

Questions of *Shen*

Moderator: Stephen Birch, PhD, LAc, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Contributors: Chris Dhaenens, Miguel Angel Cabrer Mir, Elizabeth Rochat de la Vallée, Lillian Bridges, Charles (Chip) Chace, Eric Brand, Bruce Ferguson, Yair Maimon, Diane Sommers, Clemens Prost and Peter Firebrace

Shen ■ 神 “spirit(s)” ■ 神

Introduction by Stephen Birch

In this section, you will find a book review and a series of short essays about the term *shen*, often translated as “spirit.” The inspiration for this small project began when my friend Miguel Angel Cabrer Mir showed me the book *To Become A God* by Michael Puett [1] (see also Book Reviews) and told me I had to read it. A few months later I did. Puett is a Harvard scholar and in his book he traces the different religious traditions that developed and existed during the late Warring States to early Han dynasty periods. In this text, he highlights the different uses and meanings that the term *shen* acquired or was given. As you will see in Chris Dhaenens’ thoughtful review, we think that Puett has done a fantastic job on this.

The importance of Puett’s book for us in the field of acupuncture and Traditional East Asian Medicine (TEAM) is that the historical period that he covers is the period immediately before the appearance of the early medical texts, the *Huang Di Nei Jing*. Thus, we can see some of the pre-medical influences on that text. For example, the *Nei Ye* (or *Inward Training*, sometimes, *Inner Life*) chapter that is found in the fourth-century *Guan Zi* [2] is thought by a number of scholars to have been quite influential on the *Huang Di Nei Jing* [3]. Puett includes extensive discussions of this text that are helpful to us, and, as you will see, others have chosen to focus on it as well in the various essays below.

After convincing (without much difficulty, I might add) Chris Dhaenens and Elizabeth Rochat de la Vallée to get involved in the project, we developed the format you will find below. Chris’s review aims to highlight major tradi-

tions of meaning for the term *shen*. This lays an historical foundation for the next section, the essays. We then contacted a number of different people from different backgrounds, different trainings, and perspectives, and asked them a series of questions. The instructions we gave and questions we asked were:

We ask that you answer the first question and at least one of the other three questions.

We ask that you write no less than one paragraph and no more than two A4 sides (single spaced).

1. What do you think *shen* is? Or how would you define the concept of *shen*?
2. How does the *shen* affect your practice?
3. What do you see as the role of *shen* in TEAM?
4. What issues are important for you in trying to understand the concept of *shen* in the West, in China, and/or in Japan?

We asked more than 12 people to answer these questions and have received answers from nine. Several of the others that were asked expressed an interest in answering these questions but found themselves too short on time to be able to do so. Perhaps we will receive and publish their answers at a later date. Below, you will find answers in various forms to these questions from the following nine people:

Eric Brand is a TCM practitioner-scholar who has studied extensively in Taiwan and China. He has a passionate interest in the translation of Chinese texts and has pursued this working especially with Nigel Wiseman. He has also worked as editor on publication projects in China, Taiwan, and the United States and is a co-author of the forthcoming *Concise Chinese Materia Medica* (Paradigm Publications). Eric also does some teaching.

Lillian Bridges is a practitioner-scholar of TCM. She has emphasized and extensively studied the art of facial diagnosis, which directly assesses the *shen* of the patient. She has written the book *Face Reading in Chinese Medicine* (Churchill Livingstone) and a forthcoming book *Feng Shui for the Clinic*. She practices in Kirkland, Washington State. Lillian also does some teaching. She generously submitted two sections in answer to the questions she was sent.

Miguel Angel Cabrer Mir is a practitioner-scholar of *tai ji quan*, *yi quan* and acupuncture. He has studied extensively in Spain and China. Currently, his primary *tai ji quan* instructor lives in Canada, whom he visits annually. He lives in Barcelona, Spain where he has been teaching *tai ji quan* and *yi quan* for years and maintains an acupuncture practice.

Charles (Chip) Chace is a practitioner-scholar of acupuncture and TCM. He has been involved in the field for over 25 years and works in Boulder, Colorado. He is a co-author of *Channel Divergences* (Blue Poppy Press) and has been involved in a number of translation projects including the *Huang Di Zhen Jiu Jia Yi Jing*, *The Yellow Emperor's Systematic Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion* (Blue Poppy Press) and the forthcoming Li Shizhen text *Qi Ji Jing Ba Mai Kao*, *Exposition on the Extraordinary Vessels* (Eastland Press). Chip also does some teaching.

Bruce Ferguson is a veterinarian and practitioner-scholar of veterinary acupuncture and TCM. He studied with the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS) and in China. He is president of the American Association of Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM). Bruce has also trained and taught oriental martial and meditative arts for over 25 years. He also does some teaching for veterinary practitioners.

Peter Firebrace is a practitioner-scholar of acupuncture. He has studied extensively with Father Claude Larre and Elizabeth Rochat de la Vallée, and is one of the editors of Monkey

Press, which has focused on publishing their work. He lectures extensively on concepts like *shen* and their role in acupuncture and TCM. For those who know Peter, it is no surprise that he has answered the first question with a poem.

Yair Maimon is a practitioner-scholar of acupuncture and TCM. He is a practitioner and senior instructor in Tel Aviv, Israel and has been practicing acupuncture for more than 20 years. He studied in the United Kingdom, United States, and China. In his practice, Yair especially pays attention to diagnosing the condition of the *shen* and teaches workshops on this.

Clemens Prost is a medical doctor and practitioner-scholar of acupuncture. He has studied extensively in Germany and China. He is a senior instructor in acupuncture at the Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Klassische Akupunktur und Traditionelle Chinesische Medizin e.V. (Association for Classical Acupuncture and TCM) (AGTCM) school in Berlin, Germany. He has had a Buddhist meditation practice for many years and, with special training in China, integrates this into his acupuncture practice.

Dianne Sommers is a practitioner-scholar who has practiced acupuncture for over 20 years. Currently she is practicing in Amsterdam, pursuing advanced studies in sinology and philosophy, and is working on a Dutch translation of the *Nei Ye*. Dianne also teaches acupuncture in Holland.

We think you will find the clinical, historical, and theoretical insights of this diverse group of contributors very useful in your search for understanding this important concept in TCM. There are some short editorial comments from Elizabeth Rochat de la Vallée [ERV] to clarify a number of points. Chris Dhaenens' review of Puett's book not only places the concept of *shen* into Puett's historical and anthropological perspectives, but it contextualizes the discussions with some of Chris's own perspectives.

Why, you might wonder, have we chosen this focus on the concept of *shen*? As I have al-

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ready written, such a concept has laid the field open to attaching meanings and ideas that are not part of the actual traditions of TCM and acupuncture due to problems such as wishful thinking, highly selective translation, and interpretations [4]. Why then this focus? Perhaps it is self-evident if one looks at the first chapter of the *Huang Di Nei Jing Ling Shu*. The *Ling Shu* has sometimes been called the “*Needle Classic*” for it lays out important principles in the art and practice of needling. In this first chapter, which means that this is important to the authors of the *Ling Shu*, it says something like:

The basics of needle technique are easy to describe but difficult to achieve, the average (or inferior) [practitioner] pays attention to the form, the superior [practitioner] pays attention to the shen, which is supposed to be “focused at the tip of the needle” while needling in order for the treatment to be effective. (My rough-literal translation)

In the first sentence, the importance of *shen* (whatever it is) in the practice of acupuncture could not have been more clearly stated.

It is our hope that the discussions below will trigger letters to the editor, further discussion, and debate. We would like to include these responses and discussions in the next issue of the *Almanac*. We editors have our own thoughts and ideas about the materials below; perhaps you the reader do as well. If the muse grabs you, please send us your thoughts.

The Review by Chris Dhaenens

That man is able to think about himself is the big miracle of nature. Because he cannot grasp what his body is, let alone his spirit. And the least of all how the body can be united with the spirit. This is his major problem, and yet it is the essence of his being. (Blaise Pascal)

Michael J. Puett’s *To Become a God* represents a wonderful intellectual journey through the evolution of ideas in China during the “Axial Age.” This is the age in which the major reli-

Abb. “To become a God” fehlt !!!

gious and philosophical traditions in the world took shape, roughly stretching from the 16th to the second century BCE. This era saw the genesis of Hinduism and Buddhism in India, daoism, and Confucianism in China, monotheism in Israel and philosophic rationalism in Greece. As for China, this period covers the Shang and the Zhou dynasties, the Warring States, the Qin and early Western Han dynasties.

The initial objective of the book is to dissect and amplify the long-lasting debate during this period on the relationship between humans and gods. It is not the first time a scholar has ventured into this theme (see, for example, A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao, Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, Open Court; 2007 and M. Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise*, Albin Michel; 1999), but it is the first time it is done within such a broad anthropological and historical scope and so thoroughly cross-referenced with concurrent evolutions, especially to the Greek pantheon and rationalism. Furthermore, Puett strongly participates in the debate and often goes beyond merely juxtaposing different views by taking firm positions himself, and by introducing a plethora of secondary historical sources. Knowledgeable as he proves to be, it is a guarantee for a solid

socio-historical context and a rational anchor in the disputes.

Evidence collected from Shang oracle bones already reveals a dichotomy in the notion of how humans and gods could possibly be related. On the one hand, there were those who saw the human and divine realms as separate and agonistic, and applied divination to determine the will of the gods and sacrifices to pacify them or extricate their benevolence. On the other hand, there were those who saw the two realms as intertwined, and claimed that human birthright included achievement of divinity and the resulting control of the cosmos. Puett claims and proves that this debate continued throughout the creation myths and classics of the Zhou, Warring States, Qin, and early Han. Further, he shows that it deeply influenced the correlative, pattern-like cosmology as it was more or less consolidated in early Han. He further suggests that this correlative thinking preserved its consistency because it was permanently put to the test by opposite views, headstrong rulers, and historical fate like wars, famine, and calamities.

The survival of this correlative cosmology turns out to be quite interesting to us, as TEAM students, for several reasons. Every philosophical or religious worldview is, far more than generally accepted, somehow connected to the medical practices of the time, simply because they deal with the experiences of suffering, disease, and death that are shared by everyone. But, impregnated by correlative thinking, the ancient Chinese have undoubtedly generated the worldview (usually identified with daoism) that is most intimately interwoven with a medical system. Throughout all parallel spiritual developments, they have preserved the body as the indispensable matrix for spiritual transformation. Suppressed in Judeo-Christian tradition, transcendently ignored in the over-spiritualized Indian traditions, and blatantly absent in post-Roman Western philosophy, the Chinese body has survived rational materialism, ghost-in-the-machine dualism, and epistemology. (Some cynics even claim that the body is completely absent in Western Medicine.) For students interested in the divergent evolutions of the Greek ana-

tomical and the Chinese energetic body, see Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body* (Zone Books; 1999).

At the end of the historical period Puett covers, the body is no longer unequivocally considered to be a sacrificial instrument to gain power over the spirit world. Rather, it is seen as an intricate, whirling web of possibilities wrapped around the axis of *shen*, *qi*, and *jing*. Some of the traditions of self-cultivation at the time poetically and pictorially infer that the body does not only make the organization of the different *qis* visible but it simply *is* the way the “organ-izing” of the *qi* is happening. Many texts, compiled during the Warring States period, but especially the *Nei Ye*, sustain the pivotal role of the body as an embryonic field of potentialities and possibilities of “essence” and *shen*, with the *qi* moving up and down and in and out. In the open, correlative cosmology then, the distance to the energetic body aligned along the *jing luo*, seems less distant, given this period immediately precedes the appearance of the *Huang Di Nei Jing*.

It is absolutely impossible, within these few pages, to do full credit to the spectrum, the nuance, and the depth of argumentation Puett is displaying along this history of ideas. Students interested in this mental exercise should read the book, but we will choose to make a virtue of necessity and confine ourselves to the topic of this section: the different meanings that have been attributed to *shen* and the different ways in which *shen* was experienced during this “Axial Age.” Why do we venture to make this rather brutal methodological stride (that Puett would certainly reject)? Because, anyone with TCM-guts, while moving forward in this book, will discover a fascinating parallelism between the familiar conceptual aspects of *shen* and the way *shen* is progressively experienced in time and history. It is precisely in this particular loop of time we witness the subtle nature of *shen* unfolding in the subtle nature of its conceptual aspects.

As to the initial questions “What is *shen*?,” “What is the definition of *shen*?,” the Zen answer would be “*Shen is* the question,” and the easiest definition is that *shen* is the absence of all definition. But, to avoid the avalanche of

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tautologies such answers bring about, let's consult the early sources.

Where *shen* is more or less identified with the *Tai Yi*, the "Great One," the first and highest principle before *yin* and *yang*, it could be paraphrased as a fathomless, unmanifested singularity before space-time, as pure consciousness before it had touched an object or was reflected by a subject... Then, literally "upon a time"...

Long ago, in the time before there existed Heaven and Earth, there was only figure without form. Obscure, dark, vast and deep—no one knows its gate. There were two spirits (shen) born together; they aligned Heaven, they oriented Earth. So vast—no one knows its end or limit! So overflowing—no one knows where it stopped! Thereupon they divided and became yin and yang, separated and became the eight pillars. Hard and soft completed each other, and the myriad things were thereupon formed. The turbid qi became insects, and the refined qi became humans. (Huainanzi, Jingshen Chapter, 7.1a)

Apparently, the two *shen* caused this sterile balance to break, causing the break of creation, the prime movement, or one of the many cultural metaphors for genesis and cosmic drama. In terms of *qi* one could call it "the incipient big breath." In terms of science, some analogies can no longer be considered trivial, for example, the quantum break of original singularity in physics and the dramatic shift from the sterile RNA-based life to effervescent DNA-based life in biology.

Shen in duality and dialectic movement can be defined as "numinous" rather than divine. (Numinous comes from the Latin *numen*, which means divine approval by nodding the head, clearly suggesting a tilting of energy.) Numinousness is revealed divinity, *shen* cast into existence (from the Latin: *sistere ex*, to whirl to the outside).

Shen can thus also be associated with "ignis," the initial light, the spark that is firing motion, motivation, and transformation through cyclic time. Speculative as it may be, this aspect becomes in a later phase interestingly associated with *yuan qi*.

In the human world of the Bronze Age (mainly Shang period), the experience of *shen* is marked by a strong anthropomorphization of the spirit(s) and a hazy demarcation line between humans, spirits, and gods. The continuity between heaven and humankind is rooted in shamanistic ritual. Agriculture and domestication make humankind increasingly dependent on a fixed locus and reliable cycles. The divine powers are experienced as capricious, angry, indifferent, and casting a blind fate on humankind. As a result, divination and sacrifice serve the purpose of anchoring in the world through mollifying the spirits. *Shen* becomes deeply identified with the spirit(s) of nature.

In the late Shang and early Zhou dynasties, these rituals turn more institutional and hierarchic. Heaven rules through the kings' heavenly mandate. This marks the beginning of a strong current of "institutionalizing the laws of heaven" for the purpose of social order and the unity of the kingdom. Sacrificial ritual further expands to the extent that the deceased become incorporated in the spirit realm to pacify the spirits of nature and to exert power on them through the mediation of the benevolent ancestral spirits. The Shang were literally "making" their ancestors, and more powers were attributed to them the older they got. It is another aspect of the continuity of *shen* to be connected to one's own blood as ancestral *qi* (*yuan qi*).

Contrary to the tragic discord between gods and humankind in the Greek universe, China, during the Shang and Zhou eras, somehow managed to preserve the continuity between heaven and humankind. Although never more diffuse, the hard times helped to sustain the web of correlative thought and the upcoming patterns of ordering the world. Puett states: "The Shang sacrificial system was an attempt to domesticate the highly agonistic forces and place them within a hierarchy manipulable for the sake of human interests." *Shen*, in this stage, starts to be incorporated in gods, spirits, and humans alike. It can be seen as the corporeal soul (*po*) coming down, providing a structural skeleton for *shen* to anchor as *jing shen* in the next phase.

Moving into the Warring States period, deeply influential texts like *Nei Ye* bring about a radically different approach of the spirit world. In short, the world turns to “elemental” and humankind turns to “essential.” Much like in Empedocles’ Greece the “elements” (cardinal phase points with temperamental, humoral, and energetic connotations) largely replace the spirits in the ordering pattern of the world. And humankind, instead of sacrificially pacifying the spirits, develops self-cultivation techniques to pacify its own spirit, and gaining the power of the spirits.

Throughout the Warring States period, numerous texts appear in which the potentially divine powers of humans are claimed. In these writings “the mandate of heaven” is progressively identified with the self-cultivating potential of humankind. All of them, poetically or explicitly, refer to *shen* as *jing shen*, and further, suggest this fusion between *shen* and *jing* is the matrix and the drive of life. The experience of *shen* is *jing shen*. Forged to each other at the deepest point of the vital breath the two “most refined forms of *qi*” align formation and contain in-formation. *Shen* becomes perceptible, tangible, and palpable in the material body, the matrix of *jing*. Or, *shen* needs the body to manifest and the body needs *shen* to be manifest. As a result, it is impossible to ask the question “What is *shen*?” without asking the question “What is *jing*?”. It is worthwhile asking this question since everything physiologically associated with *shen* (consciousness, *yuan qi*, movement and heat, light and light-elements like phosphor and sulfur, information like DNA, electro-chemical impulses, messenger molecules, etc.) have their basis and their receptors in everything that is associated with *jing* (all extra-*fu*, *jin ye*, membrane lipids, RES, etc.).

Self-cultivation and the acquisition of meaning are dependent on wise management of *jing*, quantitatively and qualitatively, as it deploys in time. *Jing* has to be generated, protected, and conserved. It has to be anchored and transformed. It has to be liberated and transcended. Self-cultivation in the Warring States period comes down to the *shen*-full transformation of *jing*.

When *shen* follows the essential *qi* that is

like water, the mind is contained and collected... “essence” (*jing*) allows the *shen* to concentrate.

Nei Ye refers quite a lot to the unique place of humans to experience stillness, to quiet the *shen* and to stabilize the mind, not only as a goal in itself, but as the basis for transformation, since the *shen* that unifies and the *shen* that transforms cannot be different from each other:

Those who can transform even a single thing, call them “numinous”;

Those who can alter even a single situation, call them “wise”

But to transform without expending vital energy; to alter without expending wisdom: Only exemplary persons who hold fast to the One are able to do this.

Hold fast to the One; do not lose it,

And you will be able to master the myriad things,

And are not acted upon by them,

Because they grasp the guiding principle of the One. [5]

As to the further claims concerning the divine power of humans in the fourth and third century of Warring States, the fairly radical message from the *Nei Ye* did not put an end to the debate but changed its course: Confucius and Mencius subscribe to the birthright of humankind to transform their “essence,” but in their approach, ethics become tightly related to the deployment of “essence.” For Confucius, heaven also has a normative role and, with Mencius, he believes that it is the source of all moral patterns that humans should follow. Mencius, naturally, wants to ritualize and institutionalize this principle. Puett brilliantly shows the inconsistency behind their position especially when confronted with the “spirit of *Zhuangzi*.” According to the *Zhuangzi* the “spirit person” does not even attempt to control things or exert power. The divine (*shen*) person is unaffected by things like life and death, knowledge or power, does not judge or interfere. He/she just allows the *shen* and the *jing* to dwell within him or herself, to let things be as they naturally ought.

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Even more radical than the *Nei Ye*, the *Zhuangzi* outlines the most naked, uncompromising, and amoral interpretation of *shen*. Transformation of “essence” is generated spontaneously, barely related to intention or individual choice. “To be like this, naturally” (*zi ran*) and absence of a personal will (an aspect of *wu wei*) are, of course, strongly reminiscent of the *Laozi*. The disarming logical consequences of “modeling on the way” as in *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*, apparently implied much more loss of spiritual identity than humans as (aspirant) spirits were prepared to face and thus marked another turning point in the interpretation of *shen*.

The descent of the One and the identification of *shen* with the “watercourse way” indeed marks the transition from involution to evolution, from exhaling to inhaling the big breath. Humans increasingly adopt the “responsibility of self-cultivation” along with the “freedom of self-cultivation.” Less and less, they project the divine in gods and spirits, although the debates subside livelier than ever. Puett tirelessly keeps on sketching this evolution in such detail that any attempt to summarize is doomed to fail, but some tendencies can somehow be extracted from the abundance of polemicizing historical sources. From texts referred to in the late Warring States period (*Huainanzi*, *Taiyi Sheng Shui*, and parts of the *Lushi Chunqiu*) one can see emerging a pattern of the cosmos in which humankind is presented as simultaneously the instrument and the goal of heaven. The *Lushi Chunqiu* says: **heaven established** the cosmos for man... Humans, as descendants of the One, assume the role of anchoring and aligning the spirit (*shen*) according to the Great One. This precipitates in an anthropomorphic correlative cosmology in which the spontaneous arrangement in patterns (like five phases etc.) concur with man’s aspirations to “lift the spirit,” or to be the material/sacrificial carrier for the ascending *shen*. (Rectify the form and assist the power—the *Xinshu* chapter of the *Guanzi*.) The sage regulates things ... things do not regulate **him (ibid.)**.

The spin-off is a series of texts Puett refers to as “Ascension literature.” These texts (*Shiwen*,

etc.) essentially highlight the spiritual struggle of humankind in reconciling biogenesis and cosmogenesis while following the double helix of the *shen* ascending. This involved spiritual techniques like balancing the *hun* and the *po*, awareness of the different *qi*, following the breaths, concentrating the mind, evaporating fear, and overcoming death. Among the many obstacles on this path one is typical for the period and for the spiritual universe of ancient China altogether: the *Zhuangzi*’s interpretation of ascension; the highest form of transcendence is a spontaneous connection with the patterns of the universe. The negative aspects of this friction are reflected in the theomorphic claims of the Qin emperors who, in their self-declared divinity, turned again to the folkloristic practices of divination and ritual sacrifice. The positive aspect was a cross-pollinating debate with those divination systems that claimed to describe the spontaneous ordering principles of the cosmos (especially the *Yi Jing* Book of Changes). All in all, the spirit rising upward and the central pivotal role of the Earth as the pattern of organization and balance, are strongly reminiscent of the spirit of *hun* and the spirit of *yi*, as later referred to in the medical classics. By the time of the Western Han, the Chinese have developed a correlative cosmology where the heavenly realms are mirrored in the earthly layers, remarkably void of the spiritual hierarchies that constitutes the hybrid of Western spiritual thinking. Also, the projection of God as an external spirit, from whom humankind is tragically separated is a lot less pronounced, especially compared with the Judeo-Christian concept of “the famous One who made us after we made Him.”

The Chinese cosmos comes as a spirally layered auto-poetic universe where the *qi* is whirling through the ethereal levels of *shen*, *po*, *zhi (jing)*, *hun* and *yi*, through the macroscopic levels of cyclic time and its elements (fire, metal, water, wood, and earth) and through the microcosm of the body in the catalytic cycle of the temperaments, the humors, and the organs. In this pattern, *shen* is that what connects...

Puett managed to catch all these currents, undercurrents, and “random parameters of

correlative thought” in an overall picture, one that lies at the roots of TCM. Very well done!

The Essays

Charles Chace, Boulder, Colorado, US

What do you think shen is?

Or how would you define the concept of shen?

Shen can mean many things. Some authors talk about it in terms of the sparkle in one’s eyes, or their “spiritedness.” The *Nei Jing* defines *shen* in wide variety of ways. *Shen* may refer to gods and deities (SW [Su Wen] 11). Mere mortals engaged in the highest levels of medical practice (SW 74) (LS [Ling Shu] 4) are referred to as *shen*. It may refer to natural laws (SW 66). *Shen* may simply refer to the correct *qi* (LS 3), the *qi* and blood (SW 32), the essence *qi* of water and grains (LS 32), or channel *qi* (SW 27). Pulses should have *shen* and it is stored in the heart (SW 62). *Shen* may refer to the mind or consciousness (SW 54). Finally, *Shen* may refer to something like the life force (神明) (LS 8) [ERV1] and by extension, the subtle and profound phenomena that occurs with the arrival of *qi* during needling (Su Wen 26).”

How does the shen affect your practice?

Taken on their own, most of these definitions are rather divorced from my clinical practice. For instance, I don’t find it especially helpful to think of the *qi* and blood as *shen* because that just muddles the concepts of *qi* and blood while adding little to my understanding. Then too, I haven’t had the opportunity to treat many gods or deities.

What issues are important for you in trying to understand the concept of shen in the West, in China, and/or in Japan?

The pivotal use of the word *shen* for me is as a label for my experience of the most primitive expression of some fundamental life force. It is that primordial urge at the root of everything that is alive. What sounds like the most arcane of the definitions described above, is for me the most tangible. It’s something I feel

when I am in close proximity to a person.

Most notably, I get a sense of the quality of that life force, that *shen*, when I touch a person. *Shen* is my label for that subtle holistic shift that occurs with the arrival of *qi*. For me, *shen* is palpable, it’s systemic, and when I feel it through my hands it does feel pretty miraculous. From this place then, from the perspective as a palpable experience, it’s easier for me to understand how *shen* might be described as being synonymous with *qi*, blood, correct *qi*, the essence *qi* of water and grains, the channel *qi* or any other bodily function. Even so, I wouldn’t describe *shen* as these media so much as I would *shen* as expressing itself *through* them. Like *qi*, we tend not to see *shen* itself, only its effects.

Eric Brand, San Diego, California, US

What do you think shen is?

Or how would you define the concept of shen?

Shen is a concept that is elusive to a single definition. Like many Chinese words, its meaning varies depending on context and the characters that it is combined with. Generally translated as “spirit,” *shen* has many different contexts of use in TCM. The two most prevalent concepts relating to *shen* in day-to-day Chinese medical practice revolve around *shen* in the sense of general vitality, and *shen* in the sense of the spirit that is stored and governed by the heart. However, the use of the word *shen* in TCM extends beyond these two primary meanings, and a brief survey of definitions from Chinese medical dictionaries helps to elucidate these wider meanings.

Arguably the widest meaning of the word *shen* is seen in one of TCM’s most foundational texts, the *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen* (*Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine, Simple Questions*). Here, the text states: “that which cannot be fathomed [in terms of] *yin* and *yang* is spirit” (阴阳不测谓之神) [ERV2]. Chinese medical dictionaries interpret this statement by suggesting that one meaning of the word *shen* is related to the manifestations and natural laws regarding substance, movement, and change in the natural world [6]. This is a very broad range of use and there is an inherent ambigu-

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ity of meaning present in the original statement; thus, such statements are challenging to translate and provide little ground for drawing firm conclusions.

A far more common and straightforward meaning is reflected in the use of the word *shen* to refer to the outward manifestations of life and activity in the human body. In this context, *shen* is used to describe the complexion, the “spirit” in the eyes, language use and responsiveness, and activity and posture. Here, *shen* is similar to a sense of vitality or general animation, and its presence or absence is important in prognosis. It is worth noting that some Chinese texts define *shen* simply as *jing shen*, literally “essence spirit.” *Jing shen* is used as a general word in the Chinese language that means energy, vigor, vitality; to have good *jing shen* is to be full of life. Note that because essence (*jing*) is the material foundation of *shen*, the *shen* is affected by changes in bowel and visceral function or other conditions of exuberance and debility that disrupt normal physiology.

Yet another meaning of the word *shen* relates to its broader use as a governing force over all other physiologic and mental activity. The heart stores the *shen*, and the *shen* ultimately presides over all other activity in the human body.

Still another use of the word *shen* can be seen in the context of vessel *qi*. When discussing pulse diagnosis, we speak of stomach, spirit (*shen*), and root. Here, these three factors are used as general prognostic indicators, since the three together form the basic features of a healthy pulse. Stomach *qi* is evident when the pulse is smooth, harmonious, and regular, while spirit is seen in the pulse by its suppleness and strength. Root is said to be present when the pulse can be felt at all three positions, particularly at the deep level [7].

The final major use of the word *shen* relates to thought and consciousness. The heart in TCM is the principle organ related to mental activity and it presides over the emotions. The heart governs the spirit-mind, and under normal physiologic conditions, the mind is clear, vital, and responsive to the outside world. When there is pathology, the result is insom-

nia, forgetfulness, heart palpitations, or other signs of disturbance of the heart spirit.

Despite my above summary of five meanings of *shen* as found in Chinese medical dictionaries, the word goes on and on in contexts beyond TCM. For example, the deities and immortalized figures seen in temples are all *shen*, though in English we refer to them as gods. The traditional supernatural protectors responsible for patrolling the neighborhood are also *shen*. The most famous of the lower-level supernatural police are the type of *shen* known as *tu ti gong*, and their shrines are found even within major metropolitan areas like Taipei. Nonetheless, to my knowledge, the *tu ti gong* and their pantheon of associates remain largely uninvolved in the affairs of medicine.

What issues are important for you in trying to understand the concept of shen in the West, in China, and/or Japan?

Personally, the greatest challenge I see with the concept of *shen* is its wide range of use and lack of definitive clarity. Because it lacks a narrow and highly specific meaning, there is a tendency for Western practitioners to ascribe all things perceived as “spiritual” as pertaining to the notion of “spirit” as discussed in TCM. In my experience, the use of the word *shen* is primarily associated with a general sense of life and vitality rather than something “spiritual” per se [ERV3]. TCM has no particular spiritual agenda and lacks a definitive separation of the mind and body, so it cannot fairly be considered to be either “spiritual” or “non-spiritual.” The fact that TCM is highly pragmatic and clinically focused can be disillusioning to practitioners who are seeking answers to their own ineffable spiritual quest, and there is a tendency for the notion of spirit in TCM to pick up a wide variety of baggage based upon whatever expectations a practitioner projects unto it.

Since I spend a great deal of my time in Chinese society and primarily read books in Chinese, the most important issues to me regarding *shen* are fine details in clarity and understanding. I feel that some of the elements of *shen* are a bit nebulous and elusive to definition, and I try to gain clarity and fill

the holes in my own conceptual understanding by seeking advice from senior practitioners as well as textbooks, dictionaries, and classical works. However, my own personal quest to understand the subtle nuances of *shen* takes a backseat when I am teaching classes at a school in California. In the latter context, the major issues I see are issues of basic concept transmission rather than analysis of subtle academic nuances. I think that the key issues regarding *shen* jump to the forefront when I am in California—the most important thing to clarify is no longer the interpretation of a *Nei Jing* statement, but rather a big picture focus on the differences between similar notions such as spirit (*shen*), mind (*zhi*), thought (*yi*), *hun*, *po*, and so on. These can be some pretty heavy and nebulous concepts, and chances are that we will need our entire community to come together to research these topics through many articles such as this one before we can be truly confident that these concepts have been adequately transmitted into the English language.

**Bruce Ferguson, Murdoch,
Western Australia**

What do you think shen is? Or how would you define the concept of shen?

I agree with completely with Maciocia. First, it is the activity of thinking, consciousness, insight, and memory; therefore it refers to the functions of the Western “mind.” Second, *shen* indicates the complex of all five mental-spiritual aspects of a living being: the mind, the ethereal soul (*hun*), the corporeal soul (*po*), the intellect (*yi*) and the willpower (*zhi*). Last, *shen* is the poorly definable and subtle quality of “life” or “glitter” that can be observed in a healthy being.

How does the shen affect your practice?

Two ways. Gives predictive power for response to treatment. Poor *shen*, generally poor response. Good *shen*, generally good response. Second, changes in *shen* implicate the TCVM [8] heart/*xin* in the disharmony. I will commonly find heart *qi*, *yin*, and/or blood vacuity as root or *ben*.

What do you see as the role of shen in TEAM?

As above, and when diagnosis is made, treatment is then possible with acupuncture (e.g., HT-7, PC-6, CV-17, **Anshen**), herbs (e.g., *Tian Wan Bu Xin Tang* for heart *yin*/blood vacuity) or TCVM food therapy (e.g., the longan).

What issues are important for you in trying to understand the concept of shen in the West, in China, and/or Japan?

None, it is self-evident.

**Miguel Angel Cabrer Mir,
Barcelona, Spain**
Shen, Tai ji quan and Acupuncture

The meaning of *shen* has different interpretations in the history of Chinese thought. The purpose of this article is to investigate different references to *shen* in the classic texts of *tai ji quan* and show how these ideas relate to the practice of acupuncture. Physical posture, state of mind, and a sense of touch are all encompassed in the concept of *shen* and are equally essential in the arts of *tai ji quan* and acupuncture.

In various texts from the third and fourth centuries BCE, an era when the concept of *shen* experienced a transformation, we can find many references to these three aforementioned aspects. Before this era, *shen* was seen as a separate entity to which offerings were made in the belief that this would influence the outcome of certain aspects of human society (agriculture, illness, warfaring).

In the third and fourth centuries BCE, texts of the *Nei Ye*, *Zhuangzi* and second-century BCE text, the *Huainanzi*, *shen* becomes a quality that anyone can attain with dedicated practice: a quality of consciousness that enables us to perceive constant change and transformation:

[Y]in changes into yang and yang changes into yin. *Yi Jing* [ERV4]

An important element in this continuous transformation is the pivot, *ji*. In the *Yi Jing*, access to the pivot or incipient movement is related to the quality of *shen*. The following quotes suggest a direct link between the



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understanding of *ji* (the pivot) and the spiritual *shen*:

The Master said, "To understand the ji, is this not a matter of the numinous!" Xici Zhuan [9]

The Master said, "He who knows the way of alternations and transformations understands what it is the spirits (shen) do. [10]

The literature of *tai ji quan* also talks of "comprehending the pivot" (*deji*). In the practice of *tai ji quan* this incipient movement is the ability to sense the movement of the other person before it happens. In acupuncture this applies to sensing the precise moment when and where to realize the puncture.

The Physical Aspect: Posture

How can we attain the quality of *shen* and comprehend incipience (*ji*) through practical physical training?

If the spirit of vitality (jing shen) can be raised then there will be no apprehension, dullness or heaviness. This is what is meant by suspending the crown of the head. [11]

Postural alignment is necessary to permit the installation of *jing shen*. The experience of a body with *jing shen* is quite the opposite of dullness or heaviness. For this reason, the practice of *tai ji quan* emphasizes the natural pursuit of a relaxed posture (*sung*). This is an alert relaxation where the body is prepared for action. Some *tai ji quan* masters have used the image of a cat observing a mouse hole to describe this state of being prepared for action but without tension in the waiting.

In the *Nei Ye* we also find references to physical posture as an important element of the practice:

*If you can be aligned and be tranquil
Only then can you be stable. (Cap VIII)
When your body is not aligned
The inner power will not come. (Cap XI) [12]*

The Mental Aspect: State of Mind

Throughout the whole body, the intent (yi) is on the spirit of vitality (jing shen) not on the qi.

If it is on the qi, then there will be stagnation. [13]

Here are two important concepts in the practice of *tai ji quan* and acupuncture, *qi* and *yi*. *Yi* is a mental activity. The result of this activity will vary greatly depending on whether the mind is calm and relaxed or disturbed by desires and emotions. A still mind has the power to reflect and flow like water. If we hold the *yi* in the *qi* we lose this quality, the mind, like the water, stagnates and cannot reflect with clarity:

*When water is still, it reflects one's beard and moustache clearly
Its level-ness corresponds to the carpenter's level and the great craftsman takes his standard from it. If water, when it is still, is so clear, then how much more the quintessential spirit (jing shen).*

The mind/heart of the sage is clear. It is the jian-mirror of heaven and earth and the jing mirror of the myriad of living things. [14] [ERV5]

The Aspect of Contact: Sense of Touch

From comprehending energy (*dongjin*) you will attain by degrees spiritual illumination (*shen ming*). [13]

This paragraph is directly related to the practice of *tui shou* (listening with the hands). It is the practice of touch and the way in which we maintain contact with the other person. It is of vital importance. Before we can understand energy we need to know how to listen (*ting*) putting into practice all the previously mentioned qualities (relaxed body, still mind). There is a phrase used to describe the practice of *tui shou* that defines how we may maintain this contact: "adhere, connect, stick, follow, without letting go or resisting" [15]. It is curious how the two qualities that directly refer to the way of connecting with the other person, adhere and stick, include the character *zhan*, which has connotations relating to divination. On a certain level there is a link between divination and the way of listening, which comes from a still mind and relaxed body. We can also relate this quality of touch to the practice of acupuncture. How we carry out the punc-

ture, where we find the point of puncture, the moment in which we remove the needle... where does all this stem from? We have the choice. Either we can be guided by the theory of where to find the points from acupuncture charts, or we can be guided by this sense of touch and listen to what we perceive in the moment.

The qualities of *shen* encompass the totality of our physical and mental being, and at the same time our way of maintaining contact with the world around us. A natural posture, which allows us to relax and keep the mind at peace, enables us to create a space of stillness, *shen*. From this stillness, we achieve a more subtle quality of consciousness, which permits us to perceive the incipient movements of constant change and transformation (*ji*), which can bring us to a greater depth of understanding and practice in the arts of *tai ji quan* and acupuncture.



Terms

adhere and stick ■, ■

zhan ■ 000

deji ■■ 000

jing shen ■■

shen ming ■■■■

yi ■

song ■

dong jin ■■

Lillian Bridges, Kirkland, Washington, US

What do you think shen is?

Or how would you define the concept of shen?

Shen, in my opinion, is one of the most important aspects in facial diagnosis and Chinese medical diagnosis. Of course, there are many references to *shen* in the *Nei Jing* and other ancient texts. *Shen* was taught to me as being the light in the eyes and skin that shows the nature of an individual's spirit. This light was best when it was luminous and the quality was once described as the eyes being "backlit" and the skin as "glowing." *Shen* can also be described as the connection to the cosmological *qi* or the embodiment of gathered *ling* from the heavens that gives people their individual spirit. *Shen* is a motivating energy that resides

in the heart and brain as a higher (transcendent) level of fire energy. *Shen* can be felt as well as seen and this can be called "intuition," but to me describes transmission of energy between two people.

Shen is also the way that people transmit emotions non-verbally as the light in the eyes change with each emotion. Further research has shown me that you cannot control the light in the eyes (unlike body language), and changes in the quality of light are determined by the autonomic nervous system functioning. Therefore, reading *shen* is an excellent way of determining whether or not someone is telling the truth or if they are lying. This of course, is a very valuable use of *shen*. *Shen* disturbances indicate an imbalance in the emotions and/or the brain functioning (or mental illness) and can be quite easily seen in the eyes.

How does the shen affect your practice?

I use *shen* reading on a regular basis and consider it one of my most important diagnostic tools. I evaluate a client's *shen* upon their arrival for a consultation and monitor it during the session. I expect that a client's *shen* will clear and get brighter by the time they leave or I have not done my job well! I teach about *shen*, *shen* reading, and *shen* disturbances all over the world to acupuncturists, as I consider it a vital for diagnosis, evaluation, and treatment. Furthermore, *shen* management is something I believe strongly in as I work with the psychological and emotional underlay of disease. For example, many diseases have trapped fire as an underlying cause and this trapped fire (pain) is often old emotional issues and wounds that are unresolved and manifest as physical ailments and illnesses. Old traumas are easily seen as the markings of the facial map (discovered as the first page of the oldest manuscript in TCM ever found by Dr. Paul Unschuld). Therefore, I link *shen* as a sign or guide to the use of *jing* (essence) (and the will to live), which is affected by human suffering.

What do you see as the role of shen in TEAM?

I believe that *shen* should be taught more and be given more importance in TEAM. Because it

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is often viewed as being one of the more “esoteric” aspects of TCM and because so many schools are using Western models of education and research, *shen* is viewed with some reservations. However, I cannot stress enough that the ability to read *shen* is the equivalent of psychiatry or psychology in Western medicine, as the qualities of *shen* give direct access to the mind and emotions of patients. Using *shen* as a diagnostic tool would significantly increase the understanding of a practitioner, facilitate more compassion (as *shen* is felt and could be called bedside manner) and would enhance the healing process.

What issues are important for you in trying to understand the concept of shen in the West, in China, and/or in Japan?

Although I believe I have a good understanding of *shen*, there is always more to learn! I would enjoy seeing some research about it and would certainly find it valuable to learn about how other practitioners understand *shen* and use it.

Shen Management

Most of the focus of TCM in modern times has been to treat disease. And although acupuncturists are much better at preventative medicine than most Western physicians, there is an aspect of prevention and treatment that is often overlooked—*shen* management. The *Nei Jing* states, “Overindulgence in the five emotions—happiness, anger, sadness, worry or fear, and fright—can create imbalances. Emotions can injure the *qi*... Failing to regulate one’s emotions can be likened to summer and winter failing to regulate each other, threatening life itself” [16].

In the past, it was quite common for people to repress their emotions. This was part of the social norm. According to the principles of TCM, this under-use or over-regulation of emotions also contributed to many diseases and illnesses. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that psychotherapy became such an important profession in the Western world. It was necessary and helpful for people to uncover long-buried traumas and hurts. Numerous treatments were developed to help people

learn to express themselves. As psychology became more mainstream, it was believed that people seeking psychological health needed to learn to express themselves.

There is no question that freedom of expression is a valuable thing and that releasing emotions is healthy. Unfortunately, much of the quality of expression has intensified so that the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction. There is now an outpouring of emotion that can be seen on a daily basis. It is quite common for people in severe grief to be shown on television sobbing and wailing at the loss of a loved one. This mental emotion was once expressed only in private situations. The deeply personal has become a public spectacle. Anger is currently one of the most socially acceptable emotions and is seen and expressed in numerous ways, even directed at strangers who happen to be in the way. Parents worry so much about their children’s safety that an entire industry has been created to childproof home environments. Excessive excitement artificially generated by reality television contests, game shows, and talk shows create frenzy in the viewers. And recent catastrophes both human-made and geological are of a magnitude not seen in generations, unleashing tremendous amounts of fear around the world.

Emotions are both necessary and even helpful to living except when over-used, but the ancients cautioned heavily against overindulgence in the five emotions. Although extreme expression is temporarily cathartic, if continued, it ultimately leads to diseases of *jing* and *qi* vacuity that shorten the lifespan. It helps create chronic and debilitating illnesses that are occurring at younger and younger ages and encourages accidents and injuries. Practitioners can monitor excessive use or under-use of emotions by evaluating the *shen* of their patients’ eyes and facial coloration.

Vacuous *qi* is seen as a dullness or shallowness of light in the eyes. If the *shen* of the eyes is murky, the patient is in the midst of emotional turmoil. In contrast, someone who is healthy and vital shows signs of strong *qi*, which is seen as a light brightness or glow in

the eyes. One of the most confusing aspects about *shen* is how temporary it is and how easily it fluctuates. *Shen* is activated by the autonomic nervous system and is impossible to conceal except by covering the eyes. Chronic *shen* disturbance indicates mental imbalance or mental illness. If the eyes are consistently very dull, this is an indication of repressed brain activity, which includes severe depression or illness that creates anhedonia. If however, the light of the eyes is too bright, this, if temporary, could indicate fever. If this excessive brightness continues for any length of time, it is a clear sign of mania. Continuous confusion in the eyes can be a sign of mental deficiency and is symptom in a disease like Alzheimer's. Craftiness is a sign of paranoia and a glazed look is a sign of substance abuse or when severe, indicates psychosis.

But most *shen* changes are rapid, and for practitioners it is advantageous to learn how to read even momentary changes in the eyes that indicate flashes of emotion. Recognizing these changes can help guide the course of conversations and help determine treatments. Fear shows as a sudden startle response and then a rapid lowering of *qi* so that the *shen* becomes muddled. Anger is seen as an intense focusing of *qi* in the eyes and creates hardness in the *shen*. Excitement at first creates an attractive sparkle, but this light is transitory and soon fizzles. It is easily seen as scattered *qi*. Worry causes the *shen* to vibrate and even the eyeballs themselves will either move back and forth, up and down or around and is often accompanied by a similar head movement. Grief causes the *qi* to dissipate and there is a lifelessness and darkness to the *shen*. When an emotion is felt for any length of time, it will be held in the body—not just in the organ responsible for its transmission, but also in whatever organs are weakest. Then, it shows on the face as skin coloration.

Lustrous colors of the face indicate that a patient is healthy. Any of the five element colors is acceptable as long as it appears as if the color has been wrapped in white cloth, meaning it has lightness on top. For example, the most beautiful skin color is described as white cloth covering cinnabar. Another ancient anal-

ogy of healthy skin color is when it has the appearance of a ripe peach. But when a patient is unhealthy, the various colors show up on specific parts of the face indicating the organ involved. The five basic colors show whether a certain organ has been compromised by over-use or under-use physically and/or emotionally. Stagnation is seen as darkness, inflammation is redness, frozen or immobilized *qi* shows up as whiteness, toxicity is green and putrefaction is a yellow or sallow coloration. These colors, of course, can be seen in combination. When the color covers the entire face, the illness is considered very deep and dangerous.

The increasing amount of disease and illness already occurring and potentially threatened reveals the need for more even more prevention. Renewing the practice of *shen* management is therefore wise. This means that individuals need to take responsibility for their emotions and learn to regulate their expression in appropriate and moderate ways. Although certain times and circumstances in life require expression, other times require observation and contemplation. One of the most valuable techniques that can be practiced is "compassionate detachment." By feeling compassion, you remain involved but do not take on other's suffering as your own. You remove yourself slightly if it is not about you and yet you still care. However, the desperate and pervasive need for attention is fueling the emotional drama. People claim they want peace, but peace is not possible as long as emotions are flaring.

For health practitioners, you owe it to your patients to manage your own *shen* and teach this ability. Work on your issues and clear your mind. Healing can be amplified when you come from a place of inner quietude and love. The quality of *shen* that appears from this state of being is beautifully soft and translucent like clear pools of water. The eyes glow with the light of an illuminated mind. As TCM has always been concerned with balance, managing *shen* is one way to achieve some much-needed equilibrium in our increasingly chaotic world.

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Yair Maimon, Tel Aviv, Israel

What do you think shen is? Or how would you define the concept of shen?

Shen is to do with anything that is greater than the way we normally perceive life. It is the true inspiration, the unity that lies beyond our perception of reality. Reality to us is on the level of the *yin* and *yang*, the manifestation of life on earth. But the outmost power that lies beyond matter, life, and death is the *shen*. It represents the oneness, the power of heaven.



There are five aspects of *shen in-me*. And in order to understand them one needs to cross the boundaries of earth and human beings, space and time and be moved by heaven:

1. in-tuition
2. in-spiration
3. in-tention
4. in-spection
5. inter-action

Intuition represents a true moment when the heart is empty and we are moved to do the right thing at the right time. *Inspiration* is when we grasp the very core of something and we are connected to the source; the fountain of life, the place where our spirit feels it is at home connected to a greater source of life. It is a gentle peaceful place full of love and possibilities. *Intention* is when we act from this very place of inspiration and share our wealth with others. *Inspection* is to see the true *shen* of anything we look at and at the same time to note the mutual interplay of life. *Interaction* is to be present and sense the *shen* of everything surrounding you, a rare moment that happens in true love, true inspiration, and in the clinic when we treat someone.

How does the shen affect your practice?

The great acupuncturist is an artist and a wise person with a generous heart... his hand is guided to the "places" of the body where the spirit is rooted... the acupuncturist will himself be guided by his own spirit. He calls heaven and earth to the points where

their meeting gives birth to life... [17]

This quote, so nicely written by Larre and Rochat de la Vallée, is the northern star that guides me in the practice. There is nothing greater than to guide a patient to his or her true inspiration to the place where there are no fears. Where he or she can clearly see his or her own path in life, what is probably called in Chinese philosophy the *dao*. A place of effortless health and peace.

When I practice, this is what I try to see in my patient and this is where I try to guide the *qi*. Although it is hard to avoid the suffering and the pain that the patient comes in with, I believe that addressing and clearly recognizing his or her *shen* is the true and deep work of an acupuncturist. Actually, patients bring to the treatment their very pain, which they want to get rid of, but at the same time their spirit is there, this spirit that is anchored in the heart. This spirit—*shen*—is the true reason why they came to treatment.

What do you see as the role of shen in TEAM?

It is like music in an orchestra. Each person has his or her own tune and together they make something harmonious. Once I heard some music created by a group of Buddhist monks from a monastery in Tibet. Each sat there for a few moments and then put out his own tune; together they gave this amazing harmonious tune. Later I was told that when they were recorded for an album they each recorded on their own. Each one kept his very original tune. They had exactly the same tune when they were alone and when they were in a group nothing affected this fine-tuning. When a team allows each individual to be him or herself, this means that respect, love, and deep tranquility may be felt, then a harmonious inspirational work is carried on.

What issues are important for you in trying to understand the concept of shen in the West, in China, and/or Japan?

To have detailed information on conception, birth, and death as viewed in Ancient China.

**Dianne Sommers, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands****A Personal Interpretation of the Spirit or Shen**

From the moment I started studying TCM and encountered their idea of the spirit or *shen*, I have been struggling with its interpretation. Teachers explained it to me in various ways, books pointed out that in different times there were different explanations, so what it really was, could only be my personal distillation out of these diverse ideas. When pondering over this concept, I deal with the tenuous distinctions between mind and body and between energy and matter, terrains that also provoked great debate in the history of Western philosophy. Although these distinctions were never made in the early Chinese literature, we commonly think in these concepts and use this terminology to express our thoughts. Where *qi* is the universal energy and matter that makes up all physical and psychological phenomena, *shen* is formed by a concept that encompasses our ideas of mind and body. Translations for the term are plenty—*numen*, spirit, God, soul—but none of these terms can fully grasp the Chinese meaning. So how is it possible to get a better idea of what they are talking about? Sources that provided me hints and clues toward a better understanding came from ancient books but especially from the *Nei Ye* chapter of a late fourth-century BC philosophical text *Guanzi*.

The *Nei Ye* chapter points out how we can cultivate ourselves and fully develop our human capacities. By showing how the processes in us are functioning, by making us understand the workings of our inner system, the Chinese text gives us a tool for a better comprehension of ourselves. The goal is to develop into a more powerful being, in such a way that nothing in the world can unsettle your life. Humans capable of doing this have developed their body and inner self. In classical texts, these people are called *sheng ren* or holy ones. But how is this development possible and what is the role of the spirit in it? The *Nei Ye* describes how we can grasp this “essence,” which is defined as the principle that generates everything, and how we can keep it in our

lives [ERV6]. It is everywhere around us, and if you can grasp this essence or *shen* and store it in your breast, you will be called a holy one:

*The essence: through it all things are formed and generated
Down here it generates the five grains
Up there it forms the constellation of stars
When it moves between heaven and earth
We call it ghosts and spirits
But who stores it in his breast
We call a holy one. [18]*

This vital energy of the spirit cannot be forced to enter, but with the inherent power or *de*, the force within by which the true nature of life can be expressed, it is possible to make it come to rest in you. It does not simply come whenever we call it, we can only welcome it with our intention. In the classical text this is called “to perfect the Power”:

*Therefore this vital force
Cannot be stopped with violence
But with the Power you can give it peace
You cannot call it with your voice
But you can welcome it with your intention
Hold it respectfully and do not lose it
This is called “to perfect the Power.”[18]*

When the Power comes to perfection, the heart is filled and gets its correct form. This is called the “way” or *dao*. Confusion of the senses should be avoided, because they lead us off the way. Only in stillness can the way be followed and will the spirit come towards you. The spirit is a free energy and has no fixed place, but it will reside in the heart when this heart is calm and peaceful. This spirit has great capacities, but its presence in us is not self-evident: its shelter (the heart) must be kept clean in a respectful way. This means that desire and emotions should not get a chance to confuse the heart in order for the essence to come naturally:

*Nobody knows the limits of the spirit
But it is radiant in its knowledge of the ten thousand things
“Grasping the middle way” is what we call:*

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*Keeping the middle way without deviation
Do not let things confuse your senses
Do not let your senses confuse your heart
There is a spirit by nature in us
It comes and goes
No one is capable of grasping this totally
Lose it, and certainly disorder will arise
Grasp it, and certainly order will arise
Keep its shelter clean with respect
And the essence will come by itself. [18]*

If you turn in upon yourself and if you still your thoughts, the spirit will stabilize itself. It acts there as a basis for numerous possibilities and a source of infinite creativity. The question is, are we capable of doing this? Are we able to store this spirit in our breast? The message of the *Nei Ye* is that you have to search for it by yourself, because there is no other way than through your inner self. Reflection on this inner self is the credo that the text emphasizes:

*By concentration of your vital essence
as the spirit used to do
The ten thousand things will be completely
stored inside you
Can you effect such a concentration?
Can you unify like this?
Can you know the future without divination?
Can you hold, do you know when to stop?
Can you find it in yourself, without searching
for it in others?
Think about this! Think about this!
And think about this again!*

The “way” is without emotions that disturb the heart, and goes smoothly with the flow of things. By keeping this regularity and balance in our life, the spirit stays in its favorite shelter—the heart. Only when this place is kept “clean,” without waste and garbage, is it possible to keep the spirit stored in the breast. Then you will not be tempted by your thoughts, the body will be peaceful, and we can keep our balance:

*Make your heart big and give it space
Relax your vital energy and spread it out
Your body will be at peace and not be disturbed
You can stick to the One, undisturbed by ten
thousand small things*

*Seeing advantage, without being tempted
Seeing disadvantage, without being afraid
Relaxed and at peace, but with compassion
Finding joy only in yourself
This is what we call “making vital energy into
clouds”
Because your intentions and movements
resemble those of heaven. [18]*

Through this text I did not learn what spirit is (because I still don’t know that), but I did learn how I can approach the idea of the spirit. That it is not about the precise definition, but about how to make contact with what this spirit is and means. Or even better: how spirit can come to me, contact *me* and touch my inner self. That which “touches” us, is what life is about. Understanding these inner workings is being aware of the connectedness of the spirit with my body, to make sure there is a place where it will be welcomed and heard. Stillness, without all kinds of distraction and interference, is an important key and makes it possible to listen to what it has to say to me.

Clemens Prost, Berlin, Germany

The *shen* or the mind is the underlying fundamental principle of our feeling, intention, and thinking. The qualities of the *shen* are clearness and cognitive faculties. That means it is not important which emotion someone has, what they want, and what they feel. It is important how they can feel, how they can want, and how they can think, the self-awareness for someone’s feeling, intention, and thinking. Through the ability to become aware to our feeling, intention, and thinking, we gain the ability to create or change consciously the underlying fundamental principle of our feeling, intention, and thinking.

TEAM is a holistic method, to understand and treat persons. The use and understanding of the term holistic is quite different in TEAM. One understanding of the term holistic is to use the concept of the *san bao* (three treasures). The three treasures (*jing*, *qi*, *shen*) are three levels of human being, or three levels of human manifestation. *Jing* is the material level, *qi* is the energetic level, and *shen* is the mental/spiritual level. The mental/spiritual

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level organizes, determines, and creates the energetic level. The energetic level organizes, determines, and creates the material level.

For treatment it means, if the patient has *xue xu*/blood vacuity, there are three levels, on which you can treat:

- On the material level, the *jing* level, you can substitute blood, or substances that the body needs to create new blood.
- On the energetic level, the *qi* level, you can tonify or regulate the *qi* and so the body can rebuild new blood.
- On the mental/spiritual level, the level of the *shen*, you can support consciousness and clearness, so that the energetic level and the material level can create new blood.

In practice it means if the patient comes to me, I can decide on which level or levels I would like to treat the patient. If I am successful in supporting the patient in their conscious perception of their feeling, intention, and thinking, they are able to change their behavior and their habits. My experience is that to help the patient to be more aware of their feeling, intention, and thinking is the most intensive impulse, to help them to create a fundamental modification in their life.

In my work, I try to reach the *shen* of the patient by talking, with *qi gong*, or meditation exercises, and mainly with acupuncture using special needle techniques. It is important that each acupuncture point has the potential to support the *shen*.

Peter Firebrace, London, UK

Shen

Is there something bright as sunlight so clear and so clean?

Something always peaceful, always tranquil and serene?

Does it come from the timeless or from a time long ago?

Where exactly did the spirits of my ancestors go? I've heard of the shen though I've never seen it But then I was pre-natal once though I don't remember being it

Shen is that something that can't be defined

Like you can't make a circle with only straight lines

They say it's not yang and they say it's not yin Though it shines from the eyes and it's felt deep within

You can't drown it in water you can't burn it in fire

It'll always be with you even when you're down to the wire

You know that it's close when everything's brighter

You feel free and easy, uplifted and lighter

You know that you've lost it when the world turns gray

When life's storms and rain clouds hide the sun away

You know that you're close when you feel life's full of space

You're not just chained down and stuck between a rock and a hard place

The shen's in the blood, the shen's in the heart It'll be with you at the end as it was at the start

It's blocked by phlegm, it's scattered by fright It's dispersed by heat but in peaceful calm it grows bright

Jing can be seen in sperm and ova

Qi we breathe in and out every day

Shen can't be seen, can't be felt, can't be heard But without it we'd never find the way

Jing, qi, shen, dao, they're the heart of now

The essence of life known unknown

There's a space without a place beyond time's ceaseless race

Beyond left and right beyond flesh, blood, and bone

Find it you're at rest and deeply refreshed

Lose it and you no longer feel at home

It's inaudible, invisible, unreachable, unteachable

An inexhaustible source of radiance in an ever-present zone. (Peter Firebrace)

How does the shen affect your practice?

Having wrestled for some years with trying to understand the *shen* (神) from Chinese classical sources (Chinese medical, daoist philosophical, and *neidan* (内丹) alchemical texts), I have realized that the problem is of equivalent complexity to trying to define God—with all the provision that it/he/she/they may not

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exist at all! From the *shen*'s earliest origins as spirits of the ancestors, then spirits of heaven (in contrast to the *gui* [鬼] spirits of earth), through being gods, genies, and divinities, to being powers beyond *yin–yang* (as in the *Yi Jing*) [ERV7] and therefore beyond rational comprehension, to being the manifestation of spirit in humankind (as in *Zhuangzi*), the *shen* are expressed through such key phrases as *jing shen* (精神), the perfect balance of water and fire, heart, and kidney in harmonious free communication, an expression of health and vitality itself or in *shen ming* (神明), the radiant illumination that gives perceptive intelligence, clarity of thought, and conscious awareness, manifesting as brightness of mind and warm generosity of spirit.

The *shen*'s indisputable links with the transcendent, place it in the realm of philosophy and religion, while the medical perspective's placing of the *shen* in the heart, in the blood, in the brain, make it eminently immanent, so we are left speechless (as perhaps we should be, in true daoist fashion!) before something indefinable, which we do not know whether it is singular or plural, let alone treatable or untreatable. Yet, it consistently appears as the most subtle and precious of the three treasures (*san bao* 三寶) and we are urged to go to the root of the *shen* (*ben shen* 本神) for full and effective treatment of illness (*Ling Shu* Chapter 2). Without it, there is sadness or madness, with it serenity and peace. It therefore appears as the crux of health itself.

It is crucial in my acupuncture practice—for myself as a practitioner and for the patients themselves. In abstract terms I might define it as a link with the limitless that will show in the traditional brightness of the eyes, an inner content not related to circumstance, an understanding and awareness that is full of brightness and spontaneity, an openness of the heart without pretension, an atmosphere of clarity and warmth. How to restore it when lost? Restore the balance of *yin–yang*, of taking in and giving out, of blood and *qi* that will nourish and move each other in perpetually circulating abundance. Bring harmony to the emotions, to the stability and serenity of the heart,

rooted and anchored in the kidneys, and the *shen* will return.

I have always found it interesting that “*shen* points,” that is, acupuncture points with the character *shen* (神) in their names, are clustered in four main areas of the body—at the navel, heart, head, and wrist. At the navel, itself known in ancient times as *ming men* (命門) the “gate of destiny,” we find ren-8 (*shen que* 神闕) the “watchtower of the *shen*,” just above the lower *dan tian* (下丹田), on the border between the middle and lower *jiao* and therefore perfectly placed to tonify the kidneys and spleen in cold vacuous exhaustion. Here we have our own personal “ancient” link to the ancestors through the umbilical cord in our pre-natal days, fed by the blood of the mother.

Around the heart, in most traditions, the middle *dan tian* (中丹田), we find a whole cluster of *shen* points. On the back, du-11 (*shen dao* 神道) “way of the *shen*,” so helpful in all kinds of depressive or manic states and BL-44 (*shen tang* 神堂), “hall of the *shen*,” useful in calming the heart, relaxing and opening the chest. At the sides, GB-23 (*zhe jin* 輒筋) flank muscles and GB-24 (*ri yue* 日月) sun and moon both refer to the *shen* in their common alternative name *shen guang* (神光) “light of the *shen*.” Both points help to free from stagnant liver *qi* causing sadness and sighing, GB-24, as *mu* point of the gallbladder, particularly moving the situation forward and clarifying with its incisive decision-making power. On the front, KI-23 (*shen feng* 神封) “sealing in the *shen*” and KI-25 (*shen cang* 神藏) “storing the *shen*” (so restoring it) help to balance fire and water as the kidney channel enters the heart area, calming, opening the chest and relieving oppressive anxiety. It is also interesting to note that ren-15 (*jiu wei* 鳩尾) “dove tail,” which has *shen fu* (神府) “storehouse of the *shen*” as its alternative name, has excellent calming, stabilizing effects in panic, anxiety, mental instability, and tightness of the chest.

On the head, above the eyes (described in ancient texts as *shen zhu* [神珠] “pearls of the *shen*,” where we can see the *shen ming* [神明] shine) and affecting the brain (*yuan shen zhi fu*, 元神之府, the storehouse of the original

shen), we have du-24 (*shen ting* 神庭) “court-yard of the *shen*,” where the *tai yang* bladder and *yang ming* stomach channels bring their strong *yang* influence and where the internal wind of epilepsy and wild mania can be calmed and cleared. Next to it du-23 (*shang xing* 星) “upper star” has as alternative names *shen tang* (神堂) “*shen* hall” and also *gui tang* (鬼堂) “demon hall” as well as *ming tang* (明堂) “bright hall” and is one of Sunsi Miao’s 13 *gui* (鬼) points for the treatment of possession. Here with the background of blocked sinus and thick phlegm congestion in the head, the patient is dull and apathetic, and dispersing the point restores the brightness of the *shen*. GB-13 (*ben shen* 本神) “root of the *shen*,” which reunites with the *yang wei mai*, can clear the wind of madness or epilepsy while restoring peace to the brain. With these *shen* points on the head we are not far from *yin tang* (印堂) “seal hall” and the calm detached serenity of the upper *dan tian* (上丹田).

At the wrist we find HT-7 (*shen men* 神門) “*shen* gate or door,” *yuan* (原) source point of the heart, though in some early texts such as *Ling Shu* Chapter 1 and *Nan Jing* Chapter 66, P-7 (*da ling* 大陵) “big mound” is used instead HT-7 is perhaps everyone’s favorite *shen* point, where we can open the door to let the *shen* back in or close the door to keep the *shen* safe inside. A door is a space in between and HT-7 (*shen men*) opens that space to restore free communication and a calm focus and concentration in fearful anxiety, memory loss, madness with sadness or laughter, the bipolar roller-coaster of emotional highs and lows.

As a final note, *shen* has great importance in the classic sexual texts, such as *He Yin Yang* (合陰陽) *Uniting Yin and Yang*. The clitoris is called *shen tian* (神田) the “field of the *shen*” or perhaps “to the *shen*.” Orgasm is described as *shen feng* (神風) the “wind of the *shen*” or again perhaps “the wind that takes you to the realm of the *shen*.” When man and woman fuse together in making love, there is no *yin*, no *yang*, each has gone beyond to be achieved and fulfilled in the other, returning to the regenerate transcendent source of *yin–yang*, the *shen*.

In conclusion, we may be unable to define *shen*, we may be uncertain as to its/their exact whereabouts, but we know when we are connected or disconnected. Treatment is one way to reconnect to the *shen*, allowing the *shen ming* (神明) to shine once again and full health to be restored.

Editorial Comments, by Elizabeth Rochat de la Vallée

- ERV1 This quote appears to come from a modern Chinese commentary on *Ling Shu* 8.
ERV2 This passage can also be found in the *Xici* or *Great Commentary* of the *Yi Jing*.
ERV3 This reflects most probably a modern Chinese perspective.
ERV4 Most probably from a commentary on the *Yi Jing* (since I do not have the exact text).
ERV5 This is a quotation from *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 13, *Tiandao*.
ERV6 It should be noted that in the *Nei Ye* the terms *shen* (spirit) and *jing* (essence) are often used interchangeably.
ERV7 Note that this is found in the *Xici* or *Great Commentary* on the *Yi Jing*.

Notes

1. Puett MJ. *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-divination in Early China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center; 2002.
2. For full translations of this text, see Rickett WA. *Guan Zi Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China. Volume II*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1998; Birch S, Felt RO. *Understanding Acupuncture*. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone; 1999 and Roth HD. *Original Tao—Inward Training (Nei-yeh)*. New York: Columbia University Press; 1999.
3. Harper D. *Early Chinese Medical Literature*. London: Kegan Paul International; 1998. Also, Rickett (1998) from Note 2.
4. Birch and Felt (1999), see Note 2.
5. *Nei Ye* IX, in Roth (1999) (see Note 2), p. 62.
6. Li Zhen Ji et al. *Zhong Yi Yao Chang Yong Ming Ci Shu Yu Ci Dian (Terminology Dictionary of Commonly Used Terms in Chinese Medicine)*. Beijing: Chinese Press of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Zhong Guo Zhong Yi Yao Chu Ban She); 2001. 李吉主编. 中医药常用名词术语辞典. 北京:

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中国; 2001. This text was a major resource for this article, and I am deeply indebted to Professor Wang Kui of the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (Beijing) for introducing me to this work.

7. Wiseman N, Feng Y. *A Practical Dictionary of Chinese Medicine*. Brookline, MA: Paradigm Publications; 1998. The true credit for much of this work goes to Nigel Wiseman and Feng Ye, both for their inspirational words and for the wealth of knowledge preserved through their texts. Their foundational work has made the Chinese literature accessible for me and countless others, and their tireless effort to preserve concepts has helped to make this entire discussion possible in the English-speaking world.

8. TCVM is Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine. Dr Ferguson is a veterinarian.

9. From R.J. Lynn. *I Ching*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.

10. *Xici Zhuan* from Michael J. Puett. *To Become a God*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center; 2002.

11. Wu Yuxiang. *The Mental Elucidation of the Thirteen Postures*.

12. Roth (1999), see Note 2.

13. Wang Zongyue. *The Tai Ji Quan Treatise* in Fu Zhongwen. *Mastering Yang Style Taijiquan*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1999.

14. 13 *Tian Dao*, p. 457 in Sarah Allan. *The Way of Water*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press; 1997.

15. Wang Zongyue. The song of pushing hands in the *Tai Ji Quan Treatise*, see Note 13.

16. Ni Maoshing PhD. *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*. Boston: Shambhala; 1995:19.

17. Larre C, Rochat de la Vallée. *Rooted in Spirit. The Heart of Chinese Medicine*. New York: Station Hill Press; 1995:81.

18. From the *Nei Yin* chapter of the *Guanzi*.

Contact Details

