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## HISTORY

# Use of the Layer Analysis Method of the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic in Modern Society



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### Abstract

This article introduces the Layer Analysis Method of the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic text to revive its use in modern acupuncture and medicine. This is a crucial concept, especially for the diagnosis and treatment of diseases by acupuncture. First, the rise and decline of this method is explored. Second, the differentiation of this method is described by symptoms, the affected organs, and the stage of the disease. Third, the treatment method is summarized into four categories: (1) equipment, (2) technique, (3) acupoint, and (4) pathology. The resemblance of the Layer Analysis Method to modern clinical applications is worth examining. The sinew layer is especially fascinating with its similarity to the Anatomy Trains' track. The skin, vessel, muscle, and bone layers have their respective resemblances to their counterparts in modern medicine. The holism concept of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is demonstrated throughout the Layer Analysis Method theory. In addition, the Layer Analysis Method of the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic should be reconsidered and complemented by channel-collateral pattern differentiation for acupuncturists to achieve better clinical results. Future research on acupuncture should consider this theory with the channel-collateral pattern differentiation theory.

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## 1. Introduction

The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic is the most important text in the literature of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), which laid its foundation. It was completed by doctors and medical theorists who used the names of the Yellow Emperor and his subordinates to form this manuscript of questions and answers in medical knowledge [1]. The book comprises two volumes: (1) "Basic Questions" and (2) "Divine Pivot", which introduced the *yin-yang* theory, the Five-Element theory, and the Channel-Collateral theory that form the basis of TCM theory. After more than 2000 years, TCM has spread far beyond China [2].

Since President Nixon's visit to China in 1972, acupuncture has gained worldwide recognition [3]. The Channel-Collateral theory is widely recognized as a diagnostic and treatment tool in TCM, especially for acupuncture. However, after millennia of development and change, certain important ideas of the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic are declining in influence. In a recent article, American researchers have noticed the significance of the stratified anatomy of the 361 acupuncture points and have proposed a catalog of the neuroanatomy and stratified anatomy for each point on all 14 channels [4]. This catalog corresponds to the Layer Analysis Method of emphasizing the importance of the needling depth during acupuncture. This article aims to share with readers the Layer Analysis Method illustrated in the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic, which is a crucial concept for the diagnosis and treatment of diseases by acupuncture.

## 2. The Layer Analysis Method

### 2.1. Rise and decline

TCM views the human body as structured in layers. *Yin-yang*, interior and exterior, *ying-wei*, *zang-fu*, and skin, vessel, muscle, sinew, and bone are examples of the layers concept. Skin, vessel, muscle, sinew, and bone are the most fundamental and most explicit structure of layers in the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic. In the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic, the use of nine needles for different layers of diseases has been explicitly described. The nine needles were the most important treatment method that exhibited the clinical importance of skin, vessel, muscle, sinew, and bone layers.

However, after the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic era and after the rise of herbal therapies, there was a transition from the use of the nine needles to filiform needles. This was primarily because of the relatively small and safe use of filiform needles at that time in which disinfection and sterilization were essentially absent. This narrowed the number of acupuncture techniques, which paled in comparison to the colorful variety of techniques used during the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic era. Hence, without the nine needles, the gradual disappearance of the Layer Analysis Method was inevitable [5].

### 2.2. Differentiation method

From the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic, we can summarize three methods to differentiate the layers of diseases. First,

each layer of skin, vessel, muscle, sinew, and bone displays different symptoms. Diseases at the skin layer present symptoms such as itchiness, numbness, insensitivity, and temperature changes on the skin layer. Hyperpyrexia, mania, abscesses, and sores are related to diseases at the vessel layer. Muscle achiness, insensitivity, and flaccid paralysis belong to diseases at the muscle layer. Symptoms such as spasms of the limbs, fixed pain, and nodules of the sinew are diseases at the sinew layer. Heaviness of the limbs, ostealgia, and so forth are diseases at the bone layer. Second, the Five Element Theory states that skin, vessel, muscle, sinew, and bone are related to different organs—namely, the lungs, heart, spleen, liver, and kidneys, respectively. Hence, pathology of the organs can also implicate their respective layers. Third, the stage of disease is also related to the layer at which the disease is located. At the initial stage, a disease would usually be at a more superficial layer, but at a later stage, the disease would be at a deeper layer [5].

### 2.3. Treatment method

According to the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic, the treatment method of the Layer Analysis Method could be summed up into four important points: equipment, technique, acupoint, and pathology [5].

#### 2.3.1. Equipment

The appropriate choice of equipment is essential for the different layers of disease. As suggested in the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic, the nine needles were designed for different layers of the human structure. Chapter 7 of "Divine Pivot" states: "The nine needles have their different uses. They have individual applications according to their length....Disease at the ... " [6]. It is clear that during the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic era, the concept of the Layer Analysis Method was prominent. Chapter 54 of "Basic Questions" states: "Needling skin the first, needling muscle the second, needling vessel the third, needling sinew the fourth, needling bone the fifth, needling for harmonizing yin-yang the sixth, needling for boosting essence the seventh, needling for dispelling wind the eighth, needling for unblocking the nine orifices the ninth." [7]. A systematic method for acupuncture treatment can be observed during the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic era.

For modern acupuncturists, the first choice of equipment would be the filiform needle. The other eight needles are seldom used. Thus in modern society, filiform needles would be the primary preference of equipment, regardless of the layer. The depth of needling is inconsequential relative to the channels and acupoints that are chosen. It would enhance the effect of the treatment if the equipment is accordingly chosen.

#### 2.3.2. Technique

The choice of appropriate acupuncture and moxibustion technique for the different layers is crucial for successfully treating patients. In the "Divine Pivot", there are various emphases on the choice of techniques for the different layers of diseases. For example, the nine needling methods, the five needling methods, and the 12 needling methods

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