A Review on the Clinical Use of the Eight Extra Meridians

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I. Introduction

In Oriental medicine we see the human body as a small universe. Man lives in and under great influence of nature. Just like a tree proliferating cells in the spring and growing in summer, halting growth in the fall to get ready for cold weather
and then minimizing activity in the winter to save energy, human body follows a similar biological rhythm. A good example of the biological rhythm is the according pulse of four seasons. When the pulse does not feel according to the season it means that something has gone wrong in the body. For example if the pulse is not tight in spring it means the body is ill. The Twelve Main Meridians surround the whole body to mediate this kind of disharmony, and the Eight Extra Meridians system is another route like it. In fact, in the early stage of the formation of the Meridians system, there were only eleven Meridians of afferent direction, that resemble the Extra Meridians that we know today.

Over time, the Main Meridians system assumed a more academic scheme of the organs system, and the more primitive, flow-related Extra Meridians adopted the name "Extra".

The difference between the Twelve Main Meridians and the Eight Extra Meridians is that although the Eight Extra Meridians are a unit under the same name, their eight circulation patterns are all independent. The Twelve Main Meridians have an Interior-Exterior relationship between the Eum and Yang Meridians that influences the physiology and pathology as well.

The Eight Extra Meridians each have at most 28 acupoints that cure the disease of the Extra Meridian, most of which are related to the region the Extra Meridian controls, but with the exception of the Governor Vessel and the Conception Vessel, the acupoints of the Extra Meridians overlap those of the Main Meridians. This fact gives rise to the question of how the Extra Meridians can still have a route, when they do not have their own acupoints. The answer lies in the function of the Extra Meridians, which is controlling the acupoints of the Twelve Main Meridians. There is an independent flow of Qi that functions in each of the Eight Extra Meridians, that forms a route and encompasses some of the acupoints of the passing by Main Meridians.

There are various explanations for the terminology of the Extra Meridians. The 'Classic of Difficulties' says that 'extra' means they are not 'restrained' by the Main Meridian system. Li Shi Zhen says that they are 'extra' because they are not related to the Main Meridian system and do not have exterior-interior pairing system. In modern texts the meaning of 'extra' is defined as 'odd' or 'surplus'. It suggests that the Extra Meridians are separate and different from the Main Meridians. This definition implies that the Extra Meridians add something to the Main Meridian system, as to the earlier description of them just being different.

II. Main subject

1. The physiology of Eight Extra Meridians

Of the Eight Extra Meridians the Governor Vessel has the greatest Yang property. It influences the back area and the spine and is manifest in central nervous diseases or severe illnesses with symptoms all over the body. The Extra Meridian with the second largest Yang property is the Yang Heel Vessel. The Yang Heel Vessel's main areas are the outer aspect of lower limb, and eyes. It causes and cures relatively lighter, localized illnesses. The two vessels' combined area include the inner canthus, neck, scapula, spine, back, and brain. They pertain to diseases such as stiffness or weakness of spine, Yang Excess, or the dysfunction of closing eyes (Eyes open too much).

While the Yang Link Vessel influences the head, it does not have central nervous elements like the Governor Vessel and the Yang Heel Vessel, and is manifest in illnesses of superficial region. It can cause and/or acute pain on hand and foot, and symptoms along the Gall Bladder Meridian. The area influenced by the Belt Vessel, as one would well guess, is the waist. The combined area of these two vessels are ear, cheek, outer canthus, shoulder, neck and occiput, manifesting in diseases