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An Historical Perspective of Acupuncture

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Throughout the study of acupuncture, one of the situations we will encounter on our journey will be references to a vast variety of physicians, emperors, authors, masters, teachers and others who contributed greatly by way of manuscripts, books, poems, stories, treatises, observations, collections, writings and developments of this incredible healing art.

During our studies we'll see reference to various dynasties of Chinese history as a framework from whence this work came. The name of the dynasty tells us the time from where a particular procedure or book was produced. To better appreciate the history of acupuncture, the Chinese dynasties are extremely important to know.

- Early Civilization 15000 -- 4000 BC
- Xia Dynasty 2000 -- 1500 BC
- Shang Dynasty 1500 -- 1000 BC
- Zhou Dynasty
- Western Zhou Dynasty 1000 -- 771 BC
- Eastern Zhou Dynasty 770 -- 256 BC
- Spring and Autumn Period 677 -- 476 BC
- Warring States Period 475 -- 221 BC
- Qin Dynasty 220 -- 207 BC
- Han Dynasty 206 BC -- 220 AD
- Three Kingdoms 220 -- 280 AD
- Western Jin Dynasty 267 -- 316 AD
- Eastern Jin Dynasty 317 -- 420 AD
- Northern and Southern Dynasties 420 -- 581 AD

- Sui Dynasty 581 -- 618 AD
- Tang Dynasty 618 -- 907 AD
- Five Dynasties 908 -- 960 AD
- Song Dynasty 960 -- 1279 AD
- Liao Dynasty 915 -- 1125 AD
- Yuan and Jin Dynasties 1115 -- 1368 AD
- Ming Dynasty 1368 -- 1644 AD
- Qing Dynasty 1644 -- 1911 AD

Each dynasty greatly contributed to the development of Chinese medicine and acupuncture, except the Qin dynasty, which only lasted 14 years; no specific development was known to come from this time frame.

During the 800 year reign of the Zhou dynasty, some of the most specific discoveries of Chinese medicine were made to include the theoretical foundations of yin and yang, the five elements, the pathogenic factors of external environment as a cause of disease and further understanding of the meridians of acupuncture.

The basic theories of acupuncture were established and stone needles became obsolete, being replaced by metal needles.

During this same time period (Zhou dynasty 1000-221 BC), three of the most significant books on Chinese medicine were written: the Huang Ti Nei Jjing (The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine), the Su Wen (Essential Questions) and the Ling Shu (The Miraculous Pivot). Even though these books were written during the Zhou dynasty, their content dates back to approximately 2500 BC during the reign of the legendary emperor Huang Ti.

The Su Wen was written over a period of over 1,500 years. It originally consisted of nine volumes containing 81 sections, consisting of anatomy, physiology, diagnosis, pathology, prevention and treatment of disease and the theories of yin and yang and the five elements. The Ling Shu provides detailed descriptions of the meridians, theories and applications. It is referred to as the Zheng Jing (The Classic of Acupuncture). Its authors are unknown.

It was not until approximately 400 BC that pulse diagnosis was first used in Chinese medicine. This method of diagnosis is attributed to Qin Ren Yue, who was referred to as the "emperor of medicine." His clinical successes were legendary.

During the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), the book Shang Han Lun (Treatise on Febrile Disorders) was written. It is still used to this day as a standard reference work for traditional Chinese medicine, including moxibustion, needling and herbal medicine.

In approximately 300 AD, Wang Xi wrote the book Mai Jing (The Classic of the Pulse). The technique of pulse diagnosis was systematized during this period and the principles of tonification, sedation, moxibustion, meridians, eight extraordinary channels and forbidden points were established.

At the time of the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), the first color acupuncture charts of the meridians were created. This effort was by Sun Si Miao, who used six different colors of ink for their creation. In the year 659, the emperor Gao Zong ordered a review of traditional herbal medicine by Su Jing and a staff of 22 scholars to create the first official pharmacopeia of Chinese medicine.

One of the great events of acupuncture occurred in 1027 AD during the Song dynasty, when Wang Wei Yi designed and casted the two life size bronze statues of the acupuncture meridians and points. This accomplishment standardized the teaching of acupuncture point location.

It wasn't until approximately 1300 AD during the Yuan and Jin dynasty that the first mention of midday-midnight circulation was recorded. Hundreds of discoveries, explanations and theories would develop during this time and the Ming and Qing dynasties, not to mention the myriad of discoveries which were attributed to the 20th century.

Literally thousands of books spanning 7,500 years of collected knowledge have created our current understanding of Chinese medicine, including herbal therapy, acupuncture and diagnosis. The history of Chinese medicine is absolutely fascinating. I invite anyone reading this article to delve further into the history of this fascinating healing art: "For in our history, we will find our future!" You are about to embark on a fascinating journey.

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