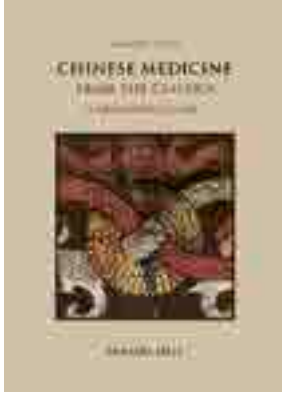


# Chinese Medicine From The Classics: A Beginner's Guide

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### REVIEW

**In this superlative study, Sandra Hill - whose knowledge of classical Chinese language and thought will already be familiar to readers of her regular contributions to Acu. - has managed to create a guide to the basic concepts of Chinese medicine that is at once accessible, scholastically rigorous, and rich in unexpected insights. As such, the book works both as a singular examination of the classical roots of Chinese medicine that will appeal to existing practitioners, and as a general purpose introduction for new initiates.**

This work also serves as a profound rebuttal to those who would seek to divorce modern 'medical acupuncture' from its roots in Chinese culture and philosophy. As Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée says in her foreword, 'Chinese medicine can be used and practiced by non-Chinese people, and it can continue to evolve throughout the world ... [but to build a firm foundation for this] a true understanding of its roots, of its vision of life, health, disorder and disease is absolutely necessary.'

The benefits of learning the basics through a study of the classical sources become immediately apparent: difficulties are resolved, illusions dispersed, familiar confusions rendered clear. When one's understanding of the concept of qi, say, begins from its contextual position within Daoist cosmology, many of the western translational and metaphysical problems simply drop away. Qi need no longer be 'energy', 'functionality' or 'informational

patterning'; it is simply the movement generated through the interactions of heaven and earth, yin and yang; 'a kind of intermediary between form and formlessness'.

Similarly, the author's close attention to the ideographic etymology of Chinese characters allows us to trace the subtle evolution of concepts, rather than settle for bastardised translations shorn of contextual resonance. Learning that the classical meaning of the character zong means 'a kind of clan gathering of the ancestors', for example, gives instant clarity to its variant interpretations as 'ancestral', 'central' or 'gathering' qi. Moreover, that its various qualities can all be described with a single character has practical, not merely conceptual implications - it suggests a functional connection between the involvement of ancestral 'source qi', its 'gathering' together with qi from food and air, and their 'gathering' in the central sea of qi in the chest. It suggests, in short, that the conceptual unity of classical Chinese thought might correlate with a genuine unity in the wider world.

To take another example, we might compare the kind of understanding that results from rote learning that 'the lung controls the skin' with the insight that emerges from the author's account, rooted as it is in the fundamental movements of the wu xing:

'Whereas the sour taste gathers, and has a balancing effect on the expansive nature of the wood qi, the pungent taste disperses and diffuses - balancing this contractive effect of the metal. In their double action, the lungs press down, but also diffuse the qi to the surface of the skin and the body hair. The lung qi is therefore responsible for the quality of the skin, its ability to act as a barrier but also as an intermediary ...'

It is a rich irony that, in trying to inject 'clarity' and 'rationality' into TCM by remoulding it in the image of western medicine, the result has often been to generate confusion and theoretical fragmentation where before there was simplicity and organic unity.

Perhaps in deference to the structure of the Su Wen, this guide enacts the cosmological evolution in its own form, beginning with the notions of dao, yin and yang, before moving on to the wu xing, five zang, six fu and seven emotions. Far from being a stylistic affectation, however, this structure allows the inner sense and profundity of the philosophy to unfold. Each section is perfectly placed to build upon the understanding and ideas established in the previous, and the result is that, despite the wealth of information and insight it contains, the prose feels poised and unhurried throughout. Indeed, in such a slim

tome, with so much richness within its pages, there is still space for occasional agreeable divergences into issues such as ancient agriculture, modern medical research, environmental parables and the therapeutic uses of MDMA.

As we have come to expect from Monkey Press, this is also a beautifully produced book. The well-spaced type is interspersed with elegant illustrations, vibrant calligraphy by Qu Lei Lei, and reproductions of details from classical medical manuscripts and archaeological artefacts. As with the structure of the text, the unity of form and function seems to point back towards the conceptual unity underlying the practice of Chinese medicine; just as the multiple interpretations of a concept are contained in a single character, just as the different elements fold back into yin, yang and dao, just as the 'ten thousand things' have their origin in the unitary one.

To sincerely engage with Chinese medicine is to be humble in the face of a greater understanding - it is to give due respect to the idea that the universe as a whole may be more unified than our modern western cosmology allows us to perceive. It is possible to practise Chinese medicine in a purely empirical fashion, of course, without paying attention to the metaphysical background of its development or inquiring into how this masterful technology of physiological intervention was appraised and evolved. But to be uninterested in the source of its genius, to lack curiosity into what higher unity of understanding must have been involved in extricating its methods and mechanisms, is, if not a kind of intellectual ingratitude, certainly a gross misperception of its nature.

In its own quiet way, Sandra Hill's work is a powerful and convincing curative for this error, as well as a clear and concise introduction to the medicine. It is to be hoped that it becomes the standard text for all new students of the art.