

Extraordinary Vessel Trajectories

Concerning the internal and external paths of the twelve meridians, consensus points to the accuracy of the information in the *Ling Shu* and the *Shisi Jing Fa Hui, Elucidation of the Fourteen Meridians of 1341 AD*. Concerning the extraordinary vessels, there has never been such a precise consensus. Since there have been many interpretations of the earliest explanations of the extraordinary vessels from the *Su Wen*, *Ling Shu* and *Nan Jing*, determining their trajectories is not an easy undertaking. Nonetheless, the main sources for this information must be the earlier classics. As additional sources, we have a preference for Wang Shu He's *Commentary on the Nan Jing* and Li Shi Zhen's text on the eight extraordinary vessels, the *Qi Jing Ba Mai Kao*. We have also used the *Lei Jing*, or *Classic of Categories*. The modern Chinese text, *Nei Jing Jie Po Sheng Li Xue, Anatomy and Physiology of the Su Wen*, has a good compilation of the major sources and commentaries.

It is important to remember that all these great texts are the written record of the experience and observation of their authors. Thus, in addition to the problems of translating a character language, where there is no absolute certainty that the modern meaning of a character is indeed its ancient meaning, there are the problems inherent in any language. Describing the energetic pathways of the human body in words, or in two dimensional drawings, is no simple task. The mental exercise required to reduce a three dimensional form to words or artistic representation is subject to considerable uncertainty. Is a line on the side of the face behind the lips on the front of the face, or is it at the front of the side? Though a practitioner or author may easily recognize or locate the indications of a pathway, often he cannot precisely describe this knowledge in a chart or expression.

This is further complicated by the pathway or meridian concept itself. When we write or teach, we find the idea of a channel to be useful. Yet, are there really channels? Are we discussing some physical analog of the meridian concept, if so, is this analog an actual, linear path that contains the energy flow as an aqueduct contains water? Since what we expect to "flow in the meridians" is an energy, an extremely subtle energy, such a physical conduit is unlikely. Further, physical channels have not been found. What has been found is different electrical properties in areas that correspond to the Oriental medical concepts of points and meridians? If we are to discuss the flow of energy and ascribe lateral and vertical direction to it,

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to allocate points along its path and posit the results of stimulating those points, we need to propose some idea of how this energy moves.

We begin with the presumption that when we are discussing meridians we are discussing gradients. Further, these gradients operate within fields, areas of potential influence. Qi, while it may be much more than electricity, is similar to electricity in that it can be described as moving from an area of greater or lesser potential to an area of a complementary and opposite potential. This is simply another yin-yang pair. Thus, meridians may be thought of as the path of least resistance between gradients. Depending on the source and polarity, energy passes from yin to yang, yang to yin, and the meridian is the resulting course. The meridian description as a line or channel is a practical means of describing and organizing the phenomena by which we observe the transference of this energy.

This is particularly true of the extraordinary vessels. Often they are described as seas or oceans, clearly implying that the energy is at least more broadly channeled. Their intimate connection to the tai yi and their strong relationship to biorhythmic influences also suggest fields and gradients more strongly than absolute channels. The classical disagreements among commentators who have described the extraordinary vessels should not be taken as an issue of who is right or wrong. First, some allowance must be made for the linguistic problem of reporting a phenomenon that was largely inferred, rather than anatomically traced. Second, we must not allow the words of our organizing concept, “meridian,” “channel,” or “vessel,” to misrepresent the phenomena by implying too strongly a physically fixed or absolute line. The line we use to draw the picture is not the meridian. In this sense, “vessel,” which implies a larger, less linear container, is a better choice of word. Finally, we must also consider that these vessels are two dimensional only when we describe them in words or drawings. In operation, they are three dimensional and may be wider or thinner at various places along their trajectories.

In response to local gradients, variations in potential, a meridian could be less a channel and more an area. Thus, these energetic seas and oceans may have their own topography, now a stream, now a river and later perhaps a broad sea. It is useful to remember the concept of a field when thinking of meridians. As noted earlier, this idea from energetic physics is three dimensional and represents an area of kinetic or potential energy. While fields are often found in relation to material forms and structures, they are entirely energetic.

They are shaped by the energetic potentials that are their source and are able to influence other fields. Thus, the idea of a field satisfies all the criteria of a meridian in classical medical thought and provides the conceptual tools necessary to consider energy flow without the limits inherent in the word “channel.” If we keep in mind the idea of a field when discussing meridian trajectories, we are able to understand that frequently all the variant opinions regarding a meridian path may be no more than different, partial descriptions of the same phenomenon.

Ren Mai

The *Su Wen* tells us this about the ren mai, or “conception vessel,” as it is known in English:

The *ren mai* starts below *zhongji* {CV-3}. It then comes up from the edge of the hair {the superior edge of the pubic hairs on the midline}, circles *along* the lining of the abdomen *and* comes up to guanyuan {CV-4}. Then it passes up to the throat, circles *around* the chin, then around the face, and enters the eyes. ²

There are a variety of ideas concerning the origin of the ren mai. The *Ling Shu* tells us that it originates from the uterus;³ at least, this is how most readers understand the *Lei Jing* interpretation of the expression, “The chong mai and ren mai start at the covering of the small abdomen.”⁴ Other interpreters feel that this vessel begins above GV-1.⁵ The writer of the *Tai Su* says, “Below the zhongji, this is the inside of the womb.”⁶ Li Shi Zhen, who described the most detailed trajectory for the vessel, felt that “below zhongji” was too vague, and that the ren mai began at CV-1,⁷ and that it became the ocean or controller of the yin meridians:⁸

{It occurs} below *zhongji* (inside the small abdomen) which is the dividing *place* of huiyin {CV-I}. It rises up and comes to the surface of the abdomen *at qugu* {CV-2}, up the edge of the hair to *zhongji*, rising *superficially through the lining of the* abdomen, circling *outwards* to the spleen, kidney and liver meridians. Then to guanyuan; then to *shimen* {CV-5}. *Shimen* is dantian, one more name for it is ming men. It is *two* divisions below the umbilicus and is a mu point of the triple

*warmer. Then up to qihai (CV-6); to yinjiao { CV-7}, meeting with the gallbladder meridian and the **chong mai**, which is also the entrance of the bladder and a **mu** point of the triple warmer. Then it rises up to shenque { CV-8}, to **hufu** to xiawan { CV-10}, where it meets the spleen meridian; then up to jianli, to **zhongwan** { CV-12}, meeting the lung, triple warmer and stomach meridians; then to shangwan { CV-13}, up through the points to tiantu { CV-22) and **lianquan** { CV-23}, where it meets the yin **wei mai**. Then it travels up the chin to **chengjiang** { CV-24}, meeting with the **du mai**, large intestine and stomach meridians; then it circles around the Zips on the inside of the mouth, divides and passes up to **chengqi** { ST-I } where it ends.⁹*

The *Nan Jing* trajectory description, which is based on an expansion of ideas from Chapter 60 of the *Su Wen*, varies slightly from Li Shi Zhen's description. Instead of dividing around the inside of the mouth, as is proposed by Li Shi Zhen, the *Nan Jing* states that the **ren mai** comes up the throat and chin, then splits and rises to enter the eyes. From here it branches to circulate through the tongue.¹⁰

Another important variation of the trajectory comes from the *Ling Shu*:

The tail *shadow* {dividing *luo* meridian} of the **ren mai** goes to pigeon tail { CV-I 5} and from there goes into the abdomen. . . For excess conditions, the abdominal shin will be painful; for deficient conditions, there will be itching.¹¹

Ren Mai Points		
Trajectory	Point	Source
Starts	CV-1	<i>Qi Jing Ba Mai Kao</i>
	ST-30	Wang Shu He
Passes through	CV-1 to CV-24	Most sources
Ends	ST-1	<i>Qi Jing Ba Mai Kao</i>
Luo point	cv-15	<i>Ling Shu</i>

There are a some important questions regarding the association of the **ren mai** with ST-30. These are discussed in the next section.

Ren Mai Trajectory

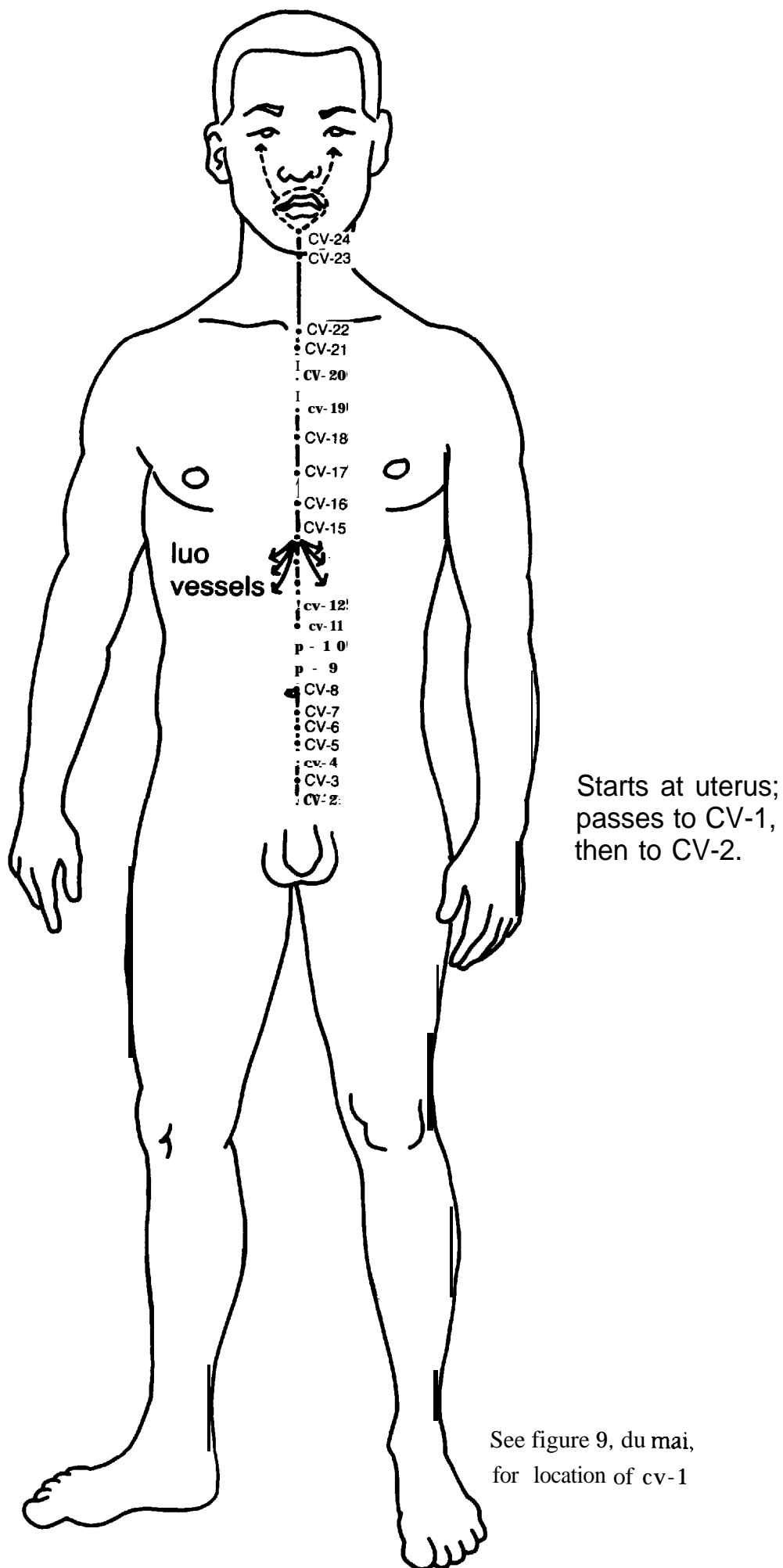


Figure 7

The Chong Mai

We read in the Su Wen:

The *chong mai* begins at *qichong* {ST-SO}, comes up, on, or close to the kidney meridian on either side of the umbilicus, reaches to and goes into the chest, then disperses. ¹²

Different interpretations and alternate trajectories exist. The *Ling Shu* defines the *chong mai* and details a trajectory:

The *chong mai* is the ocean of the five *yin organs and six yang organs, the ocean of the twelve* meridians, *and passes* blood to the five yin and six yang *organs. It rises up the* neck and chin, moistens *each of the yang* { meridians} *and* moistens *each of* the *jing*. *Then a branch passes down, this is the big luo of shao yin, and comes out at qichong* (ST-30). A branch goes down inside the thigh, entering behind the knee, going down through the *liver* bone of the *leg*, to the *internal malleolus*. Then it separates. One branch *runs alongside the* kidney meridian, moistening *the three* yin. The other branch comes to *the upper surface of* the foot and then goes *down* into the foot between the *first* and second *toes*. ¹³

It is unclear whether “the big luo of shao yin” is related to the heart or the kidney meridian, a factor which will feature in following discussions. The author of the *Lei Jing* comments that the “three yin” moistened by the *chong mai* are the three yin meridians of the leg. ¹⁴

The *Ling Shu* presents a similar but abbreviated description:

The *chong mai* is the ocean of the *twelve* meridians and the big *luo* of the shao yin. *It comes from below* the kidneys *and rises to the surface at ST-30*; then *passes down* inside the thigh to behind the knee, down inside the tibia to behind the internal *malleolus*, *where* it divides. One branch goes down the kidney meridian, the other to the upper *surface of the foot and down* between the *first* and second toes, keeping the *lower leg warm*. ¹⁵

There is another passage from the *Ling Shu* concerning the trajectory, of the *chong mai*, which is perhaps more difficult to understand because of the one-sided pathway description:

The *chong mai* and *ren mai* originate from the inside of the uterus, a branch rises up in front of the spine making the “ocean of the twelve meridians.” The branch that floats up to the surface of the abdomen only rises up the right side and then reunites {with the *ren mai*} at the throat; then it separates and circles around the Zips.¹⁶

Finally, in the “Four Ocean” chapter of the *Ling Shu*, the *chong mai* is again described as the “ocean of the twelve meridians” and the “ocean of blood.” Upper and lower “shu” or transportation points are also described. These could be either treatment or pathway points, the passage is not totally clear:

The *chong mai* is the ocean of the twelve meridians, its upper {transportation} shu point is *dashu* {BL-11}, and its lower shu points are *shangjuxu* {ST-37} and *tiaohou* {ST-38}...

{In a condition of} excess blood, the body feels full; {in a condition of} deficient blood, the body feels small.¹⁷

These passages from the *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu* have been accepted in large part; however, they have been interpreted and further elaborated in a variety of ways, Some commentators disagree with others. The *Nan Jing* says only that:

The *chong mai* starts at *qijie* [氣街], {which many see as ST-30) and rises parallel to the stomach meridian, surrounds the umbilicus, then goes inside the chest to disperse.¹⁸

This terse statement by the *Nan Jing* is expanded slightly by Wang Shu He in his Commentary on the *Nan Jing*:

The *du mai*, *ren mai* and *chong mai* start at *qijie*. This point is the three branching point of the source.¹⁹

He also comments, “Chong mai is the general of the twelve meridians.”²⁰ This indicates that he thought of the *chong mai* as governing