Veterinary Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine: Facts and Fallacies

Today’s interest in a diverse group of scientifically unproven therapies, collectively referred to as alternative or complementary medicine, has brought increased attention to culturally based therapeutic practices, including acupuncture and other aspects of traditional Chinese medicine. Mystic and ancient healing practices are worthy of study, both for their historical interest and because they may ultimately yield some useful therapies.

Appeals for the use of these therapies are frequently based on the belief that they have been tested over time; however, veterinarians looking to make informed recommendations about them should examine the historical record. Only by accurate reference to source material can those who are interested in acupuncture, for example, determine whether its concepts are applicable in a meaningful way to modern veterinary practice. Current veterinary literature contains much misinformation regarding the nature of both modern and ancient Chinese medical practices. This column highlights some of these areas of misinformation in hopes of promoting good scholarship and helping veterinarians make informed choices.

**Historical Fallacies**

**The Earliest Written Reference**

According to some veterinary sources, a text purportedly called Bai Le’s *Canon of Veterinary Medicine* was one of the first veterinary texts. It is claimed to date back to approximately 650 BC and was based primarily on acupuncture. However, no other information is available. Bai Le (or Bo Le; also known as Sun Yang) is described in fanciful stories from the second century BC (in the *Huainan zi*, [“The Philosopher Huainan”]) as a historical figure who lived in the seventh century BC. Bai Le is also mentioned in another early philosophic text, the *Zhuang zi*, attributed to a fourth century BC philosopher but actually dating from perhaps 700 years later. Bai Le is said to have been knowledgeable in the “cure of horses,” but no text known to have been written by him appears to exist; furthermore, those texts associated with his name first appear in the historical record more than 1000 years after his death.

A now lost work, the *Bai Le zhima* (Canon on Treating the Various Illnesses of Horses) is one of several veterinary medical texts listed in the bibliographic section of the *Suishu, The Official History of the Sui Dynasty (AD 581 to 618)*. This is the oldest known title referring to Bai Le as an author, but the title alone provides no information as to the therapeutic methods presented. Nothing in the title links the book to acupuncture.

It is not until almost half a millennium later that any clear association is made between Bai Le and “needling.” The *Simu anji ji* (Collection of Herdman’s Ways for Pacifying Horses), an early veterinary text that dates to the Southern Song period (1125 to 1278) in its present form, is the first to cite a text entitled *Bai Le zhen jing* (Canon of Needling). How-ever, the term *needling* as used at that time encompassed surgery, bleeding, and cauterization and apparently did not include the manipulation of Qi by fine-needle insertion (the definition of acupuncture usually used by...
historians of Chinese medicine). Thus there is no reason to assume that the Bai Le zhen jing is an acupuncture text based solely on an ambiguous reference to "needling" in the title.

**Equine Arrowhead Acupuncture**

Veterinary sources note that a Tang (T’ang) Dynasty (618 to 906 AD) sculpture from the tomb of Emperor Taizong (T’ai-tsung) is widely purported to be the first illustrated use of acupuncture in horses and that a Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) rock carving depicts soldiers using arrows to perform acupuncture on their horses to stimulate them for battle. The rock carving in question is on display in the Chinese Rotunda at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Figure 1). The portraits of Taizong’s six favorite horses, which were ridden in his battles to secure the empire’s borders, are well known in Chinese history and literature. Each horse is identified by the position of its arrow wound. The pictured line drawing shows General Qiu Xinggong, who had given up his unwounded horse to the Emperor, pulling an arrow from the chest of the Emperor’s wounded charger. The relief thus has nothing to do with acupuncture.

**Ancient Acupuncture Drawings**

Current acupuncture texts contain numerous reproductions of animal charts from traditional Chinese sources identifying purported “acupuncture” points. A closer examination of these drawings leads to other conclusions. For example, a chart from the famous Ming dynasty (1368 to 1644) manual of horse medicine, the Yuan Heng liaoma ji (Yuan and Heng’s Collection for Treating Horses), has been claimed to show lateral acupuncture points. However, the accompanying text indicates that such “points” are, in fact, areas where feces accumulate and cause colic. A subsequent illustration in the same text even shows an arm inserted rectally in an effort to remove the impactions. Illustrations elsewhere in
the text show points associated with cauterization, bleeding, physiognomy assessments, and divination using hair whorls. What is entirely lacking in the text accompanying these drawings of equine “points” are the other constructs historians generally associate with the practice of acupuncture.

**Ancient Elephant Acupuncture**

Claims that acupuncture was practiced on elephants in India and/or Sri Lanka as early as 5000 BC appear to stem from a 1979 article purporting that an estimated 3000-year-old treatise on veterinary acupuncture (specifically dealing with Indian elephants) had recently been found in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Although Indian and Sri Lankan mahouts (i.e., elephant keepers) have always controlled elephants by touching traditional points (called nila), nothing in the literature suggests that those points have ever been associated with acupuncture or any other therapeutic modality. The art of writing in Sri Lanka can be traced to approximately the third century BC, and the date of authorship of known Sri Lankan literary works cannot be assigned to a period before the fourth century AD. The earliest Indian treatise on elephants, the Gaja Sastra/Gajayurveda Samhita, which dates to between 300 BC and 300 AD, does not mention acupuncture.

**Hyeza and the Nihon Shoki**

Another claim for the antiquity of veterinary acupuncture indicates that the Buddhist monk Hyeza taught veterinary acupuncture in Japan in 595 AD. The story of Hyeza is recorded in the Japanese mytho-chronicle known as the Nihon shoki, written in the late seventh or early eighth century AD; this is the only likely source from which such an account might have been derived. However, acupuncture is not mentioned in the Nihon Shoki.

**Contemporary Fallacies**

**Modern Traditional Chinese Medicine Is Not Traditional**

A basic misconception is that Chinese medicine, as currently practiced in the West, reflects the type of medicine most commonly practiced in China, and furthermore, that medicine practiced in China truly reflects age-old customs. This is not true. In fact, the Chinese medicine practiced in the 10th century differed from that practiced in the first century, and both differ from the Chinese medi-
In turn, Chinese medicine being practiced in the United States and Europe today is not the same as the healing systems being practiced in East Asia. Furthermore, the systems being practiced in any locale are very much removed from the practice of Chinese medicine before the 20th century. According to Paul Unschuld (a leading authority of the Institut für die Geschichte der Medizin of the University of Munich), Chinese medicine as practiced in the West today contains only minimal traces of the ideas and practices extracted from an immense variety of Chinese medical thoughts and is substantially augmented with modern elements of Western rationality. Chinese medicine, in the sense of a homogeneous system of ideas and therapeutic practices, did not exist before the mid-20th century and was created as such in the People’s Republic of China to meet particular needs of the times (principally, a lack of Western-trained doctors).

**East versus West**

The notion that a vast gulf has always existed between traditional Chinese and Western medical practices is completely without foundation. The theoretic bases for traditional Chinese medical practices are very much like those expounded by contemporary European physicians, as are the suggestions of many of the appropriate therapeutic responses. Concepts of Chinese Qi mirror those of Greek *pneuma*, and both travel in “vessels.” Practitioners and theorists of traditional Chinese medicine have never construed it as being irrevocably at odds with Western medicine. Over the past approximately 100 years, Chinese physicians and scientists have readily incorporated Western medicine into their medical practices and made important contributions to Western medicine. Chinese medical practices that stand up to scientific scrutiny are likely to be assimilated into mainstream medicine. It is only in modern times that Chinese and Western practices have been brought into opposition. This occurred principally because as Western medicine evolved from folk- to science-based medicine, it was forced to discard the philosophic, theoretic, and even anatomic underpinnings of Chinese medicine, which, rather than allowing progression “from a reasonable, although incomplete, knowledge of the body to a more detailed one by systematic dissection,” went “the opposite direction, under the sway of the cosmologists, to a less accurate picture.”

**Acupuncture’s Place in Traditional Chinese Medicine**

Contrary to what appears to be popular belief, acupuncture is not and never was the primary therapeutic method used by the Chinese. In-
stead, two main and distinct traditions of medical literature can be noted in China. One, the acupuncture tradition, is based on concepts of systematic correspondence, whereby the ancient Chinese intellectual elite attempted to reduce world phenomena to a limited number of causes and effects. This systematic way of thinking made it possible for the prescientific Chinese to try to understand—and influence—natural processes. This system is very similar to Greek ideas expressed by Hippocrates and others that form the foundations of Western medical traditions.

Conversely, Chinese pharmaceutical practices (China’s other major medical tradition) did not rely on such constructs as a significant degree because the theories of systematic correspondence are not well suited for herbal medicine. The Chinese pharmaceutical literature was largely based on botanical remedies, with fewer mineral and a small minority of drugs of animal origin. As is the case today in both Chinese and Western botanical medicine, the prescriptions for these remedies were simply based on recognition of a medical problem and the subsequent selection of the desired therapeutic substance to respond to it. Such a rationale is easily recognizable to any medical practitioner, although historical practices were based on treating symptoms simply because the underlying pathobiology of disease was unrecognized in ancient China. (Certain empiric connections were made; e.g., the link between bad water and disease.) Herbal medicine—not acupuncture and its associated theories—is by far the major tradition of Chinese medicine.

**Chinese Use of Acupuncture**

The history of acupuncture is hardly one of general acceptance. Although various theories for its use appear relatively early in the Chinese medical literature, for unknown reasons, acupuncture lost much of its appeal by the middle of the second millennium. By 1757, the loss of acupuncture tradition was lamented and the fact was noted that the acupuncture points, channels, and practices in use at the time were very different from those described in ancient texts. Eventually, the Chinese and other Eastern societies took steps to eliminate the practice altogether. In an effort to modernize medicine, the Chinese government first attempted to ban acupuncture in 1822; the Japanese officially prohibited the practice in 1876. By 1911, acupuncture was no longer a subject for examination in the Chinese Imperial Medical Academy.

Today, science-based medicine has largely supplanted traditional practices in China, and recent estimates are that only about 15% to 20% of Chinese practitioners currently follow traditional therapies. It is curious that interest in Chinese medicine is rising in the West and waning in the East and that all aspects of traditional acupuncture theory have been deleted from current Chinese textbooks.

**Conclusions**

The medical historian Epler Jr. has observed that acupuncture is reportedly over 2000 years old and that contemporary authors continue to cite ancient texts when describing its theoretic foundations. However, when approached as historical documents rather than as sourcebooks that can be continually reinterpreted for medical practitioners, these ancient texts indicate vast differences between medical literature when described as historical documents and the present form of veterinary acupuncture. What is now known as veterinary acupuncture is thus the result of a long development and bears little resemblance to its ancestral counterpart. Acupuncture and other traditional Chinese medicine practices may or may not be effective therapeutic modalities. Although an appeal to tradition is not a legitimate basis for determining therapeutic efficacy, such traditions should not be rejected without critical evaluation. Rather, such treatment methods have been and should be evaluated using conventional scientific methodology. However, at least in the case of acupuncture in human medicine, clear evidence of efficacy has largely failed to materialize in 30 years of scientific investigation. That said, whatever the clinical efficacy of such practices in veterinary medicine may be, erroneous appeals to nonexistent traditions or to a history that never existed mostly serves to cast doubt on their legitimacy.

**References**


