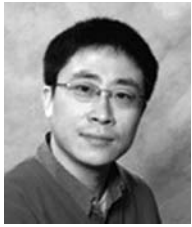


# An Extra Thought about Nomenclature of Eight Extraordinary Channels

By Xiaotian Shen, LAc, MS



Translating TCM terminology from Chinese into a foreign language takes more than the direct conversion of a word or a thought. This is because the resulting translated text may lack depth, richness and readability in an

alternate language. This paper provides an example of applying the original uses and cultural context to translation. The words in Chinese and their meanings have to first be translated into a current or recognizable thought and then into another language. When we look back at the ancient texts, it is important to understand the original meaning rather than immediately contrast with the contemporary usage of today's language.

When we are looking into the evolution of the TCM language, is it more important to stick to the ancient origins or is it better to keep some traditions? Can there be flexibility with the meanings of the terminologies so they are more understandable and acceptable to modern readers?

In this article it is not the purpose of the author to try to answer this question. Rather, the intent is to use the translations of the names of the eight extraordinary channels as an example of how different a translation can be when the philosophy behind the comprehension of a name is different.

The eight extraordinary channels in acupuncture are the meridians separated from the twelve regular channels. The theories of the eight extraordinary channels first appeared in the *Inner Classics* (Nei Jing), an early book of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and are scattered throughout its several chapters. *The Classic of The Difficulties* (Nan Jing) was the first book that discussed the extraordinary channels systematically and articulated them as eight extraordinary channels (Qi Jing Ba Mai). The *Systematic Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion* (Zheng Jiu Jia Yi Jing) detailed the locations of the points on the extra channels. *The Classic of Pulse* (Mai Jing) elaborated on the clinical applications. Finally, *The Investigation of the Eight Extraordinary Channels* (Ji Jing Ba Mai Kao) focused on the extra channels.

The eight extraordinary channels are the Du Channel, Ren channel, Chong Channel, Dai Channel, Yang Wei and Yin Wei Channels, Yang Qiao and Yin Qiao Channels. When the names of the extra channels are translated into English, often times they are perceived as verbs or words of action in their original Chinese language. Governing is for Du, conception is for Ren, penetrating is for

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Chong, girdling is for Dai, linking is for Wei and motility is for Qiao.

In both Chinese and English texts, the Dai Channel has always been understood as resembling a belt or a girdle around the waist, as suggested by its name Dai. In today's Chinese language, Dai is still a noun that characterizes a belt rather than a verb as in belting or girdling that can be seen in many English translations. In this case, the Dai Channel is named after a part of a garment (a girdle or a belt), and its name is related to the location of this channel (around the waist). But the question remains as to why the names of the other extra channels are all related to certain activities (governing, conception, linking and mortality) instead of an object? Why do not the names of the other extra channels have anything to do with their locations?

Is the Dai Channel really an exception to the extra channels? Maybe not.

## The Du Channel

Du channel is usually translated as Governing Channel in most of the English books we use today for the reason that one of the meanings of Du is to supervise, to guide or to command. However, in ancient times, the Chinese character 督 for Du also referred to the middle seam on the back of a cloth. Especially when it is used as a variant (Tong Jia Zi).

The significance of Du as the middle seam on the back can be found in many classic Chinese dictionaries, including *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Explanation on Chinese Characters 說文解字), the first lexical work that analyzed the shape of the characters and systematically searched the source of characters in ancient China. It was written by Xu Shen in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 A.D.) and completed in 121 A.D.

The similar explanation can also be found in *Jing Ji Zuan Gu* (經籍纂詁), by Ruan Yuan (1764-1849 A.D.), by Dai Tong (1200—1285 A.D.); *Kang Xi Zi Dian* (Kangxi Character Dictionary 康熙字典, was completed in 1716 A.D.), and can be located in some modern dictionaries such as *Ci Hai* (辭海) and *Ci Yuan* (辭源).

As pointed out in *Zhuang Zi's Life Care Principles* (莊子養生主), the Du Channel runs along the posterior midline of the body, matching the back seam of a cloth.

Therefore, the character Du implies the location of the channel.

## The Ren Channel

(Reference: AAOM website for Image)

The Chinese character 任 Ren does not really have anything to do with conception but it has long been accepted as a variant (Tong Jia Zi) of 妊 which indicates pregnancy or conception. Hence the Ren Channel is usually translated as the Conception Channel.

Yet it was common in the ancient times that 任 could also be used as a variant of 衽 which still indicates the front piece of a cloth or sleeves. Even today, according to *Xinhua Dictionary with English Translation* printed in 2000, Ren (衽) indicates the “front of a garment.”

Not only the scholars of Chinese language have associated the Ren to a dress but also some ancient TCM practitioners believed the name of the channel came from that of a cloth. The author of *Notes and Explanations to the Classic of Difficulties* (Nan Jing Shu Zhu, 難經疏注) stated: “任 is used as 衽 Ren channel is ascending along the front of the abdomen, just like the front of a garment.” (Reference: AAOM website for Image)

## The Chong Channel

The Chong channel originates from the inside of the lower abdomen and ascends along both sides of the abdomen before it reaches the face.

In most of the acupuncture books in English, Chong is translated as thorough, thoroughfare or penetrating. Almost nobody noticed that Chong also referred to a braid or a ribbon during earlier times.

A good example of Chong used as a decorative hanging on a cloth is a poem from *Shi Jing* (Classic Poetry). The earliest poetry book of China *Shi Jing* is a collection of about three hundred poems. The date of the poems ranges approximately from 1100 to 600 B.C., and the compilation was done probably around, or slightly before, the time of Confucius. *Xiaoya* (*The Minor Festal Odes*) is a part of *Shi Jing*. The ancient poem in *The Minor Festal Odes* said: “Through the thick fog near the water, here comes the gentleman with the leather reins in his hand which looks just like the Chongs hanging there.”

According to *Kang Xi Zi Dian* (*Kangxi Character Dictionary*), Chong also indicates decorative hangings on a garment. This indicates that Chong was still used as the word for braid as late as the eighteenth century.

If the Chong Channel runs on the front side of the trunk lateral to the anterior midline, does it not also look just like two silk braids hanging from the front?

(Reference: AAOM website for Image)

## The Wei Channels

The Yin Wei and Yang Wei Channels are those connecting the interior and the exterior of the body. Wei could mean to link or to connect when it is used as a verb although it originally also indicated a rope. According to Xin Hua Dictionary, when the character of 維 is used as 帷 it also refers to a bed curtain or a heavy curtain, as well as a sachet worn by people in the ancient times.

Wearing a scented sachet was very popular in China. People use to put herbs in the sachet for the purposes of preventing or treating diseases, as well as for good smell and good luck. Naturally, people could also use a sachet hanging on their clothes to resemble the route of a channel.

## The Qiao Channels

As far as the Qiao goes, many people believed that the name of the channels came from one of ancient implications of the Chinese character 跷 which indicates shoes. More precisely, Qiao indicates straw or wooden sandals in the ancient language. In modern Chinese, Qiao is almost no longer used as a noun, but rather as a verb. Some English acupuncture books translate Qiao as motility, which uses the verb version of this Chinese character.

When the term Qiao is used as either motility or shoes, it always has something to do with lower limbs. This also matches the clinical functions of the Qiao channels.

## Summary

As we can see from the many different meanings, a Chinese word or phrase can have an evolutionary process. The best interpretation of their original meanings should and could be a big debate even for some already commonly accepted terminologies used today. It's almost inevitable that different interpretations from the original language of Chinese will be brought into existence using English translations.

If the terminology is in the Chinese language, the Chinese characters and phrases used in TCM will not change that much. Yet, after thousands of years of evolution, people's understanding and interpretation of their meanings will almost never be the same. On one hand, the debate on the meaning of the language won't affect the language itself in Chinese. On the other hand, the situation is very different in English. Once someone comes up with a different interpretation of a word, the translation will have to be changed to reflect this new understanding. In other words, how a translator understands terminology will affect how the terminology will evolve in the destined language.

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