version of qì shows cloud + fire instead of cloud + grain). It is the immaterial fire fueled by immaterial water, without permanent form or structure.

The pericardium and triple heater are intimately involved in the process of zìrán: spontaneous and natural self-becoming. Each five-phase organ and its functions represent one manifest aspect of that expression. But individual expression is also affected by one's surroundings and circumstances; harmonious interaction with others and the environment is part of zìrán. The body's *extraordinary vessels* which regulate this interaction are the final subject of our exploration into TCM.