

# Shi 勢

## Efficacy born of disposition

A broad perspective on treatment strategy in acupuncture therapy

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The ideas of Traditional East Asian Medicine do not exist in a vacuum. Nearly every medical concept is a reflection of the much broader fabric of philosophical, cosmological and transpersonal concerns, to name just a few, each strand of which informs the other. Military considerations are an essential part of this weave and are especially germane to medicine. In this essay we present a few of the key ideas common to all aspects of strategic thought in early China and illustrate how they inform some of the fundamental principles of acupuncture practice. Primary among these is *shi* 勢 propensity, a concept with a wide range of clinical applications.

**T**HOUGH *SHI* IS an important principle in the classic of military strategy Sunzi's *Methods of War* (*Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法, 5th century BCE), a text that clearly influences many passages of the *Nei Jing* (Inner Classic 內經), the word *shi* itself

appears only a few times.<sup>a</sup> Specific references to *shi* in the practice of medicine prior to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) are relatively sparse. The case cannot be made that this idea has been central to Chinese medical theory throughout history. As the writings of influential thinkers such as Zhang Jiebin (張介賓, 1693–1771) and Xu Dachun (徐大椿, 1693–1771) attest, however, *shi*-propensity became an increasingly familiar concept in medicine from the Ming onward, and its medical applications during this time medicine clearly reflect back on its ancient military context. The focus of this paper is therefore not so much historical as it is practical. We hope to present the relevance of propensity-*shi* to medical practice today through some of the early writings on the topic. In the process we will attempt to articulate how our engagement of *shi*-propensity helps to enrich our own practice of acupuncture.

Strategic thinking in Chinese literature is most commonly framed in militaristic,

a. For an English language discussion of Sunzi's general relevance to Chinese medicine see Wu, Wang and Huang, 1997.

political or rhetorical terms. Military strategy may initially appear to be far removed from the kinder and gentler world of healing, yet Chinese medicine is steeped in martial terminology and its principles of action. *Wei qi* 衛氣 is defensive qi, those forces that repel invaders. *Ying qi* 營氣 is barracks qi, where the troops are billeted. Five phase (*wu xing* 五行) theory was originally developed as a means of understanding the political and military dynamics between the five warring states.<sup>b</sup> Though we work with such ideas on a daily basis in our clinical practice, we typically give little thought to their martial roots. Yet an appreciation for this kind of thinking can be clinically useful. The 17th century physician Xu Dachun wrote that treatments for every disease are contained in the 13 chapters of *Sunzi bingfa* and wrote an entire discourse on the topic.<sup>c</sup> This perspective is not based on the wanton use of force but the minimisation of conflict. In actuality, the strategic thought described by Sunzi is no more than a practical exegesis on a fundamental principle of Daoist philosophy, effortless action (無為).<sup>d</sup>

One of the key principles of strategic thought in early China, from politics to painting, is the need to assess the *shi* 勢 of a situation. *Shi* is commonly glossed as force. We might read the term *shi bing* 勢病 as the “strength of the disease,” which it certainly is, but that is only its most obvious attribute. *Shi* is the momentum or thrust behind that strength and perhaps most importantly, its overall disposition or propensity. When Zhang Jiebin complains about the sloppy diagnostic practices of his contemporaries, he emphasises its impact on the “thrust” of their treatment.

*As for the physicians of today, whenever they encounter a pattern, they are too vast and fail to fix their view, and so observe the ocean and then look for the sea, thus [therapeutic] propensity (shi) has no alternative but to be chaotic, for the application of their art is so broad, tangled and wild. (今之醫者,凡遇一證,便若觀海望洋,茫無定見,則勢有不得不為雜亂而用廣絡原野之術)*<sup>e</sup>

b. Unschuld, 1995: 65-66.

c. Xu and Liu, 1999: 134, Unschuld 1990: 184

d. For more on Effortless Action see Slingerland, 2003.

e. Li Zhifu, 1999: 889.

Perhaps more importantly, *shi* is the relationship of that momentum to the situation at large. In martial terms, one cannot intervene in any situation without a clear understanding of the lay of the land, the weather, and the strengths and weakness of an opponent’s resources as well as one’s own.

The French sinologist Francois Jullien defines *shi* more comprehensively as the overall propensity, trend, tendency, or state of affairs. It is the totality of a circumstance, which he ties up closely with the efficacy of the subsequent actions.<sup>f</sup> This reading of *shi* greatly expands our appreciation of the factors at play in given clinical presentation.

Our understanding of *shi* as a dynamic process is especially pertinent to five phase theory, providing we take seriously the principle that these *xing* 行 are not static elements but qualitative phases of resonant activity, with both physiological and pathological potentials. Take, for instance, Xu Dachun’s use of the word *shi* in his explanation of the 75th difficult issue.

*That the son is able to cause repletion in the mother [means that] if one drains the son then the propensity-shi of fire is beneficially weakened, and water can be allowed to exert its control. That the mother is able to cause depletion in the child [means that] if one tonifies the mother then the propensity-shi of water will simultaneously become effulgent and fire cannot dare to remain in a state of surplus.*

(子能令母實,馮子則火勢益衰,而水得以恣其克伐,母能令子虛,補母則水勢并旺,而火不敢留其有餘).<sup>g</sup>

We can certainly read *shi* in this passage as the respective strength of fire and water, making it comprehensible as a simple instruction to drain fire points and tonify water points. Yet when we understand the full implications of *shi*, this passage transforms from a martial discourse on how to overcome fundamentally pathological forces, and into an elegant exposition on the relational dynamics between inherently interdependent influences.

f. Jullien, 1995:15, 25-38, 107-116.

g. Xu and Liu 1999: 45.

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### Listening to propensity

How then do we make *shi* in its fullest sense of propensity a part of our practice of medicine? The *Sunzi* tells us to begin by listening.

*Calculate an advantage by listening and then promote its propensity by assisting its peripheral [manifestations]. As for propensity, it is based on advantage and the control of power. (計利以聽，乃為之勢，以佐其外。勢者，因利而制權也!)*<sup>h</sup>

For us as acupuncturists listening with our entire being means that we must take particular care in listening though our hands (Chace and Bensky, 2014). The advantage this sort of listening confers, and the control of power it affords, is nothing less than effortless activity.

### Effortless action

We will define effortless activity here as being in the right place at the right time and in the right way to produce an optimal result with the minimum of force. Listening in the service of effortless activity further requires that we leave our own agendas at the door. When we observe and participate in a situation in a manner that superimposes as few of our own prejudices and fondly held beliefs as possible, then we allow that situation to unfold itself in a spontaneous and natural (*ziran* 自然) way. Events then develop according to their natural tendencies and yet we as practitioners are part of that process. This deep principle is also ingrained in some martial arts. When asked about his combat method, Ueshiba Morihei (植芝 盛平 1883-1969), the founder of aikido, replied: "I just stand on my feet." (Tamura, 1985:31)

It is worth mentioning that an absence of an agenda does not preclude our having an ultimate goal; that may be treating a disease or subduing an assailant as the case may be. What we try to avoid are any fixed ideas regarding how to best achieve those goals.

### The right moment

One determines propensity by listening and gathering information with the goal of subtly shifting a situation to one's advantage. Although we try not to have an agenda

h. Wei Rulin, 1988: 64.

Our task is to find the optimal place and time to intervene, the spot and moment that will accomplish the most with the least effort. It is often preferable to exercise our influence indirectly, by "assisting in its peripheral [manifestations]". From this perspective our intervention may be indirect in terms of both space and time. If we have accurately assessed and intervened, we will have altered a situation sufficiently upstream in the flow of time that things will inexorably develop downstream in a manner that is to our advantage. At least in principle, this effortless action allows us to prevail without ever having to enter into real conflict with our opponent. It is sometimes said that the greatest of China's generals won only easy victories, and therefore their victories were not very glorious. By virtue of their mastery of propensity, the outcomes of their campaigns were foregone conclusions. In medical practice, engagement of propensity is the means by which we can presume to effectively assess and treat a disease before it manifests.

The optimal moment to exert a subtle influence occurs at the nascent manifestation (*ji* 幾) of a situation where it is most easily addressed, long before its full expression. Yet even here, this principle cannot be reduced to an axiomatic rule to engage problems as soon as possible. At what moment is a situation most amenable to influence? It may be prudent to lay some groundwork prior to bringing the full complement of one's resources to bear. Is it always best to go right to the root of a problem? There are certainly circumstances when, in engaging "peripheral manifestations", it is best to wait until a propensity is ripe for change.

Yet in the martial arts the best moment to intervene is sometimes not at the instant that a movement is initiated. Addressing an attack at this moment may simply abort one attack and initiate another one. If one waits until an attack has acquired just enough momentum that it has a clear direction, then it is easier to fuse with it and redirect it into a new and less confrontational disposition. As acupuncturists, this means that as we listen carefully to the *qi* in as many of its expressions as we can absorb it is also essential to wait until a situation has gathered enough momentum that we can meaningfully interpret it. This is yet another

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example of addressing what is present as opposed to what you think might be present.

### The right place

In assisting an event in its natural tendency we must also identify the pivotal (*shu* 樞) places where the dynamic (*ji* 機) of a circumstance is at play in space and time. The *Nan Jing* may instruct us to needle a certain type of point when presented with a certain pulse pattern, and the *Nei Jing* will even tell us what kinds of points to needle at a certain time of day or season, but will this invariably be the best choice in every situation? How many times has a patient told an acupuncturist, “that was a great treatment, you should do that again” only to be disappointed when the results of the repeat performance fell short of the original? In the first instance, we had effectively identified the right place to treat for that moment; in the latter that moment had passed. The optimal place is no longer where we left it. The principles of nascence and the dynamic are so inextricably interwoven with propensity that the skillful engagement of one is the engagement of them all.

### The right way

What we do at that pivotal point of a situation is no less important than identifying it in the first place. We must, of course, apply the optimal technique or modality in a given circumstance, and we must do so in a manner that creates the condition for its optimal efficacy. Whatever the technique, we must also be a certain way, physically and mentally. It is not only the resources of our patients that we must attend to. For instance, our alignment of our own structure is one very real expression of how we assess and consolidate our own resources as practitioners. Similarly, if we have a judgmental attitude towards our patients this will inevitably impact our interactions with their qi (Chace 2006). Attending to this simple thing can have a powerful effect on clinical outcomes.

The importance of a quiet mind in effectively influencing the qi is a common thread running through most, if not all, of China's internal cultivation traditions, and the *Nei Jing* has a great deal to say about this topic (Chace and Bensky 2014b). It is also a crucial prerequisite for listening to

the qi effectively. The *Gui Gu Zi* (The Master of Ghost Vale 鬼谷子, probably Warring States period) a classic treatise on the art of persuasion, provides a complementary perspective on the attributes necessary for accurately assessing a given situation.<sup>i</sup> “The Heart-mind desires to be calm and tranquil, and deliberations desire to be profound and far reaching. If the mind is calm and tranquil, then extraordinary insight flourishes (心欲安靜慮欲深遠. 心安靜則神明榮)”<sup>j</sup>

Yet, even within this quiescence, the optimal conditions for listening are not only cognitive. Like Zhuangzi we must listen with our entire being in a particular way. The Ghost Vale Master counsels, “by means of effortless activity seek to make calm the five viscera, harmonise and open the six receptacles. When the essence, spirit, *hun* and *po* are secure, stable, and unshaking one may inwardly reflect on what one has heard (無為而求安靜五臟, 和通六腑. 精神魂魄, 固守不動乃能內視反聽.)”<sup>k</sup>

The Ghost Vale Master evidently considered this to be an especially potent prescription for efficacious action. “The ancients who were adept at reflecting upon what they had heard were even able to incite ghosts and spirits and to learn their feelings (古善反聽者乃變鬼神以得其情)”<sup>l</sup>

### The quality of our attention

Although some degree of quiescence is an acknowledged prerequisite for effective acupuncture, the sort of quiescence required for this endeavor is nevertheless awake and engaged. The word *yi* 意 is often translated as intention. Some would say that acupuncture is effective by virtue of our intention. A complementary and arguably more fundamental meaning of *yi* is that it is simply our capacity for attention (Chace

i. The dating of the *Gui Gu Zi* is somewhat contentious. It may have been composed as late as the later Han, 25-220 CE. For a discussion of the *Gui Gu Zi*'s dating and transmission see Borschat, 1985: 19-39

j. The words *shen ming* 神明 have a variety of meanings across the scope of early Chinese literature. For that matter, they are defined in *Gui Gu Zi* in a variety of ways. Here, it seems to mean something akin to miraculous insight. For instance, Michael Broschat translates this line as when the “Heart is calm and tranquil ingenious plans emerge.” Broschat, 1985:196. Tao, 1989:57

k. Tao, 1989: 58.

l. Tao, 1989: 10.

and Bensky 2014b). In terms of acupuncture, *yi* is our capacity to remain present, non-judgmental and receptive to the totality of the therapeutic encounter. *Yi* is an essential ingredient in being the right way in evaluating the propensity of the moment. Optimally, our attention should be unified with the natural development of the moment in a manner that allows us to participate in a spontaneous restoration of harmony.

Again providing a complementary perspective, *Gui Gu Zi* links *yi* as “attention/intention” with *zhi* 志 will, or perhaps more accurately one’s capacity for focus and resolute action. A calm and tranquil Heart-mind is not an end in itself, it produces a unified Heart-mind and “for this reason if the Heart-mind qi is unified, then desires are not aroused. When desires are not aroused then resolution-will and attention-intention are not debilitated. When resolution-will and attention-intention is not debilitated then deliberation and reason are intelligible (故心氣一，則欲不惺。欲不惺，則志意不衰。志意不衰，則思理達矣).”<sup>m</sup>

In unifying our Heart-mind we become more focused. This passage also introduces a recurring theme in *Gui Gu Zi*: the importance of setting aside one’s own desires, preconceptions and agendas.

### Filtering out filters

Our often unconscious assumptions and judgments that influence our perceptions have the potential to profoundly obscure our view of propensity. We can never eliminate all of our perceptual filters, but the more of them that we can identify and consciously set aside, the more accurate our appreciation of a patient’s propensity will be. The less we judge our patients through the haze of our own likes and dislikes, the more likely it will be that their qi will talk to us (Chace 2003).

This aspect of propensity is as significant as the colour and shape of a patient’s tongue.

In making the best use of the resources available to us and assisting in their natural development we achieve the most favourable results possible. Our contribution, whatever it may be, will appear effortless, obvious. As *Gui Gu Zi* observes. “Those who would persuade, do so unnoticed (捷者，捷所謀

也).”<sup>n</sup> Like those great generals mentioned above, and like a genuine master of the martial arts, the victory will appear as a simple result of the natural evolution of things, and will come without a visible conflict. The victory becomes not so much a triumph of one antagonist over another as a newly discovered harmony between them.

### *Shi* as *sho*

As an inherently fluid and ever-evolving phenomena, propensity is not a fixed state to be assessed at the beginning and poured like concrete into the foundation of our treatment strategy.<sup>o</sup> If only because we have influenced a situation with some intervention of our own, we must continually attend to the unfolding of these changes. An appreciation of the fluidity of propensity bears directly on our understanding of the role of *sho* (證 chin. *zheng*) through the course of an acupuncture treatment.

In Japanese styles of meridian therapy, *sho* is often described as a patient’s background constitutional pattern or type, and it is typically framed in the context of the five phases.<sup>p</sup> The treatment of *sho* is the basis of all therapeutic interventions. It is not uncommon, however, for a patient’s *sho* to vary somewhat from treatment to treatment, and for the *sho* to change completely when patients are acutely ill. Clearly, *sho* is not a fixed entity.

We find it helpful to approach *sho* from a more flexible perspective. In meridian therapy the determination of *sho* is one of the most tangible expressions of our assessment of propensity. Although it is in many ways only the first and grossest step in defining a patient’s overall disposition, it shades every aspect of our understanding.

*Sho* is a reflection of the ground, the lay of the energetic land that defines the context in which we will work. It is essential to understand this terrain in order to know where to jump in. The concept of *sho* helps to situate us in the right place within the overall milieu of the qi. By selecting the optimal starting point we define a path that achieves the most effective result with

n. Tao, 1989: 14.

o. Jullien, 1995: 33.

p. For a more detailed discussion of *sho*, see Fukushima, 1991: 134-143.

m Tao, 1989: 56.

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the least effort. In less militaristic terms, *sho* is simply the optimal place to begin our conversation with our patient's qi. We don't open a conversation with a topic that we know our conversation partner has no interest in. We start with something we are reasonably confident that she can relate to. By the same token, we don't tend to begin with topics that are too personal, or close to home. That is not to say one could not begin a conversation on an entirely random topic and ultimately arrive at a meaningful exchange. It just takes more effort.

In accurately assessing the *sho* and beginning our conversation there, we tip the entire situation in our favour, which in this case means the improved health of the patient. The more precisely we can accomplish this, the less effort it will ultimately take to achieve our goals.

Nevertheless, we must remain open to the possibility that in some cases the optimal place to begin our conversation with the qi is not with the *sho* at all. Our optimal point of engagement may well be a more “peripheral manifestation”. The propensity of a situation may dictate that we begin with the patient's immediate symptomatic presentation. For instance, it may be more effective to address a patient's acute back pain before even considering their *sho*.

Regardless of whether or not we begin with *sho*, a first step in determining the disposition of a situation is to assess one's resources. *Gui Gu Zi* counsels “For this reason, first know yourself. If you know yourself then you can know other people (故知之始己, 自知而後知人).”<sup>q</sup>

Taking this line of reasoning a step further, Sunzi asserts that we if we “know the other [person] and know yourself and in one hundred battles you will not be defeated 知彼知己者百戰不殆.”<sup>r</sup> In a very real sense, this is what *sho* is all about, the consolidation of both our own and our patient's resources.

However we define it, the relevance of a *sho* is something that should continue to both inform and be informed by the energetic conversation between patient and practitioner beyond its assessment and treatment in the initial stages of therapy. The information we receive when we've moved on to “branch” therapies should continue to shape our

understanding of our patient's disposition including their *sho*. If our understanding of their circumstance is correct then the patient's signs should continue to improve; their pulse, abdomen, tongue, lustre, and the overall quality of their qi. Perhaps this patient has appeared to respond adequately to a root treatment framed within one *sho* but later one finds oneself working in a manner more consistent with another *sho*. Taking this a step further, we must consider the quality or manner of those changes. How does this help to clarify for us what we have done and what needs to be done next?

### Root or branch?

The principles of branch and root (*biao ben* 標本) aspects of therapy are deeply embedded in many if not most styles of acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. It cannot, however, be employed too rigidly and there are many times when it is a less than useful concept. One way to understand the root is as a fundamental and relatively undifferentiated aspect of a situation. The branch will be that situation's most evident manifestation. Both aspects must be attended to in their proper time but they are not fundamentally separate.

Consider an attacker armed with a spear. We might identify the attacker as the root of the problem and the spear as the branch. Clearly, we must attend to the attacker while not ignoring the immediate threat posed by the spear he is wielding.<sup>s</sup> It is true that in itself the spear is useless without the attacker but that does not make it any less potentially lethal. The immediacy of this situation makes distinctions between root and branch rather abstract. The propensity of the moment is what determines whether we deflect the spear tip or exploit a weakness and attack the assailant directly.

Any preconceptions we have regarding the primacy of either root or branch influences will surely be counterproductive. Root and branch are best understood as aspects of the same, complex reality. Our orientation to propensity helps us determine which aspect to attend to. In this regard, *sho* is more

q. Tao, 1989: 7.

r. Sunzi, 1988: 722.

s. It also bears mentioning that the attacker may also be concealing a gun, a single root to expressing itself in multiple branches.

productively appreciated not as the “root” but as part of the overall propensity of a situation. Once the concept of *sho* is de-coupled from the premise that we are treating the “root” of the problem, the distinctions between branch and root strategies blur to the point of irrelevance. In very real terms, the “root/*sho* is simply whatever is necessary to initiate an optimally efficient therapeutic exchange. The “branch” is a natural and spontaneous expression of this particular line of conversation.

### Tonification as *tong*

A central premise of military theory is that if our own forces are strong enough, then there is nowhere for the opponent to attack and we need never enter into actual conflict. That is at least one reason why the 69th Difficulty of the *Nan Jing* tells us to tonify before we attempt to attack or drain. This principle may partially explain how some practitioners can be so effective though they rarely use anything but a tonification technique. At least in principle, they have so completely consolidated a patient’s resources that there is little left to do. The engagement is won before it is ever started.

We propose a broader perspective on what it actually means to tonify, specifically with regard to the organisation of qi. Adequate resources most certainly need to be allocated, yet they must also be arrayed coherently and in precisely the right way. Approached in this way, tonification implies more than filling up or replenishing (*shi* 實) a lack or emptiness (*xu* 虛). It is not sufficient to have a strong regiment of forces billeted in the barracks. If they are to act effectively, those forces must have the capacity to move freely (*tong* 通) to and from wherever they are needed, and there must be open communication (also *tong* 通) between them. In many ways, this function of openness and communication is a fundamental, if not the primary goal of acupuncture practice (Chace and Bensky 2016). From this perspective, in attending to propensity we are listening less for the optimal place and moment to tonify or drain, and more for the optimal place and moment to facilitate openness and communication.

### Enemies into allies

The skillful engagement of propensity does not seek to neutralise a disposition so much

as to find some way to make it work to our advantage. Such a perspective encourages us to think more flexibly and creatively, softening some of the hard methodological lines drawn in much of the medical literature. We begin to see how we might apply axioms such as “if it is full, drain it,” “if it is empty, make it replete,” and “if it is cold, warm it,” in a less binary manner. Far from dulling the discriminatory faculties, propensity ultimately hones our critical thinking by making us work from multiple perspectives in coherent ways.

Such a sensibility colours our notions of *seki* (*zheng* qi, 正氣, vital qi) and *jaki* (*xie* qi, 邪氣, evil qi). It is certainly preferable to recruit the opposition into our own camp. In Chapter 4 of his treatise, Sunzi counsels: “In all cases, the general, the best way to proceed in war is to keep the [opposing] country intact 凡用兵之法全國為上.”<sup>t</sup> Abraham Lincoln’s famous adage that “I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends” is skillful and compassionate refinement of this principle.<sup>u</sup> It can be limiting to invariably approach *jaki* as something to be dissipated rather than a potential resource that has yet to be tapped. When we treat exogenous pathogenic factors using acupuncture, are we really expelling them or are we creating the conditions for their resolution? Ikeda Masakazu’s distinction between draining (*xie* 瀉) and shunting (*xie* 寫) pathogenic factors is a simple expression of a broader perspective on tonification and drainage (Ikeda 2005: xli).

### Shi as attunement with heaven

Another way of engaging propensity in the practice of medicine is to approach it as a measure of one’s attunement with heaven or the macrocosm. To what degree is a situation or set of relations “in communication with heaven (*tong tian* 通天)?” Chapter 3 of *Su Wen* presents this as a fundamental principle of health.

*The Yellow Emperor said: Now, since ancient times, that which communicates with heaven is the basis of life and is rooted in yin and yang. Between heaven and within the six directions, all the qi within the nine prefectures, the nine apertures [of the body],*

t. Wei Rulin, 1988: 92.

u. [www.totalgettysburg.com/quotes-from-abraham-lincoln.html](http://www.totalgettysburg.com/quotes-from-abraham-lincoln.html), accessed 11-19-15.

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If we need to exert a very strong action, we may have failed to properly appreciate and engage the propensity of the situation. A vigorous bone shattering blow is not considered an expression of martial mastery.

*the five viscera, and the 12 articulations, all communicate with heavenly qi.*

黃帝曰，夫自古通天者，生之本，本于陰陽，天地之間，六合之內其氣，九州九竅五臟十二節，皆通乎天氣。<sup>y</sup>

The first chapter of *Su Wen* frames this in more general terms.

*The people of high antiquity, those who knew the Way, modeled [their behavior] on yin and yang and they complied with the arts and calculations. Their eating and drinking was moderate. Their rising and resting had regularity. They did not tax themselves with meaningless work. ....[Thus] the qi follows its appropriate course and therefrom results compliance, everything follows one's wishes; in every aspect one achieves what one desires.*

上古之人，其知道者，法於陰陽，和於術數，食飲有節，起居有常，不妄作勞，故能形與神俱，而盡終其天年，度百歲乃去。今時之人不然也，以酒為漿，以妄為常，醉以入房，以欲竭其精，以耗散其真，不知持滿，不時御神，務快其心，逆於生樂，起居無節，故半百而衰也。...氣從以順，各從其欲，皆得所願<sup>w</sup>

A corollary idea running through Chinese philosophy is that true communication of this nature is a kind of resonance (*gan ying* 感應). This idea is germane to a healthy relationship with one's environment and it is also a critical component of military planning. The Ming dynasty anthology *Chu Ke Pai An Jing Qi* (Chu's Brevities to Make One Strike the Table in Surprise 初刻拍案驚，1627), makes this point succinctly. "Don't start a war! If you insist upon an uprising you must await the resonance of heaven. 切勿稱兵！若必欲舉事，須待天應。"<sup>x</sup>

### Resonance from the inside

Sunzi's admonition to calculate an advantage by "listening" presupposes a degree of relational resonance with qi. Our capacity to appreciate the propensity of a given situation is nothing less than our capacity for resonant listening to the totality of the situation. In this our resonance makes us an inseparable part of the equation. Propensity

v. Yang Jiwei, 1984: 20.

w. Yang Jiwei, 1984: 2. Translation from Unschuld 2011:30.

x. Ling, Liu and Miao, 1990: 428.

is as much about our own resources as those of the patient. Yet, here a delicate balance must be struck. Our own resonance with a situation is essential if we hope to come into a meaningful and ongoing conversation with qi, and yet we must impose as few of our own filters and preconceptions on that conversation as possible. We come into resonance not so much by means of our intention but by virtue of our attention and our awareness.

### Call and response

Acupuncturist and osteopathic physician Dan Bensky understands the concept of *gan ying* in the therapeutic process as a kind of call and response feedback loop between patient and practitioner. The patient tells us something about what they need, we respond to that and the patient tells us something more. The treatment is not so much what we do as the larger conversation that we have. The direction that conversation takes is its propensity.<sup>y</sup>

### The spaces between

Strategic writings often speak of the spaces between (*jian* 間), or cracks (*po* 破) in the opponent's defences. These are places where there is some vulnerability, or insufficiency.

The *Gui Gu Zi* counsels us to attend to such interstices. "Those who would dissipate propensity act by awaiting the interstices, and thus the activity of the propensity is divided 散勢者待間而動，動勢分矣."<sup>z</sup> Whether making a rhetorical argument or conversing with the qi we resolve a situation by pushing into or exerting our influence at these critical places and opposition dissolves around it. "In pushing into the interstices to move it, then the propensity is dissolved 推間而行之則勢散."<sup>aa</sup> We prefer to translate *jian* here as interstices to emphasise the point that we need not conceptualise such spaces only as vulnerabilities, but simply as avenues of optimal engagement. This is reminiscent of the Zhuangzi's story of Butcher Ding whose cleaver never dulled because he unerringly found the spaces between the joints of the oxes he butchered.<sup>ab</sup>

y. Personal communication with Dan Bensky 11-21-15.

For more on this perspective see Engagingvitality.com and Engagingvitality-europe.com

z. Tao, 1989: 61.

aa. Tao, 1989: 61.

ab. Guo, 1995: 2-8.



Whether conceived as vulnerabilities or opportunities for strategic engagement, these spaces between are best understood in acupuncture practice as resources that are not optimally allocated or deployed. As such, areas of localised excess are equally vulnerable to our intervention. In martial terms, too many forces situated in the wrong place is no less a tactical blunder than deploying insufficient force where it is needed. This is a common phenomenon in acupuncture practice. The experience of a localised stagnation dissolving around a well-placed needle is a familiar one for many practitioners. When situated properly, no manipulation is necessary. The needle is the wedge, a pivot of stillness around which the tissues can reorganize themselves in a manner more conducive to health. In this we bring the resources of the opposition into the service of our own goals. More aggressive tactics are typically unnecessary.

Even our pushing into these interstitial vulnerabilities need not be extreme. Sometimes a bone-shattering blow is indeed what is called for. But if we need to exert a very strong action, we may have failed to properly appreciate and engage the propensity of the situation. A vigorous bone shattering blow is not considered an expression of martial mastery. In Japanese martial arts, a relatively weak blow of minimal but sufficient force, applied with precise technique to a specific point (jap. *atemi*, 当身) causes disability and even death. In needling, it is often simply a matter of optimally situating our influence in communication with the area of interest.

As always, this knack for effortlessly pushing into the interstices requires a certain way of being on the part of the person doing the pushing. According to the *Gui Gu Zi*, “To look for the interstices, you must first nourish your resolution-will and subdue your intentions 必先養志伏意以視間。”<sup>ac</sup> Once again, we must simultaneously focus our attention while setting our own agendas aside.

### Technique matters

The principle of propensity, and its associated concepts of nascence and the pivotal dynamic, may potentially improve our

clinical efficacy regardless of the techniques we may apply.

Yet, that does not mean that technique is unimportant. On the contrary, technique must be mastered to the point where it comes by itself, as the natural action to be undertaken in a specific moment. It is nearly a reflex, though never completely unconscious. This means that our attention must not become fixed on the mechanics of needling. It must instead remain wide enough to include the entirety of the moment (Chace 2013).

When we drive a car we are directly conscious of the car movements and of our environment, but we had best not fixate on what we are doing with the pedals, or at which angle we should turn the steering wheel to navigate through traffic. Yet we cannot be completely unaware of what our hands and feet are doing.

General strategy begins with an initial tactic and employs flexibility to adapt to new circumstances in real time. An adequate technique is essential. In war troops must be properly trained, and it is important to have a plan, an initial tactic. When driving, one must be properly trained, and it is good to know where we want to go. Yet, having started the car, before we even leave the curb, we begin attending to the environment, ready to adapt our driving to whatever it is we might be presented with.

Armed with a fundamental technical competency and a specific outcome in mind, our main challenge in treatment is in interacting with the environment, in gathering information and synthesising that information within the context of our own resources.

We reach our destination safely and quickly by means of effective communication between ourselves and our environment. The accurate appreciation of our environment, our tactical flexibility and our capacity to adapt without losing our goal demands a certain quality in our self-perception. It requires that we be willing to abandon the goals of clinical infallibility and the premise that protocols will be effective in the vast majority of circumstances.

Most acupuncturists work by applying a fixed course of action based on information gathered from symptoms, pulse, tongue,



### Ante Babic's **Tips for running a successful clinic**

Have you ever noticed how often the statement “I have not done what you said to do” is followed by “And how long is this all going to take, anyway?!”

ac. Here we have translated *yi* 意 in its more familiar sense as “intention” as it would make no sense to cease “attending” to a situation altogether. Tao, 1989:60.

“

The activity of qi has its own pace and rhythms. Our job is to attune ourselves to them.

etc. Their expectation is that stimulating a particular set of points in a certain way and perhaps a certain order will produce an expected result.

Though reassuring in that we no longer have to figure out for ourselves what to do, fixed protocols of all sorts easily impose a certain rigidity (*gang* 剛) in our engagement of the qi. What we are proposing here is that a more supple (*rou* 柔) approach to acupuncture is not only possible but may often be superior.

### Waiting

The propensity of a situation evolves in its own good time. If our engagement really is effortless, then our input cannot be forced. As we all know, the activity of qi has its own pace and rhythms. Our job is to attune ourselves to them. As the treatise on internal cultivation, the *Nei Ye* (內業 Inner Workings, 350-300 BCE) explains

Therefore, as for this qi,  
是故此氣也,  
it cannot be halted by force,  
不可止以力,  
and yet it can be calmed by virtue,  
而可安以德.  
It cannot be stopped called by sound,  
不可呼以聲,  
but it can be met with attention.  
而可迎以意.<sup>ad</sup>

Waiting in a state of openness, with our mind, our whole self softly focused on all that is happening, hearing all while being simultaneously focused on one's concrete activity, is the essence of sound acupuncture practice. As *Ling Shu* chapter one says, “Whether meeting it or following it, by means of one's attention, one harmonises it [the qi] 迎之隨之, 以意和之.” And, as the line concludes, “This is all there is to say with regard to the way of needling 針道畢矣.”<sup>ae</sup>

### An inherent treatment plan

When every step of our treatment strategy is indeed a response to the complex of factors at play in a given moment encompassing patient, practitioner and macrocosm, propensity takes on a life of its own. It will often take us into unfamiliar terrain where

ad. Li Mian, 1990: 106.

ae. Yang Weijie, 1990: 2.

we must make sense of a situation on its own terms, rather than making it conform to whatever conceptual framework we happen to be most comfortable with.

The principle of the self-regulating wisdom of the body is well described in some forms of cranial osteopathy (Becker 2000, Handoll, 2000: 17-35, Sills 2001: 403-9, Ridley 2006: 56-7). When optimally expressed, an “inherent treatment plan” emerges. This is a natural expression of the dynamic call and response process mentioned above. As the therapeutic propensity unfolds, it exhibits an intelligence far more insightful than any theoretical framework we might construct. The job of the physician is simply to follow and facilitate that treatment plan.

In this, our treatments cease to conform to fixed protocols or time-honored principles of what we “should” be doing with the qi. We simply attempt to respond to what the qi actually tells us to do. Orienting to propensity is a step in this direction. Engaging the qi in this way we respond to whatever presents itself using whatever conceptual or instrumental tools are most appropriate at the moment. For instance, we do not so much execute or administer an extraordinary vessels treatment, as an engagement of the extraordinary vessels evolves out of whatever conditions have been created up to that point in the arc of the treatment.

### What's left uncarved

Once we have quietly and patiently nudged that momentum towards health in precisely the right way, moment, and place, then room must be left for it to develop in an organic and well-integrated manner. A certain restraint accompanies the ease of doing more with less effort. Our goal is to do just enough. That inherent treatment plan has just begun to exert its influence and any truly meaningful change will not find its fullest expression until some time in the future. How then do we know where to stop?

A productive way to frame this question is to ask ourselves, when am I getting in the way? When has the momentum we have generated taken on life of its own and no longer requires our assistance? Indeed, excessive fine-tuning beyond what the body can actually accommodate may retard the healing process. Precision is not synonymous

with micromanagement. We may hone the pulse to a razor's edge of perfection, agonising over subtle, possibly imaginary reflections of *jaki* in the yang channels. Yet, that sharpness may easily be blunted with the next cup of coffee, glass of wine, office crisis or traffic jam.

Of course, pulses will begin to harden when we have done too much. Like a tensing against excessive palpatory pressure, we understand this as an expression of the body's incapacity to receive any more input. Because it is systemic, this phenomenon is discernable in a variety of other ways throughout the body and it is prudent to attend to as many of these as possible as it may appear elsewhere prior to presenting in the pulse (Bensky and Chace 2014a). The *Gui Gu Zi* makes precisely this point in the context of initiating a persuasive influence. "Those who would act without seeing the overall presentation, will be thwarted 不見其類, 而為之者, 見逆."<sup>af</sup>

In advising the famous swordsman Munemori Yagu, Zen Master Takuan Sōhō (沢庵 宗彭, 1573–1645) warned against fixing one's attention on the tip of one's sword. One must instead remain attentive to the totality of one's environment (Chace 2013). Takuan's counsel is pertinent for acupuncturists as

af. Tao 1985 Juan 3:15.

well, both throughout the treatment process and specifically with regard to the question of when one has done enough. It is best to maintain a broad gaze in discerning the optimal place to strike. Some improvement in a wide variety of diagnostic parameters is more likely to reflect a significant therapeutic change than a marked improvement in a single parameter. A modest pulse improvement when accompanied by marked improvements in tongue, abdomen, lustre, etc. is a better measure that we have initiated a therapeutic propensity than relying on a perfectly balanced pulse alone.

### Conclusion

Approaching acupuncture through the practice of propensity changes our orientation subtly but meaningfully. Our determination of *sho* becomes more than a theoretical framework for labeling a hypothetical constitutional type and transcends fixed protocols for point selection. Propensity establishes the ground for every interaction that we have with our patients no matter how trivial. Techniques such as *naso*, *muno* and *sanshin* become more than merely adjunctive therapies. In orienting to propensity we become perpetually engaged in an inquiry into how we can most effectively influence a given situation with the least amount of effort.

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