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SHEN RESIDES IN THE BLOOD: A UNIFIED THEORY OF BLOOD AND THE SPIRIT OF THE HUMAN BEING FROM CLASSICAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Kellyn Adams, ND LAc

SUMMARY: This article explores, as explained by the classical textbooks of Chinese Medicine, a false dichotomy between the physical and spiritual constituents of circulation, blood and shen. By demonstrating the relationship between structure and function within circulation, the truly integrated nature of the two seemingly separate aspects of blood and shen becomes clear, from a Chinese cosmological perspective. Blood and shen are the objective and subjective expressions of spirit within the human being; they are a unification of material and divine that creates the unique position of humanity as standing upright between heaven and earth.

Introduction

“Thus physiology falls into two parts which are not easily separated, i.e., into a physical part and a spiritual part. In reality these are inseparable, but

the researcher in this field may start out from one side or the other and thus lend the greater weight to one or the other. (4, p. 59)”

While the Western biomedical view of blood is strictly physical and objective, the Classical Chinese

Medicine approach is broader, as it includes a subjective and spiritual consideration as well. In the classical Chinese Medical literature, the physical blood would be unable to serve its functions without the presence of the spiritual substance, *shen*, within. The aim of this article is to illuminate the physical and spiritual features of blood leading to conversion rather than diversion of understanding.

A NOTE ON YIN-YANG THEORY

Yin-yang theory is essential to understanding Chinese medicine in particular and Chinese philosophy in general. It can be understood in the following way: each singular concept implies opposite properties of that concept, and both of these diametric conceptual poles exist upon one spectrum of being, inextricably connected as part of a unified whole. This interaction of counterparts gives birth to the complexity of life and generates the patterns of nature that allow for communication and transformation.

PERSPECTIVES ON BLOOD AND SHEN

Shen resides in the blood. Blood provides structure to shen and the ability to communicate with heaven, allowing for a life in harmony with nature. Both the production of blood and its essential function to human physiology rely upon its proper movement through circulation, which is established by shen and the natural patterns of yin and yang to ensure smooth and continuous movement of blood. Spirit is effused throughout the universe, but is only observable when contained. In the case of the human being, the blood is that container. Because blood contains shen, the human being may maintain health by appreciating the rhythms of nature through the movement of yin and yang.

WHAT IS BLOOD?

From Unschuld, Prolegomena:

“We are aware of a widespread hesitation to translate certain anatomical terms, such as *xue* or *gan*, with their English morphological equivalents blood or liver, respectively. The different physiological and pathological functions assigned to these and other fluids and tissues in ancient China have led many to prefer a *pinyin* transliteration over a literal translation. Our approach here takes a different path. If a morphological-anatomical unit has been identified as such in the Chinese text, it is translated with its vernacular equivalent in English. Functions do change over time, and it is to be expected that a reader of a historical text will be aware of this...The ancient Chinese naturalists had a very clear perception of...liver and blood as distinct morphological/physical entities. But even a cursory reading of the text shows that the functions assigned to these entities in the ancient Chinese interpretation of the organism differ from today’s understanding. It cannot be the task of a translation to reflect these dynamics by modifying the morphological terminology. The physiological concepts we associate with blood at the beginning of the 21st century differ greatly from the established knowledge of even as short a time ago as the 19th century. Still, we continue to speak of blood as far as the morphological fact is concerned. The same should apply to a translation of ancient Chinese morphological designations.”ⁱⁱ

Unschuld explains here that although the known functional details of blood have evolved over time in the West through scientific study, the use of the term ‘blood’ is neither incorrect nor misleading when applied to both medieval and modern versions of the term. The same applies to the Chinese concept. Certainly, the “functions of [blood according to an ancient] Chinese interpretation... differ from today’s understanding” but the “morphological designations” remain the same.

A current scientific definition of blood is plasma and cellular elements. The cellular elements are erythrocytes, leukocytes and platelets, derived from bone marrow. Plasma is the extracellular liquid matrix of blood. It carries the cellular elements, most notably in Chinese medicine, erythrocytes, as well as proteins such as albumin, lipoproteins, clotting factors, glucose, electrolytes, amino acids, fatty acids, hormones, and more. These constituents feed the tissues in different ways from the erythrocytes, and maintain the fluid and electrolyte balance through osmotic force and protein reserve. However, the erythrocyte content of blood with the main function of oxygen delivery for cellular energy manufacture serves as both the structural and functional locus of the varying concepts of blood as it has evolved across time and space (in Chinese medicine). All blood elements contribute essential functions, but a narrowed focus upon the red cells within the vasculature to compare Western and Chinese concepts of blood provides clarity without sacrificing accuracy.

According to Chinese theory, the classical concept of blood can be defined in the following way: blood is a red liquid substance that travels within the vessels under the dominion of the heart and along a route and circadian cycle that is established by the natural patterns that emerge from the interaction between the earth and the greater universe. This movement within the human body is reliant upon the inhalation of air and the consumption of foods, along with proper metabolism to distill and construct the blood. Without this proper coursing, essential nourishment cannot be delivered for the purposes of either maintaining health or effective treatment of disease. Therefore, it is precious to the human being and both deserving and demanding of careful attention.

Thus, when the ancients referred to blood in the classics, they were speaking of the same red-colored, viscous fluid that travels in our vasculature to deliver necessary functional material to organs and tissues. It is possible that one reason for this preternaturally accurate understanding was, in fact,

because the Chinese medical authors lacked the technology that allows for microscopic understanding of its various particulate constituents; their concept of blood was not limited by a Western reductionist mindset. This mindset regards only the observable as worthy of study, disregarding spiritual elements. Understanding the microscopic constituents is an essential starting point; how and by what means the constituents interact with their environment must follow, and inevitably requires analysis of unobservable elements or forces. For the Chinese medical authors, the mysterious and unseen aspects of physiology were not seen as limiting, but merely realistic.

THE CHINESE CHARACTER AND ITS DEFINITION

The Chinese language is a symbolic, as opposed to English, which is a phonetic language. This means that representations of words are not made up of pieces of sound, or phonemes, which when strung together in proper order indicate meaning learned through memorization. Rather, Chinese words are written as symbols, representations of meaning that include history and context. The study of the characters themselves can lend vital insight to the development of the concepts being represented.



Xue (also xie): blood

The Chinese character is the symbol for a vase with an added mark above indicating that the vase is used to contain sacrificial bloodⁱⁱⁱ. There are two notable implications here: first, that the blood is represented only not as fluid itself, but as its own container, and second, that the concept of blood is inseparable from the concept of sacrifice to god/spirit. Taken quite literally, the two parts of *xue* mean simply ‘vessel of spirit’.

The Chinese symbol inherently informs the reader that blood functions as a vessel itself. The

representation of blood as both the substance and its containment is another illustration of the concept of blood as the structural vehicle for spirit, and further evidence of the Chinese consideration of its coexistence within the earthly, human, and heavenly realms. The construction of blood, as will be explained in the Classical texts, demonstrates that its very formation is based upon the fusion of physical material with the breath of heaven.

Certainly, the physiological travelling of blood within the vasculature and its interaction with vascular endothelium, capillary beds, and the tissues of the body in a dynamic, nutritive way is an integral aspect of its physical functioning; but the definition of *xue* itself is separate from that of the blood vessels, *mai*. Endothelial interactions are indeed essential to the function of blood as we now understand it, but the Chinese concept of this red-colored ‘vessel of spirit’ was not speaking to anything other than the erythrocytes themselves as the containers of spirit, offering the ephemeral a structure and thus ability to move in the physical realm. The biomedical information about the structure and function of the erythrocyte, containing hemoglobin with an iron core with incredibly efficient oxygen binding and delivery function, fulfills the Chinese definition of *xue* readily and completely. This makes clear that that which makes blood red—erythrocytes carrying oxygen—is the crucible for communication with spirit itself.

WHAT IS SHEN?

From Unschuld, *Prolegomena*:

“It would be futile to search in Chinese for a conceptual equivalent to the European ‘spirit’, as there is no Chinese term that could be used to include meanings ranging from Holy Spirit to methylated spirit.^{iv}”

The primary translation for the Chinese word ‘shen’ in English is ‘spirit’, listed in Harbough’s *Dictionary* are also ‘god’ and ‘soul’; his translation of ‘shen qi’ is ‘miraculous, mystical’. Claude Larre and Elisabeth

Rochat de la Vallee define ‘shen’ as “Spirits. Divinities. The vital principle. Something marvelous.”^v These terms evoke scores of variations upon spiritual and religious themes, the shared property of which is the inexplicable; they rely upon acknowledgement of the unseen, the unknown for their existence. They are subjective experiences of individual human life, not objective data that can be measured and compared.

Paul Unschuld adds a parenthetical to his translation of shen in his *Dictionary of the Huang Di nei jing su wen*; he provides the definition ‘(supernatural/human) spirit’. Unschuld uses the term ‘spirit brilliance’ in his *nei jing su wen* translation to imply manifestation of the obscure, as a reader of a medical text will require observable data to make use of the concept of spirit. The difference between spirit as a concept and the state of physical being that is a result of the interaction between spirit and the human is important; the proper method of assessing this manifestation of spirit within the human body is the theme of the entire text itself.

In their translation of Chapter 8 of the *nei jing ling shu*, Larre and Rochat de la Vallee explain the meaning of the characters for shen and shen ming with a similar differentiating emphasis. They explain spirits themselves: “The alternating expression of natural forces unfolds under the authority of influences from above.

Heaven thus penetrates and instructs all of humankind. The Spirits are Heaven within us. They conduct us and guard us, and we must guard them.” Shen as the motivating force that dictates proper blood flow results directly from this definition. Following this, they describe shen ming as “Luminous radiance of the Spirits. When the Spirits find natural Virtue, they make it shine...The radiant activity of the Spirits is distributed...the result is perceptible in all aspects of life, in virtuous and effective conduct, in bright and clear eyes, and in a fresh pink complexion...” The use of terms such as ‘shine’, ‘radiant activity’, and ‘bright and clear’ are

found on the yang pole of the spectrum of life, where we find shen, and also movement. That shen is observable within the body is stated more specifically here and further reinforces the innate bond between shen and blood.

THE CHINESE CHARACTER AND ITS DEFINITION

神

Shen: spirit, god, soul

Examination of the Chinese reveals the centrality of the manifestation of shen within the character. The symbol on the left translates to 'omen', which means 'revelations' in the context of religious sacrifice. This symbol is itself composed of three markings that signify the three elements of heaven: sun, moon, and stars. These natural phenomena were perceived to reveal the truths of the gods. As a radical in ancient use, it indicated that the associated symbol pertained to ritual ceremonies, worship, or prayer – the human experiences of the divine. In modern use, it has come to indicate an ability to make known, to manifest, to show. The emphasis on divinity has minimized, but the demonstrative aspect is retained.

The symbol on the right is suggestive of lightning. Harbough explains that this symbol represents curved lightning flashes appearing in clouds, which the ancients believed to be a manifestation of god. The form of this symbol evolved into an image of hands girding a pole-like body, representing an extension or statement.

Together, these symbols convey the concept of an extension of the elements of heaven, or in divine terms, a manifestation of God. Perhaps this is why the single translation of spirit will suffice for some, but other translators feel the need to elaborate further; shen within a medical context denotes spirit within human that is witnessed, the branch of heaven that is observed in earthly existence, the manifestation of God within man that gives us our

unique capacity to exist between heaven and earth. The classics reveal that spirit has established and embodies the patterns of nature, and we have very simple and clear tools for assessing and guiding treatment based on these observations of nature.

From the definitions of shen provided by various Chinese scholars, as well as the analysis of the Chinese symbol, an understanding of shen as the subjective expression of spirit is clear. With the knowledge of blood as the objective expression of spirit, the integral relationship between structure and function naturally emerges. Shen is the presence of spirit within the physical, it guides us along the established patterns of nature; blood must follow these natural patterns in a constant, cyclic path to maintain health and prevent disease. This precious function of blood is made possible by the guiding presence of the spirit within the blood to create the necessary movement. As yin is solid stillness and yang is supple movement, blood holds shen within its physicality to allow shen to generate blood's agile mobility, remaining in tune with nature and greater universe.

Conclusion

The Western Biomedical concept of blood is a fascinating study of the constituents of this vital fluid and the individual functions that each serve. In Chinese medicine, the driving forces behind the coursing of the blood through vasculature imbues physical connection to spirit.

Blood contains structure for shen. Shen provides function to blood through guiding its coursing: its precious ability to nourish organs and tissues. To heal the dynamic human being is a result of the patterns of movement and transformation conferred by shen. Shen directs the motions that follow natural law and the patterns of the universe. The universal patterns of movement, change, and growth are the foundation of life, and living a life in harmony with these patterns is the key to health.

Shen resides in the blood. Blood provides structure to shen as a tangible location of the intersection of

the physical with the spiritual. Shen is the manifestation of spirit within the human body, and is held within the material substance of the blood. Blood provides a physical residence for spirit within the human being, without which the human would lack the ability to possess the spiritual connection that allows for appreciation for and resonance with natural patterns that are essential for proper blood circulation.

Identifying constituents and understanding functions enables proper categorization of information, as the Western conception of blood does very well. What this lacks is the spiritual aspect, which provides movement and thus, time. Blood is essential to life and impossible to remove from the concept of life as an ever-changing phenomenon rather than a still-life snapshot that assuredly cannot represent the full totality of functions. ✱

About the Author

Kellyn Adams is a naturopath and Chinese medicine practitioner in Portland, Oregon. She practices primary care medicine with emphases on behavioral change as well as endocrinology. She has studied Endobiogeny with Kamyar Hedayat and has incorporated the concepts and practice as central tenets in her patient care.