

Part III

COMMENTARY ON *Exposition on the Eight Extraordinary Vessels*



Part III contains full commentaries on each chapter of *Exposition on the Eight Extraordinary Vessels*. The yin and yang *wei* vessels and the yin and yang *qiao* vessels are each discussed together, rather than in separate chapters, because they are most readily understood in relation to one another. The chapters are arranged in the same order as the material is presented in the *Exposition*.

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On the Overview of the Eight Extraordinary Vessels

Li Shi-Zhen begins his exposition on the eight extraordinary vessels by establishing their place in the overall scheme of the channels and networks: “People have channel vessels and network vessels throughout their body. Those that travel longitudinally are called channels, while those that branch off are called networks.” Here Li introduces a technique that he uses throughout the book, juxtaposing passages from earlier texts in a way that expands their meaning. Li’s opening statement glosses a line from Ch. 17 of *Divine Pivot* that compares the channels and networks and states: “The channels and vessels are the interior and those that branch from it and travel horizontally are networks.”¹

The modern commentator Wang Luo-Zhen notes that the original meaning of the graph 經 (*jing*, ‘channel’) is a vertical or longitudinal line, whereas the original meaning of the graph 絡 (*luo*, ‘network’) indicates a connecting net. Thus, the channels and vessels are the trunk and their trajectories are typically deep, while the network vessels are the branches and these are disseminated superficially.² Li develops this theme, elaborating on Ch. 1 of *Divine Pivot*:

There are 12 channels [consisting of the] three yin and three yang of the hand, and the three yin and three yang of the foot. There are 15 networks. Each of the 12 channels has its own branching network, and the spleen also has a great network. In addition, with the two networks of the *ren* and *du* [vessels], there are 15 [networks]. (The *Classic of Difficulties* posits a yin network and a yang network.) Combined, the 27 qi [of the channels and networks] move up and down together as if flowing from a spring, moving like the sun and moon without rest.

The original passage from Ch. 1 of *Divine Pivot* is considerably less detailed. “There are 12 channel vessels, and 15 network vessels. Altogether these make 27 [channels], and the qi thus ascends and descends [through them].”³ Ch. 1 of *Divine Pivot* makes no mention of the great network of the spleen, nor does it include the networks of the *ren* and *du*.

In an annotation of his own, Li mentions that the *Classic of Difficulties* omits the *yin* and *yang qiao* in its count of the networks, tacitly pointing out that these vessels have been substituted for the *ren* and *du*. Although this appears to be a passing comment, the relationship of the *qiao* vessels to the networks is central to Li’s understanding of extraordinary vessel physiology. Li makes no mention of the *Classic of Difficulties* as the source of the great network of the spleen.

In *Discerning the Truth Regarding Pulse Theory* (*Mai li qiu zhen* 脈理求真, 1769), Huang Gong-Xiu (黃宮綉) takes this idea a step farther. Huang identifies the *qiao* vessels not only as constituents of the networks, but as their primary controllers. The *yang qiao* masters the yang networks and the *yin qiao* masters the yin networks.⁴ At least one modern commentary goes so far as to claim that the *qiao* vessels are synonymous with yin and yang networks.⁵ These interpretations echo Li's own perspective on the extraordinary vessels, which will be developed in subsequent chapters of *Exposition on the Eight Extraordinary Vessels*. Here in the introduction, Li lays the groundwork for his development of this idea in later chapters. For him, the *qiao* vessels are intimately related to the networks while the *ren* and *du* have a much more generalized function in regulating yin and yang.

Li next presents his own explanation of the flow of qi between the channels and networks and the extraordinary vessels.

Thus, the yin vessels manage [the qi] in the five yin viscera while the yang vessels sustain the six yang receptacles. Yin and yang connect with each other in an endless circuit in which there is no discernable break. Upon reaching the end, it just starts again. The overflow of qi [from the channels and networks] enters the extraordinary vessels, providing reciprocal irrigation, interiorly warming the yin viscera and yang receptacles, and exteriorly moistening the interstices.

Although it is regarded as part of the bedrock understanding of the extraordinary vessels today, the notion of a reciprocal flow of qi between the extraordinary vessels and the rest of the channel system is an innovation of Li's. In the *Inner Classic* (*Nei jing*), the relationship between the flow of qi in the primary channels and extraordinary vessels is unclear. Li reframes the meaning of a passage from Ch. 17 of *Divine Pivot* to fit his own more versatile interpretation. The original passage reads:

At no time does the qi not circulate. It is like the flow of water, like the ceaseless movement of the sun and moon. Therefore, the yin vessels nourish the viscera while the yang vessels nourish the receptacles, like an endless circuit in which there is no discernable break. The overflow of qi internally irrigates the viscera and receptacles and externally moistens the interstices.⁶

This passage appears in the context of a discussion of the trajectory of the *qiao* vessels and their transmission of qi to the eyes and interstices in the exterior, and to the yin viscera and yang receptacles in the interior. Li has taken a statement pertaining to the physiology of a specific extraordinary vessel and extrapolated it to include all the extraordinary vessels as a whole. Li asserts that the overflow of *all* the extraordinary vessels irrigates the viscera and receptacles. By contrast, the 27th and 28th Difficult Issues of the *Classic of Difficulties* posit a much different dynamic between the pri-

mary channels and the extraordinary vessels. In this scheme, the networks receive the overflow from the primary channels, and the extraordinary vessels in turn receive the overflow from the networks. The extraordinary vessels of the *Classic of Difficulties* clearly do not flow back into the primary channels or their networks.

When they are filled to overflowing, they stagnate and they cannot return to the circulating [qi] by drainage into the [primary] channels ... they are no longer part of the circulation because the 12 channels cannot seize this [surplus].⁷

Similarly, the symptoms associated with the extraordinary vessels in the *Classic of Difficulties* tend to reflect conditions most commonly associated with excesses such as lower back stiffness, chest pain, abdominal urgency, and accumulations and masses. The only treatment strategy mentioned in the *Classic of Difficulties* is to “pierce [the respective vessel] with a sharp stone” (*bian she zhi* 砭射之) to relieve swelling and heat resulting from the stagnation of pathogenic heat within it.”⁸

Li’s proposal that the flow of qi between the extraordinary vessels and the rest of the channel system is reciprocal (*chuan xiang guan gai* 傳相灌溉) skillfully reconciles this apparent contradiction. According to Katsuda Masayasu, “When the circulating qi is in excess, it flows into the extraordinary vessels. It also flows back to the 12 primary channels to nourish the viscera and receptacles and the interstices.”⁹ This interpretation has become the standard understanding of the relationship between the extraordinary vessels and the rest of the channel system. Having established this key piece of extraordinary vessel physiology, Li then returns to the 27th Difficult Issue to explain what is so extraordinary about the extraordinary (*qi* 奇) vessels. “The eight extraordinary channels are eight vessels that are not controlled by the 12 main channels, nor are they arranged in exterior-interior combinations. Therefore, they are called extraordinary.”

This is not the only interpretation of the word *qi* 奇. According to the Tang dynasty commentator Yang Xuan-Cao (楊玄操),

Qi 奇 means ‘odd or unpaired’ (*yi* 異). These eight vessels are not part of the [system of] mutual seizure regulation [of contents] among the 12 conduits; they constitute passageways proceeding separately. They are different from the main conduits. Hence, they are called extraordinary channels.¹⁰

However, during the Song dynasty, Yu Shu (虞庶) took issue with Xuan-Cao’s interpretation:

Qi 奇 is to be read as ‘fundamental’ (*ji* 基); it stands for ‘slanted, oblique’ (*xie* 斜), ‘odd’ (*ling* 零); it means ‘singular’ (*bu ou* 不偶). That is to say, the eight vessels are not regulated by the main channels, there are no interior-exterior combinations between yin and yang [vessels], and they constitute

separate pathways with unusual circulations, therefore they are called the extraordinary vessels. [Thus] Master Yang's statement that *qi* means odd is incorrect.¹¹

Katsuda points out that there may be another shade of meaning to Yu Shu's association of 'odd' with the extraordinary vessels. He claims that *ling* (零) often refers to small things like the falling of leaves or the dripping of water and so evokes an image of the extraordinary vessels as branching off of or falling away from the major channels.¹²

The Qing dynasty physician Xu Da-Chun (徐大椿, 1693–1771) noted that “[The word] *qi* 奇 should be read as ‘odd or singular’ (*ji ou* 奇偶). That is to say, in contrast to the 12 channels, there are no pairs of foot or hand [channels] in the case [of the extraordinary vessels].”¹³

As previously mentioned, the extraordinary vessels are not arranged in hand and foot pairings but in interior-exterior pairings, such as the *yin* and *yang qiao* and the *yin* and *yang wei*. The *ren* and *du* are also a functional pair, and, as we will see, there is even a tacit pairing of the *chong* and the *dai*.

The main channels are like irrigation ditches, and the extraordinary channels are like lakes and marshes. When the vessels of the main channels are swollen and abundant, they overflow into the extraordinary channels. Thus it was that Qin Yue-Ren compared this to when the “rains pour down from heaven, the irrigation ditches overflow, the rain floods rush wildly, flowing into the lakes and marshes.” This is the revelation of the secret meaning not presented in the *Divine [Pivot]* and *Basic [Questions]*.

Qin Yue-Ren is also known as Bian Que (扁鵲), the apocryphal author of the *Classic of Difficulties*. The above passage is a synthesis of the 27th and 28th Difficult Issues, which state:

The sages constructed irrigation ditches and kept the waterways open so that they would be prepared for any extraordinary situation. When the rains poured down from heaven, the irrigation ditches overflowed. In times such as that when the rain rushed recklessly, even the sages could not make plans again [and therefore they had to be prepared].¹⁴

The 28th Difficult Issue continues:

This is comparable to the sages planning and constructing irrigation ditches. When these irrigation ditches were full to overflowing, [this excess water] flowed into deep lakes because even the sages were unable to [find other means to] seize [this overflow] and ensure the continuation of a circulatory flow.¹⁵

This passage again emphasizes the one-way flow of qi from the channels to the extraordinary vessels. It suggests that once the networks overflow with qi and blood, the 12 channels cannot further add more qi and blood. Because this statement does not actually appear in the *Inner Classic*, Li considers it to be “a revelation of the secret meaning of the *Divine [Pivot]* and *Basic [Questions]*.”¹⁶ Li Shi-Zhen evidently has a low opinion of the existing literature concerning the extraordinary vessels. His goal was to compile the information he considered most relevant to their study and to present it in a coherent manner so that those involved in internal alchemy could benefit from his synthesis of these materials.

[Discussions of] the eight vessels scattered throughout the masses of [medical] texts are sketchy and incomplete. If physicians are not aware [of the theories of the extraordinary channels], they will remain in the dark as to the cause of disease. If [aspiring] transcendents are not aware of [the more comprehensive theories of the extraordinary channels] it will be difficult for them to tame the furnace and the cauldron. [Although I,] Li Shi-Zhen, am not clever, I have carefully considered the statements of all [the various schools] and compiled them below to allow both transcendents and physicians to trap and snare these useful words.

The “transcendents” (仙 *xian*) mentioned here refer to practitioners of internal alchemy concerned with longevity practices. In the lexicon of Daoist alchemy, the “furnace and the cauldron” (*lu ding* 爐鼎) is the elixir of immortality. The 50th hexagram of the *Classic of Change* is also called *ding* or cauldron. Li concludes his introduction with an allusion to *Zhuang zi*, establishing the Daoist thread that runs through his *Exposition*. His reference to a “trap” (*quan* 筌) is a bamboo fish trap and the “snare” (*ti* 蹄) is a snare for catching rabbits. The phrase is from *Zhuang zi*, Ch. 2, titled “On External Things” (*wai wu* 外物), which says:

Nets exist for catching fish; once a fish is caught, the net is forgotten. Traps exist for catching rabbits; once a rabbit is caught, the trap is forgotten. Words exist for expressing ideas; once the ideas are expressed, the words are forgotten. I would like to find someone who forgets words and have a talk with him!¹⁷

Li is making it clear that he understands the limitations of the written word. He intends his book to be a snare for capturing the meaning of the extraordinary vessels, but once the reader has grasped their meaning, the words can be discarded.

On the Eight Vessels

Where Ch. 1 was concerned with the relationship between the extraordinary vessels and the rest of the channel system, Li-Shi-Zhen's second chapter in *Exposition on the Eight Extraordinary Vessels*, simply titled "The Eight Vessels," focuses on the rough trajectories and general characteristics of each of the extraordinary vessels as well as their relationships with one another. Before embarking on a more comprehensive discussion of pathology, Li first devotes this chapter to describing the normal physiological functioning of the extraordinary vessels as large-scale regulators of yin and yang within the body. He begins with an amalgam of material culled from passages appearing in the 27th and 28th Difficult Issues in the *Classic of Difficulties*.

The eight extraordinary vessels consist of the *yin wei*, *yang wei*, *yin qiao*, *yang qiao*, *chong*, *ren*, *du*, and *dai*. The *yang wei* arises at the meeting of all the yang and travels upward from the outer ankle in the protective aspect; the *yin wei* arises at the intersection of all the yin and travels upward from the inner ankle in the nutritive aspect, and [together] they constitute a binding network for the entire body. The *yang qiao* arises from within the heel, traversing the outer ankle and traveling upward on both sides of the body; the *yin qiao* arises from within the heel, traversing the inner ankle and moving upward on both [sides] of the body, and [together] they allow nimble springing [movement] of the organism.

In this concise introductory statement, Li skillfully blends his own ideas into these passages, first interjecting a relationship between the *wei* vessels and the protective and nutritive aspects that does not appear in the *Classic of Difficulties*. The original lines from the 28th Difficult Issue read:

The *yang wei* and *yin wei* are the binding network of the entire body. When they overflow, [their qi] cannot return to the circulation of all the [primary] channels. Hence, the *yang wei* arises at the meeting of all the yang, and the *yin wei* arises at the meeting of all the yin."¹

The concept of the *wei* vessels as overseers of the protective and nutritive aspects is central to Li's subsequent development of treatment strategies pertaining to these vessels, and he has insinuated this idea into the bedrock principles of *wei* vessel activity presented in the *Classic of Difficulties*. Similarly, the original passage in the 28th Dif-

difficult Issue of the *Classic of Difficulties* makes no mention of the “nimble springing” movement initiated by the *qiao* vessels, limiting itself to a rudimentary description of their trajectories. According to that text:

The *yang qiao* vessel arises at the heel; it proceeds along the outer ankle, ascends upward and enters the wind pond [hole]. The *yin qiao* vessel arises at the heel; it proceeds along the inner ankle, ascends upward, and reaches the throat where it intersects and links with the *chong* vessel.²

Li's initial statements establish an essential dynamic between the *wei* and *qiao* vessels. While the *wei* vessels constitute the gross energetic structure of the extraordinary vessels and the infrastructure of qi that defines the body, the two *qiao* vessels mobilize qi in the body, allowing for physical movement. Having established the boundaries and the motivating force of the extraordinary vessels, Li continues his recitation of eight vessel function, alluding to passages from the *Classic of Difficulties*, quietly inserting his own innovations into this orthodox material:

The *du* vessel arises at the meeting of the yi, traverses the back, and proceeds along the posterior of the body such that it is the Director General [of the yang vessels]. Hence, it is called the sea of the yang vessels. The *ren* vessel [also] arises at the meeting of the yin, traverses the abdomen, and proceeds along the front of the body such that it is the official controller of the yin vessels. Hence, it is called the sea of the yin vessels.

The 28th Difficult Issue identifies the beginning of the *du* vessel less specifically as “the transport [hole] at the [body's] lower end.”³ In his subsequent discussion of the trajectory of the *du* vessel, Li clarifies this point by stating that “Its vessel arises from within the gestational membranes below the kidneys.” He attributes the imperial title of Director General (*zong du* 總督) to the *du* vessel, a term in use since the Western Han (206 BCE–24 CE), denoting one who is generally in charge, typically of regional clusters of two or more provinces. By Li's time, in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the title was also associated with executive officials such as ministers or vice ministers delegated to deal with military problems in a region overlapping provincial jurisdiction.⁴

The terms “sea of yang vessels” (*yang mai zhi hai* 陽脈之海) and “sea of yin vessels” (*yin mai zhi hai* 陰脈之海) do not appear in the *Classic of Difficulties*. They first appear in the *Pulse Classic* in the chapter titled “On Treating Diseases of the Eight Extraordinary Vessels” (*Ping qi jing ba mai bing* 平奇經八脈病).⁵ They also appear in a commentary by Lu Guang (呂廣) who asserts that the *chong* vessel was originally designated as the sea of yin. However, according to Yang Xuan-Cao, “The classic states: The *chong* vessel is the sea of [all] 12 channels. The *chong* vessel is not only the sea of the yin vessels. I'm afraid that Mr. Lu is in error.”⁶

Yang Xuan-Cao's argument is based on the statement in Ch. 33 of *Divine Pivot*

that the *chong* vessel is “the sea of the 12 channels.”⁷ This is the interpretation Li subscribes to in his description of the *chong* vessel.

The *chong* [also] arises at the meeting of the yin and travels to hug the umbilicus where it surges directly upward, constituting an essential thoroughfare for the various vessels. Hence, it is called the sea of the 12 channels. The *dai* vessel winds around the lumbar region in the form of a binding girdle, making it the overall commander of all the channels.

All of the extraordinary vessels regulate yin and yang; however, the *du* and *ren* vessels are the most comprehensive and overarching regulators of yin and yang within the body, and they serve to regulate the rest of the extraordinary vessels as well. The *chong* shares the same origins as the *ren* and the *du*, but its role is very different. In this context, the *chong* is more akin to the *dai* vessel in its function. According to Yang Xuan-Cao, “*Dai* means to bind. This refers to the overall binding of all the vessels to regulate them. It [begins] at the 11th and 12th ribs, below the costal margins, and descends to connect between the hips, returning [to its beginning] and coiling. It coils around the entire body like a binding belt.”^{8,9}

While the *dai* vessel provides a restrictive boundary for the trajectory of all the channels, the *chong* defines an axis or thoroughfare along which all of the channels are aligned. Hence, it is the sea of the 12 channels. If we think of the *dai* as exerting regulatory control inward from the outside, then the *chong* may be understood as exerting its influence outward from the core. As the sea of the 12 channels, the *chong* may be perturbed by an imbalance in virtually any channel.

Next, Li summarizes these topological resonances in a manner that lays the groundwork for the chapters that follow:

Hence, the *yang wei* governs the exterior of the entire body while the *yin wei* governs the interior of the entire body, and so they are referred to as *qian* and *kun*. The *yang qiao* governs the yang [aspect] of the left and right side of the entire body while the *yin qiao* governs the yin [aspect] of the left and right side of the entire body, so they are referred to as east and west. The *dai* vessel horizontally binds all the vessels so it is referred to as the six directions.

The *wei* and *qiao* vessels both regulate yin and yang as it pertains to day-to-day structure and function. They have distinct but complementary roles. The *wei* vessels regulate the communication of qi between the protective and nutritive levels, the two aspects of qi that most immediately define human interaction with the environment. The nutritive and protective are the day-to-day qi that allow us to move effectively and safely in the world. Proper communication between the exterior and the interior ensures an ‘organizational binding’ (*gang wei* 綱維) of the channels and vessels, providing an energetic superstructure to the body.

The idea that the *qiao* vessels govern the sides is an innovation of Li's based on an inference. The 28th Difficult Issue traces the trajectory of the *qiao* vessels roughly up the sides. The 29th Difficult Issue describes *qiao* pathology in terms of tension and flaccidity, which are generally interpreted as referring to musculoskeletal disorders. This prompts Li to conclude that the *qiao* vessels govern the sides.

Li's reference to the trigrams *qian* ☰ and *kun* ☷ from the *Classic of Change* further expands the resonances attributed to the *wei* vessels. The *yang wei* governs the exterior, and its influence is analogous to the attributes of heaven, maleness, and the trigram *qian*. The *yin wei* governs the interior, and its influence is analogous to earth, femininity, and the trigram *kun*.¹⁰ The *yin* and *yang qiao* vessels govern the yin and yang channels on the sides of the body, respectively, and taken together, this influence is analogous to the east and west directions. The *chong*, *ren*, and *du* govern the core vertical axis of the body, the influence of which is analogous to north and south. The *dai* vessel links the entire body together such that its influence is analogous to the six confluences. The six directions or confluences (*liu he* 六合) include the compass points plus up and down, and they organize the perception of space. Just as the six confluences provide a unifying concept for all spatial relations, the *dai* vessel organizes all of the extraordinary vessels into a coherent whole.

If the *dai* vessel defines the ultimate boundaries of the extraordinary vessels, the extraordinary vessels themselves define the spatial boundaries of the channel system as a whole. In governing the yin and yang on the sides, the structural periphery of the body, the emphasis of the *qiao* vessel lies more in the physicality of the body. The *qiao* vessels concern themselves with the healthy ascent and descent of yin and yang through the relatively superficial aspects of the body, allowing movement in the world. The *Classic of Difficulties* makes no mention of the role of the *qiao* vessels in diurnal and nocturnal circulation of protective qi between the interior and exterior. In Li's discussion of diseases of the *qiao*, this circulatory function appears only after his presentation of material pertaining to tension and slackness of the exterior, suggesting that he considers it secondary to these structural resonances.

While not ignoring their other functions, Li organizes his material in a manner that emphasizes the role of the *wei* vessels in governing the interior-exterior dynamic of yin and yang, and the role of the *qiao* vessels in governing the sides of the body. He concludes his overview by recapitulating the relevance of this material to both physicians and those involved in spiritual practice.

For this reason, those who practice medicine and know of the eight vessels comprehend the great purpose of the 12 channels and 15 networks. Those who practice transcendence and know of the eight vessels miraculously attain the ascent and descent of the tiger and dragon, and the subtle aperture of the Mysterious Female.

The implication is that the alchemical resonances of the eight vessels will deepen a

physician's understanding not only of the extraordinary vessels, but of the channel system at large, while spiritual cultivators will equally benefit from the medically oriented material. Once again, Li's final statement on the topic makes plain his alchemical influences.

The ascent and descent of the dragon and tiger (*long hu sheng jiang* 龍虎升降) is alchemical jargon laden with many layers of meaning. In its most basic meaning here, the dragon connotes yang qi and the tiger connotes yin qi. The goal of alchemical cultivation is to promote the optimal interpenetration of yin and yang. Another common resonance of the dragon and tiger concerns the necessity of subduing the dragon of the intellect and taming the tiger of sexual desire, both of which are accomplished through contemplative practice.

Where Ch. 1 finishes with an allusion to the *Zhuang zi*, Ch. 2 concludes with a reference to the *Lao zi*. The term Mysterious Female (*xuan pin* 玄牝) appears in Ch. 6 of the *Lao zi*: "The valley spirit never dies, this is called the Mysterious Female" (*gu shen bu si, shi wei xuan pin* 谷神不死是為玄牝).¹¹ As previously discussed, Mysterious Female is an evocation of emptiness that gives birth to all things, and it is an allusion to the development of breath control as the vehicle for achieving the goal of regulating the ascent and descent of the dragon and tiger.

His interest in spiritual cultivation notwithstanding, Li's *Exposition* is, nevertheless, primarily a medical text, and the challenge for physicians is to make some practical use of the alchemical material he believes is so important. In subsequent chapters, we will address in some detail how this stratum of the book holds the potential for enriching the practical application of the extraordinary vessels.