

# The History of Moxibustion

## Introduction

The practice of moxibustion is a skill that is invariably linked with acupuncture. Texts and articles invariably refer to the practice of 'Acupuncture and Moxibustion' as if they were a single trade in which each skill only finds completeness when used with the other. With no previous knowledge of the historical developments of either, one may believe these two entities inseparable with a common history. However, this is not the case as the beginnings of these two medical therapies are vastly different, were discovered separately, and were developed to suit different purposes and different situations. Throughout the history of medicine in China, physicians had limited implements and tools at their disposal to treat the sick and these were considered two of the best. This may be why they are linked so strongly. Another reason they are linked in such a way is that they both developed to be incorporated into medical theory that made use of meridians, acupoints and the concept of Qi. There is also a history of moxibustion that made no use of channels and acupoints theory but had its own idiosyncratic methods and techniques. Historically acupuncture and moxibustion have been used independently or synergistically with the possibility of them being counterproductive to each other also. They are still used in these ways today. This essay will explain the history and development of moxibustion from ancient times and describe the characters and their theories that have been most influential in the course of this history. The development of techniques and theory will also be related to that which is commonly taught to students of TCM today.

## Historical Development of Moxibustion

The use of moxibustion for therapeutic purposes is believed to begin in ancient times and is believed to have been used before acupuncture was discovered (Reid, 1996). What we refer to as moxibustion began as simple techniques that allowed an area of the body to be warmed or cauterised by available methods. Initial methods included laying close to a fire, using bark filled with hot sand or stones, or even using hot leaves and stems of plants to create localised warmth and heat (Ping, 2000). An image may be generated of men and women living in damp and cold caves and similarly damp and cold environments, surviving cold winters and enduring associated cold induced illnesses. The presence of winter and coldness induces feelings of hibernation and stillness whereas summer and heat induce movement

and the euphoric feeling of being alive. It is when the weather improves the health also improves. The ancients realised this and knew what to expect with the turning of the seasons. Once they mastered power over fire they found they could use it therapeutically to create the warmth and heat that was lacking through the nights and the through the colder months. Command of fire not only meant the ability to warm the body but also the ability to perform cauterisation. Cauterisation was found to be useful to close wounds and seal infections.

The Mawangdui silk scrolls are the earliest found writings to mention moxibustion and these have been dated to the Zhou Dynasty, particularly the Warring States period 475-221BCE (Ping, 2000). However, as man was using fire and was able to create fire for long before this it is thought that moxibustion was in general use even in the Shang Dynasty 16th-11th centuries BCE (Moffett, 1984). Although there is no supporting evidence, it is generally believed that moxibustion resulted from empirical evidence associated with the perceived benefits following the warming or cauterisation of body parts. The importance of the herb *Artemisia Vulgaris* is known in the Zhou Dynasty as it is venerated in the *Shi Jing* (Book of Odes) 11th-8th centuries BCE. These writings are thought to be the earliest collection of Chinese poems but this reference to *Artemisia* gives no indication of its relationship to medicine (Hoizey & Hoizey, 1988).

The scrolls of the Mawangdui tombs consisted of ten books two of which were directly relevant to moxibustion. These were: *Zu Bi Shi Yi Mai Jiu Jing* (Classic Of Moxibustion On Eleven Channels In The Arm And Leg) and *Yin Yang Shi Yi Mai Jin Jing* (Classic Of Moxibustion On Eleven Yin And Yang Channels) (Ping, 2000).

The first reference to moxibustion following the Mawangdui scrolls is found in the *Huang Di Nei Jing* (The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine) believed to have been put together in the Western Han period, 206BCE – 24CE, of the Han Dynasty. The first book of the *Nei Jing*, the *Su Wen*, makes many references to the beginnings of and uses pertaining to moxibustion.

“In the north we have high mountains. The majestic energy of solemn solitude is similar to the season of winter, where atmosphere is one of calm and reserve. The weather is cold and snowy. Native people here are often nomadic and live amidst nature, exposed to the weather ... their internal organs are often invaded by cold, and their conditions are excess and distended. The proper method of treating these

conditions is moxibustion. It is therefore said that the method of moxibustion comes from the north.”

(Ni, 1995 pp48-49)

From this passage we are led to believe that moxibustion was a tradition that developed in cold places, more specifically the north of China. We can make sense of this as the use of moxibustion would have lacked relevance in the south of China as it is so much closer to the equator that the winters would be of shorter duration and not as intense compared to the winters further north. We could imagine through lack of necessity the southern dwellers would have had less need to cultivate uses for moxibustion. Although, over time, as development of the burning of herbs and other matter became a definite art its use was refined and able to be customised to a wider range of conditions. As uses of moxibustion widened so too its popularity spread in all directions rather than becoming a quaint technique prevalent in just one area.

The Su Wen goes on in further chapters to explain that moxibustion is just one of many techniques used for healing and describes when it should be used. Chapter 60 of the Su Wen actually gives a prescription of which points to moxa and the techniques involved that suit specific patterns (Ni, 1995).

The second book of the Nei Jing, the Ling Shu, looks more closely at the theory of acupuncture and moxibustion and expounds more knowledge handed down from the ancients on these arts. It is in the Ling Shu that greater explanations are given on the uses, contraindications, techniques and methods that are relevant to moxibustion. It is also the Ling Shu that illustrates the action of moxibustion in terms of functions and actions on Qi and Blood. It is here that moxa is said to warm the channels, disperse cold and move the Blood (Jingnuan, 1993).

“Moxibustion can be effective when needling is not effective. When the qi is full, disperse; when hollow, tonify . . . When using the fire to disperse, quickly blow on the fire to propagate the action of the Artemisia, then extinguish the fire.”

(Ni, 1995 p180)

This quote explains that moxibustion is quite useful in some cases where acupuncture is not and it gives an indication that the herb Artemisia is being burnt in the process. It is believed that Artemisia Vulgaris was commonly used in moxibustion

therapy from sometime in the late Zhou period (475-221BCE) (O'Connor & Bensky, 1995). At this time cones of moxa were used on specific points selected by a variety of methods with many cones being burnt in succession. This is a form of direct moxibustion in which the herb comes in contact with the skin. This method of direct moxibustion is still a standard practice in the art of moxibustion found today.

During the Han Dynasty (206-220AD) Hua Tuo's *Zhong Zang Jing* (Classic of Central Viscera) was compiled in which mentions of moxibustion were made. In Chapter 47 of this text Hua Tuo warns that moxibustion may be misused and cause injury to the channels and connecting vessels and lead to a disharmony that is incurable (Shou-Zhong, 1993). This is important as information on contraindications associated with therapeutic techniques are just as relevant as theory and instructions associated with their use. Today, contraindications for moxibustion are just as important. Contemporary textbooks state that moxibustion must not be used in excess conditions and heat syndromes and scarring moxibustion is not to be performed on the face, head or close to large blood vessels. The other major contraindication for moxibustion is the abdominal and lumbo-sacral area of the pregnant woman (Xinnong, 1990).

Zhang Zhongjing's text the *Shan Hun Za Bing Lun* (Treatise On Cold Injury and Miscellaneous Diseases) is another important text of the Han Dynasty that advises the importance of using acupuncture in warm syndromes and moxibustion in cold syndromes (McDonald, 2006). This theory is in line with modern teachings, as previously described, whereby moxibustion is contraindicated in warm diseases.

It wasn't until later on in the Jin (265-420CE) and Tang (618-907CE) eras that indirect moxibustion became popular. Indirect moxibustion was carried out by placing a substance on the skin that acted as a buffer between the skin and the moxa cone. Ge Hong is regarded as the first to develop this method of moxibustion and it is described in his text *Zhou Hou Bei Ji Fang* (Emergency Prescriptions To Keep Up Your Sleeve). Slices of garlic and ginger or pastes made from beeswax, soybean and salt were all used in this fashion. These methods are also described in a Tang text titled *Thousand Ducat Prescriptions*. Other techniques of moxibustion also appear in this text such as piping moxa smoke into the ear via a bamboo shaft, which are still used in the People's Republic of China today (O'Connor & Bensky, 1995).

Common TCM texts such as *Chinese Acupuncture and Moxibustion*, edited by

Cheng Xinnong (1990), describe using moxibustion with various techniques such as direct and indirect methods. Direct methods include scarring and non-scarring moxibustion whereas indirect methods include using ginger, garlic or salt as a buffer between the skin and the moxa itself. In comparison to the Ling Shu, we can see not a lot has changed in terms of moxibustion techniques. Other current student texts such as Fundamentals of Chinese Acupuncture, (Ellis et al, 1991), describe very similar uses for moxibustion and make the same distinctions between direct and non-direct techniques.

Wang Tao's *Wai Tai Mi Yao* (Medical Secrets of an Official) is a compilation of previous acupuncture and moxibustion works. Wang Tao himself belonged to the Emphasize Moxibustion School. This text was compiled in the Tang Dynasty (618-907CE) and is interesting in that although very little of the text is original works that which is considers moxibustion as superior to acupuncture (Jiaxiu, 1986). This view does not correlate to other views before or after Tao's time and stands out as quite an unusual point of view. Wang Tao is considered a patron of the Emphasise Moxibustion School because of this view point but some views are at odds with other Emphasise Moxibustion School advocates that came after him.

Few mentions of moxibustion are made in the Song Dynasty (1127-1279CE) but there is a reference to spontaneous cauterisation that was made possible by using a combination of several herbs that were known irritants to the skin. These herbs were combined and placed on the skin causing heat and blistering (O'Connor & Bensky, 1995). This seems to be a more unusual technique that is no longer described in current TCM texts. Theory relating to moxibustion is also explained in the *Zhen Jiu Zi Sheng Jing* (Experiences On Acupuncture And Moxibustion Therapy) written by Wang Zhi Zhong. Wang Zhi Zhong covers available moxibustion theory prior to the Song and includes information on fire needle technique. Wen Ren and Qi Nian are two other physicians that contributed to moxibustion development in the time of the Song. Wang Zhi Zhong's text explains, among other methods, fire needle technique that is still taught today; albeit less popular while Wen Ren and Qin Nian are credited with publishing the *Bei Ji Jiu Fa* (Moxibustion Therapy for Emergency) (Ping, 2000).

The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644CE) saw the increasing interest in acupuncture hit a crescendo whereas moxibustion actually began losing favour (Moffet, 1984). Acupuncture won the favour of the emperors of the time thus ensuring widespread

popularity and increased availability of learning materials for scholars. It is suggested that the pain associated with direct moxa was part the reason for its decline in popularity but in effect this led to the development of the moxa stick (Moffet, 1984). The moxa stick was developed as a method of indirect moxa and its popularity continues today. The use of the moxa stick re-popularised moxibustion and again it is a method of moxibustion that has survived to this day (Ellis et al, 1991). Other less popularised methods of moxibustion during the Ming include the use of a copper plate to focus the sun's energy causing cauterisation. This technique is not one that has survived the test of time most probably due to inconsistencies in temperatures achieved and the lower degree of manipulation possible (O'Connor & Bensky, 1995).

Wang Ji lived in the south of China during the Ming Dynasty and wrote many books regarding acupuncture and moxibustion. Wang's understanding of these arts comes together in the *Zhen Jiu Wen Dui* (Queries and Responses on Acupuncture & Moxibustion). It is here that Wang's belief that acupuncture is to be used in excess conditions and moxa treats deficiency conditions is explained. Wang draws on the classics as a reference point to back him up on his theories and is strong in his belief that needles cannot tonify. Wang also went against the grain of many of his contemporaries with his point of view that moxa should not be used when illness is not present (Clavey, 2000). The use of moxa to prevent illness had been a common therapeutic technique and was advocated by great physicians such as Sun Simiao in the Sui Dynasty (581-618AD) (McDonald, 2006). Wang's theory rested on the idea that excessive moxibustion of points cause them to become dry and harden → this in turn causes stagnation of Qi and Blood → stagnation in the channels leads to pain and illness (Clavey, 2000).

Gao Wu's *Zhen Jiu Ju Ying* 1529CE (Glorious Anthology of Acupuncture and Moxibustion) gives information relating to acupuncture that relies on 'moxapoint' location derived from a system completely foreign to acupuncture's *jingluo*. Intricate methods of 'moxapoint' location are described by Gao Wu in this text giving the indication that there is much information pertaining solely to moxibustion theory that had been handed down through ancestral lines but had been overlooked by the creators of texts (McDonald, 2006). It is also possible that these texts were in fact created but due to the perceived lower importance relative to acupuncture these texts were not so well cared for, lost or perhaps remain undiscovered. It is believed that up to 300 acupuncture and moxibustion texts written before the Qing Dynasty have been

lost (Xuetai, 1986).

Another source of moxibustion point location that disregards the system of meridians associated with acupuncture is the Shen Ying Jing (Divinely Responding Classic) by Liu Jin. Republished in the Zhen Jiu Da Cheng in 1601CE by Yang Jizhou who included the work in the eight chapter. Although originally published by Liu Jin the material came from Liu's master Chen Hong-gang's work titled Guan Ai Shu (Book Of Universal Love) (Shouzhong & Fengting, 2001). This section of the Zhen Jiu Da Cheng describes intricate and complex methods of moxa point location using proportional measurements of the body and lengths of string. The original version of the Sheng Ying Jing includes a preface that indicates that moxa may be used to assist yang and to dispel yin evils (Shouzhong & Fengting, 2001). This is saying that moxibustion can be used for full and empty heat conditions. This goes against previous thinkers that put forward that moxa can only be used for cold syndromes. But others such a

s Liu Wansu, belonging to the Warm Moxibustion School, practicing during the Song Dynasty, agreed that moxibustion may be indicated in some heat syndromes. This was based on the theory that moxa could actually guide empty heat. This was in opposition to Zhu Zhenheng (Yuan Dynasty 1271-1368CE) who saw benefits in moxibustion in the treatment of phlegm-heat and in the tonification of Yin deficiency (McDonald, 2006).

In the following era of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911CE) further developments in moxibustion occurred with Wang Mengying's publication the Wen Re Jing Wei in which he stated that moxa was forbidden in warm disease. Physicians Wu Yiding and Fan Yuqi also feature as important figures in regard to moxibustion during the Qing dynasty but little information is available on their theories and techniques (McDonald, 2006).

Other developments in the art of moxibustion have occurred more recently. TCM practitioner Shmuel Halevi presented five cases of snail shell moxibustion in the Journal of Chinese Medicine in 1995. This method of moxibustion is used to improve a number of eye diseases such as haemorrhaged capillaries within the eyeball. The method involves covering the eye with snail shell and lighting a moxa cone on top. The heat is diffused by the shell and acts on the local area of the eye itself (Halevi, 1995).

General moxibustion theory taught today in TCM colleges as seen in such texts as *Acupuncture – A Comprehensive Text* (O'Connor & Bensky, 1995) and *Chinese Acupuncture and Moxibustion* (Xinnong, 1990) put forward that moxibustion is contraindicated in full and empty heat condition in line with Wan Mengying of the Qing Dynasty. These texts promote the use of moxibustion to prevent disease and to improve health by heating points such as Zusanli (St36), Qihai (Ren6), Guangyuan (Ren4), Mingmen (Du4) and Zhongwan (Ren12). This is in opposition to historical figures such as Wang Ji of the Ming Dynasty. Current texts explain materials needed for moxibustion, types of moxibustion including direct and indirect techniques and usually include information pertaining to 'after care' of moxaed sites.

### Conclusion

Moxibustion has its own definite history apart from acupuncture and should, perhaps, be given more credit in Western TCM teaching institutions. The information made available to students and practitioners today is eclectic and draws on a vast history of over 5000 years of man's experience with heat and fire. The developments in the history and characters involved in the making of what we call moxibustion today, is by no means conclusive and no doubt ever will be due to the impossible task of collecting information that has been lost or never recorded. It is important that this history is further investigated, deciphered and rerecorded in order to widen our current view on this art, as that which is lost may well be still incredibly relevant to today.

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