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# What Is the Origin of Acupoint

## 穴位的起源

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**【摘要】** 探讨了穴位的起源，认为穴位的起源与古人鬼神邪祟致病的理念有关。鬼神邪祟所藏之处即为穴位，在病变局部直接驱除鬼神邪祟便成为最主要的治病思路。《黄帝内经》中记载的“以痛为腧”形象地说明了早期穴位的确定方法和应用要点，而《黄帝内经》时代毫针刺法的广泛应用则促进了穴位理论和经脉理论的融合，使得穴位的结构和功能进一步深化，穴位也因此成为人体气血运行的关键部位。从穴位概念的产生到定型实际上展现了由巫术到医学的历史发展进程。

**【关键词】** [穴位-针刺穴位穴位](#)；[驱邪穴位研究祛邪](#)；巫术疗法

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**【Abstract】** Acupoints originated from the ancient belief that diseases were caused by ghosts and evil spirits haunting the body. Acupoints were believed to be where the ghost and evil spirits hid, and thus, the rationale for healing was to expel the ghost and evil spirits directly from the diseased body part. *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)*, an ancient Chinese medical text, mentions "pain as the point" in describing how to allocate and manipulate the acupoint. During the era in which *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)* was written, the wide applications of filiform needle acupuncture expedited the amalgamation between acupoint and meridian theories. As a result, the concept of acupoints were further strengthened and expanded in their structures and functions. In the meantime, acupoints had developed to become manipulation points for qi and blood circulating inside of the human body rather than where evil spirits hid. The formation and finalization of acupoints actually reveals a historical progression from witchcraft to medicine.

**【Key Words】** [AcupointAcupuncture PointsAcupoint](#); [Expelling PathogensResearch of AcupointsExpelling Pathogens](#); Witchcraft Therapy

Nowadays, acupoints, meridians and collaterals are always mentioned together when discussing acupuncture at the clinical level. However, in ancient times, acupoints were indeed an independent system from meridians and collaterals. The origins of acupoints were from ancient ideas related to witchcraft, whereas the origin of meridians and collaterals remains a mystery<sup>[1-5]</sup>.

### 1 Concept of Acupoint

In ancient times, causes of diseases were believed to be due to haunting by ghosts and evil spirits, punishment from ancestors, or as a consequence of breaking a taboo. Among the above three supposed causes, ghosts and evil spirits were usually believed to be the major "pathogens" of diseases. Ghosts and evil spirits were believed to haunt at the location of the

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disease in the body. Thus, expelling ghosts and evil spirits from these locations became the key idea in ancient medicine<sup>[6]</sup>. This practice gradually leads to the concept of acupoints.

The literal meaning of "Acu" (*Xue*) is cave. The section on caves in the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi (Analytical Dictionary of Characters)*, an ancient Chinese dictionary, describes *Xue* as a cave or soil chamber, which supports the meaning of cavern and den. Thus, all words or terms containing "Acu" (*Xue*) most likely relate to holes and caves.

### 2 Related Therapies

Acupoints were believed to be the "hide-outs" of the evil spirits that had entered into the human body. To cure the disease, the evil spirits had to be expelled from their "hide-outs" in diseased parts of the body. They were directly expelled using Bian-stone, animal

horn or moxibustion. These ancient methods were the main tools used in witchcraft therapies to dispel evil spirits. This early understanding of acupoints gave rise to the applications of Bian-stone, moxibustion and horn suction therapies.

Bian-stone was a tool used to cut into the swollen parts of a body, for example, to treat carbuncle ulcers. The treatment not only lets out blood and pus, but also dispels the evil spirits which were believed to be the cause of the ulcers and were the "pathogens" of diseases. Indeed, expelling evil spirits were the theoretical basis for the application of Bian-stone bloodletting therapy. The *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)*, an ancient Chinese medical text, contains a great deal of material about bloodletting using Bian-stone<sup>[7,8]</sup>. The Indian medical literature also has many recorded uses of bloodletting treatments using needle-sticks. Prior to the Middle Ages in Europe, bloodletting techniques were used as the main method of healing various diseases, and Tibetans still employ bloodletting techniques as their general surgical method.

Moxibustion is the application of heat from burning of mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) on the body, and has its origins as a witchcraft therapy in which the fire helped to expel the evil spirits causing the disease, the smoke led the way for the spirits to exit, and the burning smell enhanced the communication with ghosts and spirits. *Artemisia* leaf is the major material used in moxibustion because of its flammability, smoky and aromatic nature, extensive growth, and ease of acquisition, storage and processing.

In animal horn suction therapy, a burning flame was used to heat the air in the horn which was then placed on the body. As the air in the horn cooled a negative pressure was created sucking out the blood and pus from the diseased area. Again, this therapy reflected the belief in witchcraft of expelling the evil spirits from the diseased body part. One of the meridian literatures uncovered from the *Wu Shi Er Bing Fang (Fifty-two Remedies)* of Mawangdui Silk Books showed that horn suction therapy was used in very ancient times.

It was believed that diseases could be treated when the evil spirits were expelled from the diseased body part and one's health could then be restored. The *Zuo Zhuan (Commentary of Zuo)* from the pre-Qin period cites a literary quotation about the "incurable vital

disease" of a Marquis of Jin. A famous doctor in the Qin State, named Huan, believed that this disease could not be treated. The disease was incurable because evil spirits were hiding too deeply in the diseased body part, becoming impossible to attack and unable to be reached<sup>[9]</sup>.

The concept of acupoints was described in detail in the *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)*. It mentioned "pain as the point" and vividly illustrated how to allocate an acupoint. Based on the belief of "pain as the point", the location of an acupoint could be identified in accordance with the progression of a disease. Bian-stone was a common tool used to press on and massage the acupoint, and together with moxibustion and horn suction, they were considered to be effective methods for stimulating the acupoints. All these therapies were applied at the skin level, and the locations of acupoints in their early usage were also limited to relatively shallow structures, such as a visible artery or touchable muscle locations on the human body.

The belief that ghosts and evil spirits caused a disease eventually evolved into other pathogens as causes of diseases. However, the therapeutic thinking of expelling "evil" qi from the body remained unchanged. *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)* described all the names, shapes and applications of the nine needles, but only two of them do not puncture the skin. The round-point needle rubs around muscles and tendons to reduce the qi within the muscular interstices, and the spoon needle presses on the channels to resume healthy qi by promoting the flow of qi without penetrating the skin. The filiform needle is the finest of the nine types and can be retained longer at one point and was used for mild manipulation to revive qi, whereas the other needles were mostly used to reduce the excessive qi. The structure and characteristic of acupoints were transformed with the use of the nine needles and with the increasing usage of filiform needles in clinical applications.

The framework for the philosophy of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is rooted in the *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)*, which is based on the yin-yang theory. Under healthy mental and physiological conditions, yin and yang are in equilibrium, whereas under pathological conditions, yin and yang are in disequilibrium. Therefore,

maintaining yin-yang balance by rebalancing deficiency or excess has become the main principle of TCM clinical practices.

The use of filiform needles embodied the concept of balancing yin-yang. As a result, the use of filiform needles developed into a series of specific manipulation methods, and the practice of filiform-needle acupuncture gradually increased in popularity. In the filiform-needle manipulations, the acupoint provides an essential domain for the actual process of inducing and reducing yin and yang.

As other pathogens replaced the old beliefs of ghosts and evil spirits as causes of diseases, so the acupoint became the location where the pathogens competed with the body's defensive system. The acupoint no longer pertained to "pain as the point" or curing of diseases limited to shallow structures, but came to be associated with the meridian and collateral systems and as a manipulation point for the circulation of blood and qi. Furthermore, the acupoint was considered as the location for the movement of the meridian qi, for the flow of blood and qi, and for the interaction of yin and yang.

With the amalgamation of the acupoint, meridian and collateral systems, the dimensional structure of an acupoint was enlarged even though its location was fixed on the surface of a body. The vast majority of acupoints had both local and distal effects. We now see that the meaning of acupoint is so called because the "Acu" (*Xue*) has a location or point. The *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)* explained an acupoint in terms of its dimensional structure and its close relationship with meridians and collaterals using numerous descriptions, such as vacancy (*Kong*), node (*Jie*), conjunction (*Hui*), qi point (*Qi Xue*), qi organ (*Qi Fu*), hollows on the bone (*Gu Kong*), congregation of points (*Xue Hui*), hole (*Kong Xue*), etc. The acupoints are usually located in the depressions between bones and joints or muscular interstices, namely *Jie*, *Gu Kong* and *Kong Xue*. The other terms *Hui*, *Xue Hui*, *Qi Xue* and *Qi Fu* are actually used to explain the aggregation of qi.

### 3 Development of Acupoint Concept

The Chinese character "Shu", used in the "pain as the point" in the *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)*, has the implied meaning of

acupoint because the writing of this character includes body and flesh in its structure, and so the acupoint is also known as "Shu Xue". In the *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)*, three types of writings for "Shu" were considered the same. Moreover, other terminologies have further extended the identification of the structures and functions of acupoints.

The development of filiform needle acupuncture has strengthened the evolution and maturity of the acupoint concept. The two independent systems of acupoints and meridians and collaterals are now integrated into one. The theory of qi and blood flow in the meridian and collateral system also becomes the fundamental concept for the applications of acupoints. As a result, acupoints have gradually developed into the various locations over the body that is linked to meridians and collaterals, becoming known as "meridian acupoint" (*Jing Xue*). The therapeutic function of an acupoint has also been extended from treating a limited body part to treating a comprehensive system corresponding to the symptoms of meridians and collaterals. We can clearly see that the historical evolution of the acupoint concept from its formation to its finalization has progressed from witchcraft to medicine.

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