

A Study on the Reception History of Acupuncture and Moxibustion in the Tang and Song Dynasties: From Body–Cosmos Connection to Social Governance Technique

Shujian Wang

*School of the Chinese Nation Studies, Minzu University of China, Beijing, China
2263829940@qq.com*

Abstract. The Tang and Song dynasties were a critical stage in the transformation of Chinese society from the worldview of "interaction between heaven and humanity" to rationalism centered on Neo-Confucianism. This transformation also left a distinct imprint in the medical field, especially in the history of acupuncture acceptance. From the interactive perspective of body concepts and governance technologies, it can be found that the acceptance of acupuncture in the Tang Dynasty was rooted in the divine cognition of the connection between the body and the universe. Its practice was full of time taboos and witchcraft rituals, and the public's acceptance was based on awe of supernatural forces. By the Song Dynasty, driven by multiple factors such as state power discipline, Confucian knowledge penetration, the printing revolution, and medical marketization, acupuncture was redefined as a low-cost social welfare and body governance technology emphasizing "convenience, low cost, and effectiveness". The public's acceptance shifted to a utilitarian approach based on economic rationality and efficacy expectations. This transformation simultaneously presented a complex picture of the coexistence of the hollowing out of official education and the folk "supremacy of moxibustion alone", as well as elite rationalization and the mystification of popular beliefs.

Keywords: Acupuncture and moxibustion, Body concepts, Social history of medicine, Interaction between heaven and humanity, Body governance

1. Introduction

The Tang and Song dynasties were a pivotal stage of profound changes in Chinese society, and their grand transformations in politics, economy, and culture also had a far-reaching impact on the field of medical history. As an ancient medical technology that directly intervenes in the body, the changes in the social status, practice methods, and public acceptance mechanisms of acupuncture between the Tang and Song dynasties are undoubtedly a key window for understanding the socialization process of ancient Chinese medicine and a core entry point for examining the transformation of body concepts and body governance.

Regarding the research on the history of traditional Chinese acupuncture and moxibustion, the academic community has achieved remarkable achievements in the past few decades. Senior

medical historians represented by Huang Longxiang [1], Zhao Jingsheng [2], Lin Zhaogeng [3], etc., have laid an extremely solid literature and empirical foundation for later research in fields such as the textual research of ancient acupuncture and moxibustion documents, the evolution of meridian theory, and the standardization of acupoint positioning. Such studies have comprehensively sorted out the compilation and collation process of acupuncture and moxibustion classics during the Tang and Song dynasties, including core documents such as Sun Simiao's *Essential Prescriptions for Emergencies Worth a Thousand Gold* in the Tang Dynasty and *Illustrated Manual of Acupuncture Points on the Bronze Figure* compiled under the auspices of Wang Weiyi in the Song Dynasty. They have also accurately restored the technological leap in how abstract meridian theory was transformed into three-dimensional, visual, and quantifiable physical models. However, this research paradigm immersed in the internal evolution of medical principles and literature mainly focuses on the improvement and inheritance of medical technology itself, and often implies a presupposition of technological determinism—that is, the belief that the progress of medical technology and the improvement of classics will naturally lead to the widespread application and acceptance of the technology among the general public. To a large extent, this perspective regards medicine as a closed, self-sufficient objective knowledge system, thus relatively lacking in-depth analysis of patient acceptance at the social and cultural level. How official elites and top physicians invented, standardized, and disciplined technologies has received much attention, but the specific process of how ordinary people in the vast grassroots society of the Tang and Song dynasties perceived, evaluated, and ultimately accepted or rejected these invasive therapies has been less directly explained.

After entering the 21st century, the social history of medicine paradigm began to rise in Chinese historiography, and medical behaviors were examined from multiple dimensions within the grand social structure, economic changes, class mobility, and resource allocation. In the field of Tang and Song acupuncture history, Professor Yu Gengzhe's research is a highly representative and influential landmark achievement in this paradigm transformation. In his works such as *A Preliminary Study on Diseases and Medical Customs in the Tang Dynasty* [4] and *The Rise and Fall of Moxibustion Therapy in Folk Medical Activities of the Tang and Song Dynasties* [5], he put forward the theory of simplicity and ease of implementation. He pointed out that under the background of the lack of doctors and medicines, expensive decoctions, and high operational risks of acupuncture tools at the grassroots level in the Tang Dynasty, moxibustion therapy, which uses mugwort as the main material and is simple to operate, became a medical alternative relied on by the vast lower-class people in the Tang Dynasty due to its unparalleled characteristics of "simplicity, cheapness, and ease of implementation". This assertion has greatly broadened the vision of medical history research and endowed the study of acupuncture history with a strong popular color and profound sociological concern.

However, if examined from a more microscopic scale of body history and cultural history, the explanatory power of the theory of simplicity and ease of implementation still has room for further expansion when explaining the complex aspects of the history of acupuncture acceptance in the Tang and Song dynasties. While emphasizing economic and instrumental rationality in medical choices, this theory pays relatively little attention to "pain cost" and the cultural motivations behind it. Although moxibustion is simple and cheap, the severe pain and permanent scars caused by its direct burning on the body surface are significant physical harm. The reason why the public endured this pain universally for a long time may not only be economic considerations, but also hide profound cultural awe, religious beliefs, or deep identification with traditional body-universe views of "interaction between heaven and humanity" such as "combating poison with pain" and "drawing

out evil with fire". Secondly, when analyzing the rise and fall of the status of acupuncture and moxibustion, the theory of simplicity and ease of implementation also leaves room for further deepening in distinguishing the differences in class status and cultural connotations they carried in Tang and Song society. Acupuncture often represented profound meridian spatial knowledge and officially certified technical authority; while moxibustion carried more rural experience and residual witchcraft. Explaining the rise and fall of the two only by economic cost and operational difficulty may cover up the potential cultural taboos of the scholar-official class against invasive acupuncture therapy, as well as the differentiated social prestige obtained by different therapies during social transformation.

To deepen the analytical dimension of the social history of medicine, contemporary research has increasingly recognized the necessity of extending inward to the micro-experience of the "body" and connecting outward to the "social construction of knowledge" and the "discipline of state power". Here, Yu Xinzhong's paradigm of the social history of medicine, Li Zhende's gender perspective, and Peter Burke's theory of intellectual history provide crucial and highly inspiring theoretical support for reconstructing the history of acupuncture acceptance in the Tang and Song dynasties. Professor Yu Xinzhong pointed out in *Plague and Society in Jiangnan in the Qing Dynasty* [6] that medical treatment is a social construction process deeply shaped by the social structure, ideological concepts, and power networks of a specific era. Through textual research on the concept of "a good physician is like a good prime minister", he revealed that the rise of the "Confucian physicians" group in the Song Dynasty was not only an internal evolution of medicine, but also a profound reconstruction of social identity [7]. Applying this perspective to the study of Tang and Song acupuncture has great academic penetration. At the same time, an in-depth discussion of the history of acupuncture acceptance must face its essential characteristic as an "invasive" physical therapy. Professor Li Zhende's research on body and gender care between the Han and Tang dynasties in *A Women's History of Chinese Medicine* [8] provides an indispensable theoretical horizon. In Tang and Song society where the Confucian ethical concept of "men and women should not touch each other in giving and receiving" was increasingly strengthened, the implementation of acupuncture would inevitably encounter huge ethical challenges and gender taboos. Drawing on Li Zhende's gender perspective, this study introduces the core concept of body accessibility to analyze how the body accessibility of women (especially elite women) was compressed, resulting in a complex appearance of acupuncture acceptance among female patients that is very different from that of men.

In addition, Peter Burke emphasized in *What is Intellectual History* [9] that the production, classification, standardization and dissemination of knowledge are always inseparable from the social systems, media technological changes and power structures of a specific era. Combined with the research of scholars such as An Chunping [10] and Cheng Jin [11] on the medical administration systems of the Tang and Song dynasties, we can clearly see the official discipline picture from the perspective of intellectual history — a series of measures taken by the Tang and Song governments, such as establishing specialized acupuncture departments, printing textbooks on a large scale, and casting "acupuncture bronze figures", were essentially a knowledge discipline process in which state power attempted to absolutely monopolize and standardize body knowledge. However, with the "textual openness" caused by the popularization of woodblock printing in the Song Dynasty, a complex intellectual history interaction was formed between official discipline and folk acceptance, misinterpretation and re-creation.

Therefore, the core question of this paper is: How was acupuncture therapy understood, practiced and accepted by all social classes during the Tang and Song dynasties? How did its acceptance mechanism transform from a body symbol connecting "interaction between heaven and humanity"

full of divinity and taboos in the Tang Dynasty to a body governance technology serving secular people's livelihood and emphasizing utilitarianism and rationality in the Song Dynasty? Through an in-depth investigation of the history of acupuncture acceptance in the Tang and Song dynasties, this paper hopes to reveal the evolution of body concepts, the adjustment of body governance strategies, and the interaction mechanism between elite and folk practices behind this transformation, so as to provide a new perspective for the medical history narrative of the Tang-Song transformation.

2. Interaction between heaven and humanity and awe-based acceptance: the body landscape of acupuncture in the Tang Dynasty

The intellectual form and social positioning of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Tang Dynasty were deeply rooted in the concepts of interaction between heaven and humanity, religious beliefs, and medical systems of that time. As a body symbol connecting heaven and humanity, the core theory of acupuncture and moxibustion was full of divinity and taboos, thus becoming a divine art that transcended physical therapy and had profound witchcraft and divine connotations in both official and folk contexts.

At the official level, the Tang Dynasty established a specialized acupuncture department in the Imperial Medical Academy with acupuncture doctors, acupuncture teaching assistants, and acupuncture students in its institutional construction, establishing the formal status of acupuncture and moxibustion in the official medical system. The state also led the revision of *Illustrated Manual of Acupuncture Points on the Bright Hall*, absorbed the achievements of private scholars such as Zhen Quan, and promoted the initial standardization and visualization of acupuncture knowledge [12]. The core theories and therapies of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Tang Dynasty were deeply influenced by classic theories such as *Huangdi Neijing* (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), emphasizing the holistic view of the unity of heaven and humanity and the five movements and six qi, and regarding the body as a "microcosm" corresponding to the yin and yang of heaven and earth [13]. Sun Simiao collected a large number of acupuncture and moxibustion therapies in *Essential Prescriptions for Emergencies Worth a Thousand Gold* and *Supplement to the Essential Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold*, clearly proposing the "combined use of acupuncture and moxibustion" and emphasizing their complementarity in treatment. His detailed classification of five zang-organ wind strokes such as lung wind stroke and liver wind stroke [14], the heavy moxibustion therapy requiring "five to six hundred moxa cones per acupoint" for beriberi [14], and the warning that "acupuncture at Guanyuan treats female infertility, while acupuncture at Shimen causes lifelong sterility" [14] all indicate that Tang physicians not only pursued curative effects in practice but also held a reverent attitude towards the human body, regarding it as the connection point between heaven and humanity. Meanwhile, Zhang Jianguang quoted Tao Gu's *Qingyi Lu* (Records of Unusual Things) from the Five Dynasties, pointing out that "people nowadays must use moxibustion when they are sick, which is also a great obsession" [15], which also suggests that the popularization of moxibustion among the people had reached a habitual or even excessive level. Tang medical books had detailed acupuncture and moxibustion treatment strategies for various diseases such as arthralgia syndrome, and the principles of acupoint selection and acupuncture and moxibustion techniques were also systematized at this stage. However, these official norms and theoretical constructions did not completely eliminate the mysterious color of acupuncture and moxibustion. The public's acceptance of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Tang Dynasty was actually not only based on its curative effect, but also on its unique understanding of the body, that is, there was a mysterious connection between the body, the universe, and ghosts and gods. Acupuncture and

moxibustion operations were regarded as interventions in this connection, and thus were full of taboos and risks.

First of all, the "temporality of taboos" bound with divinity was the core of the body concept of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Tang Dynasty. Medical books recorded a large number of cosmic rhythms that needed to be avoided in acupuncture and moxibustion operations, such as the ten heavenly stems and twelve earthly branches, the five elements, evil spirits, and the wandering of human spirits. For example, Sun Simiao clearly recorded in *Supplement to the Essential Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold* that "for all forbidden acupuncture and moxibustion, one must avoid where the human spirit is; if one does not know the human spirit, acupuncture will bring disaster" [16]. *Taiping Shenghui Fang* (Imperial Grace Formulary of the Taiping Era) (although it was an official compilation of the Song Dynasty, it included a large number of old theories from the Tang Dynasty) even systematically listed taboos such as "monthly forbidden days not suitable for acupuncture and bleeding", "twelve parts of human spirit not suitable for moxibustion", and "twelve-hour taboos not suitable for moxibustion" [17]. These taboos closely linked acupuncture and moxibustion operations with cosmic rhythms and ghostly powers, and acupuncture and moxibustion were regarded as divine arts with the power to move the secrets of heaven. The public's acceptance was mostly based on awe and obedience to supernatural forces rather than simple curative effect considerations. The taboos on time and orientation were precisely the embodiment of acupuncture and moxibustion as the core connection point between heaven and humanity, foreshadowing the profound transformation it would face after the retreat of divine arts in the Song Dynasty.

Secondly, the coexistence of medicine and witchcraft and the concept of ghosts and gods causing diseases constituted the background of Tang Dynasty medicine. Liu Ru depicted that witch doctors were prevalent among the people in the middle and late Tang Dynasty, and the public generally believed that "ghosts and gods cause diseases", and when seeking medical treatment, they "invited both doctors and witches" and "medicine and prayers were ineffective" [18]. In this context, the theories of "qi and blood circulation" and "meridian regulation" of acupuncture and moxibustion may have been translated by the people into a power to exorcise evil, communicate with gods, or mobilize the mysterious "qi". The "thirteen ghost points" therapy recorded by Sun Simiao in *Supplement to the Essential Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold* for treating "all diseases caused by evil spirits" had an obvious exorcism ritual sense [3], further proving the integration of acupuncture and moxibustion with witchcraft beliefs and their divinity in the folk context.

Furthermore, the pain narrative in the Tang Dynasty presented the characteristics of physicians treating the spirit and patients enduring silently. Sun Simiao emphasized that physicians should "keep their minds focused, keep their mouths shut as if holding a rope, look inward, monitor qi and blood, and not act recklessly", focusing on the induction between the physician's "treating the spirit" and "qi" [14], and rarely directly recorded patients' pain sensations. In fact, Tang people rarely complained about moxibustion pain, and even complained that "when the bones are cold, one feels pain before acupuncture; when the flesh is numb, frequent moxibustion cannot form sores" [19]. Behind such cultural forbearance reflects that Tang people regarded pain as an inevitable ritual of treatment, or regarded the stimulation of "fire" and "yang qi" as a way for the body to communicate with the universe and expel evil qi. Pain was regarded here as the result of curing diseases rather than the pain of seeking medical treatment, which is precisely the profound reflection of awe-based acceptance at the level of physical experience.

The silence and helpless voices in epitaphs also revealed the changes in body concepts in the Tang Dynasty. In early Tang epitaphs, such as the *Epitaph of Wei Yan* in the 11th year of Zhenguan (636) which stated "chronic illness persisted, medicine and food failed to cure, acupuncture and

moxibustion did not heal" (Wei Yan, son of the Military Advisor of Youzhou, Zhenguan 013), or the *Epitaph of Lady Liu* in the 11th year of Zhenguan (637) which stated "medicine and food could not cure, acupuncture and moxibustion could not heal" (Lady Liu, Zhenguan 057), acupuncture and moxibustion were mentioned but mostly as a background of "ineffectiveness" to emphasize destiny. This reflects the society's reluctance to speak of direct intervention in the body and the helpless acceptance of destiny at that time. Even when acupuncture and moxibustion appeared, they were mostly in the narrative context dominated by destiny, implying the "unspeakable" nature of diseases and the "unintervenable" nature of the body.

However, epitaphs from the middle and late Tang Dynasty began to speak out, such as the *Epitaph of Lady Liu, Wife of Lord Zhang from Wujun* in the 11th year of Dazhong (857) which stated "one side of the body became paralyzed, taking medicine and applying moxibustion were all ineffective" (Lady Liu, Wife of Lord Zhang from Wujun, Dazhong 136), as well as the *Epitaph of Wei, Wife of Sun Hui* in the 13th year of Dazhong (859) which stated "acupuncture, stone needles, medicine and food were all used on her body... yet they could not even reduce the symptoms slightly" (Wei, Wife of Sun Hui, Dazhong 151), and the *Epitaph of Niu Yanzong* in the 3rd year of Qianfu (876) which stated "divine acupuncture was ineffective, miraculous medicine was unfaithful" (Niu Yanzong, a scholar, Qianfu 015). These detailed descriptions of desperate narratives exhausting all medical means reflect the important position of acupuncture and moxibustion as the "last line of defense", but their mention was more used to express filial piety of doing one's best rather than to promote curative effects. These changes marked that the transformation of the body from "unspeakable" to "intervenable" was taking place, and diseases began to change from private matters to publicly discussable treatment cases, but the public's acceptance of acupuncture and moxibustion was still more based on awe than rationality [20].

Taiping Guangji (Extensive Records of the Taiping Era), as a compilation of Tang Dynasty zhiguai (tales of the strange) notes, provides us with the most vivid and extreme evidence to peek into the folk bodily acceptance of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Tang Dynasty. It reveals that acupuncture and moxibustion in Tang society were not just "simple and easy to perform", but full of sensory impact, witchcraft fanaticism and power games.

First of all, the ontological extension of pain and "sympathetic magic"-style acupuncture are very different from common sense of modern medicine. In the case of Xu Qiufu "acupuncturing a straw man to cure a ghost's illness", a ghost died of lumbago but begged Xu Qiufu for treatment, saying "even as a ghost, the pain is still unbearable" [21]. The ghost instructed Xu Qiufu, "Just tie straw into a human figure and acupuncture it according to the acupoints". Xu then acupunctured the Jianjing and other acupoints on the straw man, and the ghost's illness was actually cured. This story has high philosophical value. It shows that in the folk view of life and death in the Tang Dynasty, "pain" was not a simple neurophysiological response, but an existence that could separate from the physical body and be engraved on the soul or "qi". Curing a "ghost" by acupuncturing a straw man is exactly the perfect variant of sympathetic magic proposed by James George Frazer in acupuncture. Here, acupuncture transcended physical therapy and became a magical tool to mediate between yin and yang and deliver souls from the underworld. This thoroughly explains why the Tang people held deep awe for acupuncture: because the tip of the needle stirred not only flesh and blood, but also ghosts and gods, and the hidden pivot of the interaction between heaven and humanity.

Secondly, the violence of qi and blood and near-death crises depicted acupuncture as a high-risk operation. In the flying needle case of the acupuncture Taoist "leaping to the eave board" [21], a court official fell off a horse and injured his foot. After the imperial physician inserted the needle, "when the needle was removed, qi came out like smoke, and he gradually became tired and weak in

the evening, on the verge of death". The Taoist came and angrily rebuked the imperial physician, "The acupoints that determine life and death are off by a hair's breadth". Then he reinserted the needle, "inserting it more than an inch deep. The needle in the old acupoint suddenly leaped to the eave board, and the place where qi had come out closed seamlessly". This description is extremely visually striking: the imperial physician's mistake caused the life energy (qi) to leak like smoke, and the patient was dying; after the Taoist inserted the needle, the huge air pressure in the body actually made the old needle "suddenly leap to the eave board". This imagination that regarded human "qi and blood" as high-pressure fluids ("interconnected like rivers and lakes") endowed acupuncture with an extremely dangerous and violent visual tension. The reason why the people feared acupuncture may also be that a single silver needle could trigger such a terrifying internal energy eruption. A similar extreme case is the case of the Buddha's messenger draining pus with a hundred needles [21]. Fan Guanglu had swollen feet, and a man who claimed to be the "Buddha's messenger" "in an instant, acupunctured both feet and the Pangguang acupoint more than a hundred times, and drained about three liters of yellow pus" before leaving. This scene of continuous frantic puncturing and draining a large amount of pus was a religious, carnival-like excretion of filth, reflecting the Tang people's fanatical imagination of expelling pathogenic evil from the body.

Furthermore, the cession of bodily power and class oppression revealed that the tip of the needle pointed not only to lesions, but also to the soft underbelly of political power. In the case of Qin Minghe "pricking to bleed to save the emperor" [21], Emperor Gaozong of Tang suffered from wind dizziness, and Qin Minghe proposed to "prick the head to let out a little blood". Empress Wu Zetian was furious behind the curtain: "This man deserves to be beheaded! How can the emperor's head be a place to let blood!" However, because the emperor's "head was so heavy and stuffy that he could hardly bear it", he finally ordered the acupuncture. Qin pricked the Baihui and Naohu acupoints to let out blood, and the emperor's eyesight cleared. This vividly shows that the taboos of the imperial body were broken through by extreme physical pain, and the supreme power had to cede bodily sovereignty to the physician's needle blade in order to relieve pain. Acupuncture here was by no means "simple"; it was carried out at the risk of the execution of one's entire family. A similar case is the case of Xu Wenbo "replacing the blade with acupuncture" [21]. Xu Wenbo used acupuncture instead of Emperor Shao of Song's brutal act of "cutting open a pregnant woman's belly to see the sex of the fetus", saving the mother's life. This demonstrated acupuncture's effectiveness in manipulating human reproduction and depriving life.

Finally, the sacred transaction of moxibustion and cross-species symbolism endowed moxibustion with unique meanings beyond physical warmth. In the case of Cui Wei moxibusting a dragon with "Bao Gu's moxa" [21], Cui Wei received "Yuejing Gang moxa" (later identified as the moxa of Bao Gu, a famous Taoist immortal) from an old woman (an immortal). It not only cured the warts of an old monk and a rich man, but finally he burned the moxa in an abyss to treat the wart on a giant dragon (an enlightened snake), and the dragon spat out a priceless night pearl in return. A handful of moxa wool, in the narrative, was like hard currency, curing the three realms of gods, humans, and creatures. This shows that moxibustion was a sacred law beyond secular medicine in the folk subconscious. In addition, the description that moxibustion "draws out poisonous qi" [21] when dealing with fatal trauma such as snake bites indicates that the people recognized that moxibustion had the reverse traction to absorb and extract deadly poison. It was not just "simple", but the ultimate life-saving means in critical moments. In summary, the flourishing of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Tang Dynasty was essentially full of bloodshed, violence, witchcraft fanaticism, power reversals, and near-death experiences. Its acceptance was by no means merely due

to the instrumental rationality of "simplicity and ease of implementation", but based on the deep awe of the interaction between heaven and humanity.

3. Utilitarian acceptance and bodily discipline: the medical technology transformation of acupuncture in the Song Dynasty

The intellectual form and social connotations of acupuncture and moxibustion underwent a profound transformation in the Song Dynasty. Driven by multiple factors including state bodily discipline, Confucian intervention, textual openness, and technological standardization, acupuncture and moxibustion were redefined as a body governance technology emphasizing "convenience, low cost, and effectiveness", laying the foundation for their widespread acceptance.

First of all, textual openness and knowledge standardization became the key driving forces behind the transformation of acupuncture and moxibustion. The popularization of printing led to the massive publication of books, which greatly changed the way knowledge was produced and disseminated. Against this background, the standardization and visualization of acupuncture knowledge reached an unprecedented level. For example, Wang Weiyi compiled *Illustrated Manual of Acupuncture Points on the Bronze Figure* by imperial order, cast bronze figures, and carved stone classics. The bronze figures visualized the obscure meridians and acupoints in physical form, providing a unified physical reference for acupuncture teaching and assessment. They were a milestone in the "disenchantment" and "standardization" of acupuncture and moxibustion. These bronze figures were even placed in public places such as Daxiangguo Temple to announce the orthodoxy and learnability of acupuncture to the public, realizing the discipline of state power over bodily cognition.

Subsequently, the rise of "Confucian physicians" and the trend of "the investigation of things to attain knowledge" incorporated acupuncture and moxibustion into the Confucian orthodoxy. Yu Xinzong pointed out that during the Northern Song Dynasty, the concept of "if one cannot be a good prime minister, then be a good physician" prevailed. A large number of Confucian scholars studied medicine and regarded practicing medicine as an alternative to practicing the Confucian ideal of "loving the people and caring for all things", thus elevating acupuncture and moxibustion from a marginal "skill" to a "scholarship" worthy of study by scholar-officials [7]. This Confucianization trend is particularly evident in Wang Zhizhong's *Acupuncture and Moxibustion Classics for Sustaining Life*. His scholarly approach of conducting textual research on ancient documents and summarizing verified cases was highly consistent with the Confucian spirit of "the investigation of things to attain knowledge". Wang Zhizhong even bluntly stated the fallacy of traditional taboos: "In times of emergency, when life hangs by a thread, if one must wait for an auspicious day to treat, the patient will already be among the dead!" [3]. This directly criticized the mysticism related to cosmic rhythms and human spirit taboos prevalent in the Tang Dynasty, marking the retreat of the temporality of acupuncture taboos and reflecting the awakening of humanistic thought in Song Dynasty medicine. Su Shi's rebuke of "human-shaped moxa" in *Su-Shen's Effective Prescriptions* was even more explicit: "There is no moxa that truly resembles a human being... all such methods are absurd" [22], fully reflecting the demystification and rational discipline of acupuncture by the Song elite. The record of moxibustion for toothache in *Su-Shen's Effective Prescriptions* also reflects this rational acceptance: "I personally suffered from toothache, and all treatments were ineffective. Using this moxibustion method cured me. After moxibustion, my neck ached severely, and it took a long time to subside, but it never recurred" [22]. Pain was regarded as the price of treatment, but this acceptance was based on rational expectations and final curative effects. Shen Kuo examined acupuncture with a scientific spirit, listing "acupuncture and

stone needling" as important means of treating diseases and emphasizing the difficulty and rigor of operation. This Confucianized and standardized acceptance was precisely the new positioning of acupuncture by the Song elite [22]. Against the background of knowledge transformation, the specific application scope, acupoint selection principles, and acupuncture and moxibustion techniques of Song Dynasty acupuncture in medical books also presented new characteristics. Compared with Tang Dynasty medical books, Song Dynasty medical books such as *Acupuncture and Moxibustion Classics for Sustaining Life* paid more attention to empirical evidence and case summaries, and provided more detailed explanations of acupoint theory and treatment mechanisms.

Finally, the arrival of the golden age of moxibustion was the most prominent feature of the knowledge transformation of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Song Dynasty. Quantitative research data by Liu Zijiao shows that pure moxibustion prescriptions accounted for as high as 96.2% of all acupuncture and moxibustion prescriptions in the Song Dynasty, making it an era of "supremacy of moxibustion alone" [23]. The overwhelming popularity of moxibustion in the Song Dynasty meant that its intellectual form as an easy-to-learn and low-cost treatment method in medical practice had completed the transformation from mysterious magic to secular and practical technology.

The main reason for the widespread acceptance of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Song Dynasty, especially the prevalence of moxibustion, was that it met the huge demand of Song society for low-cost and high-efficiency medical care. It was shaped as a body governance technology of "convenience, low cost, and effectiveness", becoming a concrete manifestation of the concept of benevolent governance in bodily management. Economically, moxibustion was listed in the category of "small businesses" in the Lin'an market in *Old Stories of Wulin*, alongside services such as mirror polishing and pedicure [24], indicating that it was affordable and readily available. The advantages of moxibustion in terms of ease of operation and low cost were extremely obvious. Politically, the state used moxibustion as a tool for benevolent governance and banning witchcraft while promoting medicine. Xia Song forced witches and wizards to "be ordered to change their occupations to farming or learn acupuncture and pulse diagnosis" [25], which directly demonstrated that acupuncture was forcibly promoted as a means of cultural substitution. Therefore, the public's acceptance of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Song Dynasty was more based on considerations of economic rationality and accessibility, rather than the awe of divinity as in the Tang Dynasty.

In addition, the germination of medical humanism and the shift in pain narratives also promoted the acceptance of acupuncture and moxibustion. Physicians in the Song Dynasty began to pay more attention to patients' real pain experiences and explore methods to alleviate suffering. For example, *Posthumous Records of Duke Zeng* recorded in detail the pain response of Emperor Zhezong during moxibustion: "He did not feel pain until the thirty-fifth moxa cone, and the pain became severe after the fiftieth cone" [26]. Such real-time and quantitative pain records were extremely rare in Tang Dynasty documents, indicating that Song Dynasty court medicine attached importance to patients' subjective feelings. Meanwhile, Dou Cai recorded in *Bian Que's Heart Classic* the invention of "Sleeping Holy Powder" for anesthesia, so that "wealthy people who are afraid of pain can take Sleeping Holy Powder first and then receive moxibustion" [3], directly responding to patients' fear of the burning pain of moxibustion. Song people were "picky" about moxibustion pain, and behind this pickiness was a shift in body concepts: the emphasis on bodily autonomy, comfort, and even bodily aesthetics, which was the embodiment of the germination of medical humanism at the bodily level. This forms a sharp contrast with the Tang Dynasty narrative where pain was regarded as a treatment ritual and patients mostly endured it culturally.

Furthermore, bodily accessibility and Confucian ethical adjustment enabled acupuncture and moxibustion to be more widely applied to special groups. The prosperity of Confucian ethics in the Song Dynasty did not completely hinder the intervention of acupuncture and moxibustion in the female body, but profoundly affected the way of intervention. Moxibustion gained a priority position in female treatment due to its mildness and the possibility of non-direct contact. *Su-Shen's Effective Prescriptions* describes the acupoint location for women, mentioning that "for women, bend the nipple to measure, and the place aligned with the nipple is the acupoint", guiding self or family assistance in acupoint location to avoid direct touching by male physicians [22]. The wife of Guo Yanzhang, a contemporary, suffered from metrorrhagia, and "all treatments were ineffective. Later, measure two and a half inches above the malleolus bone, moxibustion on both sides of the depression for twenty-seven moxa cones... and use the woman's right finger as the inch for measurement, which was effective" [27]. As a means for gynecological emergencies, moxibustion's operation sites relatively do not involve privacy, and the acupoint location emphasizes "using the woman's right finger as the inch", reflecting individualized and privacy considerations for female patients. The difference in accessibility reflects the strategic compromise and breakthrough of benevolent medicine in the face of Confucian ethics. From Foucault's perspective, this can be interpreted as moxibustion, as a gendered body governance technology, achieving medical penetration into the female body through its special "social distance" strategy within the framework of Confucian ethical discipline.

Finally, the hollowing out of official education and the prosperity of folk moxibustion constituted the core conflict in the history of acupuncture acceptance in the Song Dynasty. Data from Hua Chunyong shows that the acupuncture major in the Imperial Medical Bureau of the Southern Song Dynasty was "completely vacant" for a long time, with zero students (in the first year of Longxing of Emperor Xiaozong, the quota was 11, but the actual number was 0; in the fourth year of Qingyuan of Emperor Ningzong, the quota was 2, but the actual number was 0) [28]. This forms a sharp contrast with the macro narrative by Gang Weijuan and others that official acupuncture education in the Song Dynasty reached its peak [29]. Meanwhile, Liu Zijiao's quantitative research shows that the folk was an era of "supremacy of moxibustion alone", which also forms a certain contrast with Professor Yu Gengzhe's macro argument that official medical institutions in the Song Dynasty were more effective than those in previous dynasties. This dual-track development model of "official retreat and folk advance" indicates that the popularization of acupuncture and moxibustion was not so much a direct result of official education as it benefited more from the failure of the official education system, which freed up huge space for folk practice. This allowed moxibustion to gain an overwhelming advantage among the people due to its convenience and become an important force in unofficial body governance.

Yijian Zhi (Records of the Listener), as the culmination of zhiguai notes in the Southern Song Dynasty, provides us with a broader and rougher picture of the folk acceptance of acupuncture and moxibustion in the Song Dynasty. Here, acupuncture and moxibustion are not only therapeutic tools but also media for folk society to conduct extreme dialogues with the body, full of pain, scars, and struggles for survival. This forms a sharp contrast with the elite class's efforts to rationalize and discipline the body through acupuncture, demonstrating the dual-track parallel phenomenon of elite rationalization and the mystification of popular beliefs.

The most striking is that extreme surgical interventions and violent rejection were common in folk practice. In the case of Sheng Gao's fire needle pus drainage [30], Sheng Gao, a guard soldier, suffered from choking and stabbing pain in the chest and diaphragm. Liu Jingluo, a military physician with "extraordinary skills", performed fire needle therapy. He heated two needles "in the

fire" and inserted them, and "blood poured out like a spring", eventually curing him. As a highly invasive surgical procedure, the intensity and pus drainage effect of this fire needle therapy reflect the folk acceptance of surgical acupuncture: in order to survive, people can endure even pursue extreme treatment experiences, and the body is regarded as a governance object that can be extremely intervened. Similarly, in the case of Ye Keji's fire chopstick cauterization [30], Ye Keji suffered from "the disease of no intestines". "He met a Taoist priest who burned a fire chopstick until it was red-hot and inserted it six or seven inches into his coccyx. He remained calm as if he felt nothing", and then small intestines grew in his abdomen. The extreme pain caused by fire chopstick cauterization was depicted in folk narratives as the patient "remaining calm as if feeling nothing", which may imply the intervention of Taoist magic or an exaggeration of the curative effect. However, in any case, the acceptance of such extreme body modification existed among the people, provided that it could bring the miraculous effect of "bringing the dead back to life".

The acceptance of pain and body modification in *Yijian Zhi* also has profound social significance. In the case of Xu Loutai's fatal acupuncture [30], Xu Loutai, a folk surgeon, treated a back carbuncle. During the acupuncture process, the patient "cried out in pain, with the voice gradually rising" until he died. Pain was regarded as part of the treatment process, even if it might lead to death; folk explanations for medical failures often appealed to karma rather than pure technical errors, reflecting the close connection between diseases, morality, and fate. This contrasts with the mentality of literati in *Su-Shen's Effective Prescriptions* who regarded acupuncture as an elegant pastime or a way to investigate things, reflecting the desperation of patients who saw acupuncture as a last straw. Even more extreme is the case of Wang Xieqi's "Golden Bell Cover" [30]. Wang Chao (father of Wang Xieqi) "burned thousands of moxa cones" every year and practiced the "Golden Bell Cover" skill, which made his "neck as hard as iron" and "abdomen as hard as stone". His body must have left a large number of scars. This extreme pain training and modification of the body completely broke away from the scope of treating diseases and entered the field of martial arts and personal ability enhancement. It also shows that the folk not only accepted such body modification brought by moxibustion (covered with scars and hard skin) but also regarded it to a certain extent as a symbol of strength and extraordinary ability. It can be seen that in the folk body concept, the body is not only a carrier of diseases but also a disciplinable and plastic governance object that can be tempered and sublimated through extreme means.

In summary, the history of acupuncture acceptance in the Song Dynasty was a critical stage of transformation from the interaction between heaven and humanity to body governance technology. Driven by the discipline of state power over knowledge, the rationalization of theories by Confucian physicians, and the standardization of dissemination by printing technology, acupuncture and moxibustion, especially moxibustion, were shaped into a low-cost social welfare and benevolent governance tool emphasizing "convenience, low cost, and effectiveness". The public's acceptance of acupuncture and moxibustion shifted from awe in the Tang Dynasty to utilitarianism, accompanied by the germination of medical humanism and the shift in pain narratives. Meanwhile, the adjustment of Confucian ethics to bodily accessibility gave moxibustion priority in female treatment. However, the transformation was not achieved overnight. The hollowing out of official education, the "supremacy of moxibustion alone" in folk moxibustion, and the continued folk acceptance of extreme therapies and witchcraft beliefs shown in *Yijian Zhi* together constitute the complex picture of the coexistence of elite rationalization and the mystification of popular beliefs in the history of acupuncture acceptance in the Song Dynasty.

4. The transformation of acupuncture acceptance in the Tang and Song Dynasties: concepts, technologies and governance

Multiple dimensions such as politics, knowledge, ideology and social economy constitute the evolutionary process of acupuncture acceptance from the interaction between heaven and humanity to body governance technology in the Tang and Song dynasties and its deep-seated driving factors. How state power reshapes the social positioning of acupuncture through bodily discipline, how the revolution in knowledge dissemination media promotes the transformation of medical paradigms, how the innovation of mainstream ideological concepts guides the changes in bodily cognition, and how the changes in social and economic structures lead to the differentiation of acupuncture and moxibustion-these factors interact and jointly bring about the fundamental transformation of the acupuncture acceptance mechanism.

The primary driving force behind the evolution of the acupuncture acceptance mechanism from awe-based acceptance in the Tang Dynasty to utilitarian acceptance in the Song Dynasty is actually the fundamental transformation of political and social governance models. As revealed earlier, state intervention in medical care in the Tang Dynasty was relatively limited. Although the government established the Imperial Medical Academy to regulate acupuncture, its influence was mostly concentrated among the elite class, and it had not yet formed universal discipline over the bodies of the people. Acupuncture and moxibustion were more intertwined with witchcraft and divine beliefs among the people, and their acceptance was often based on awe of supernatural forces. However, by the Song Dynasty, the degree of state power intervention in medical care was unprecedented. Medical care was elevated to an important body governance technology, and the government vigorously implemented the policy of "banning witchcraft and promoting medicine", forcing witches and wizards to "be ordered to change their occupations to farming or learn acupuncture and pulse diagnosis", directly promoting acupuncture as a tool for cultural substitution. At the same time, the Song Dynasty state established social relief systems such as Huimin Bureaus and Anji Workshops, and built moxibustion into a low-cost social welfare to meet the basic livelihood needs of the grassroots at affordable prices. It can be seen that the transformation of governance models turned acupuncture from a sacred taboo into a quantifiable governance tool, and the public's acceptance of it also shifted from obedience to destiny to a utilitarian response to the state's benevolent governance. This is precisely the concrete embodiment of what Foucault called "discipline" in the medical field, where the state maintains and transforms social order through intervention in the body.

It is worth noting that the revolution in knowledge dissemination media and the standardization process of medicine have greatly promoted the popularization of acupuncture knowledge and the transformation of cognitive paradigms. As mentioned earlier, the era of handwritten manuscripts in the Tang Dynasty limited the dissemination and accuracy of acupuncture knowledge, making it have a high learning threshold and difficult to popularize on a large scale among the people. However, with the arrival of the era of textual openness in the Song Dynasty, the popularization of printing led to the massive publication of medical books. The bronze figures and stone classics cast by Wang Weiyi by imperial order realized the standardization, visualization and authorization of acupuncture knowledge, lowered the learning threshold, transformed it from a "mysterious art" into a "learnable skill", accelerated its social acceptance process, and became an important means for the state to carry out knowledge governance.

Furthermore, the innovation of mainstream ideological concepts, especially the Confucianization and the awakening of humanistic thought, drove the changes in bodily cognition in acupuncture

acceptance in a deeper sense. The Tang Dynasty view of the body tended to be cosmic and divine. Acupuncture intervention in the body was regarded as an intervention in the "microcosm", and pain was often seen as an inevitable ritual of treatment or a way to communicate with the universe. In contrast, the Neo-Confucian trend of "the investigation of things to attain knowledge" in the Song Dynasty promoted the rationalization of medicine. The rise of the Confucian physician group incorporated acupuncture into the Confucian system and enhanced its cultural legitimacy. The Confucianization trend led to the germination of medical humanism, which was reflected in the transformation of narratives about bodily pain. At the same time, bodily accessibility and Confucian ethical adjustment enabled acupuncture to be more widely applied to women through methods such as flexible acupoint location for women, expanding the audience. Thus, the metaphor of the body shifted from sacred punishment to an intervenable physiological problem, and people's acceptance of acupuncture also moved from awe and fatalism to utilitarian pursuit of efficacy.

In addition, the changes in social and economic structures and the marketization of medical care are indispensable factors in the transformation of acupuncture acceptance. In the aristocratic society of the Tang Dynasty, acupuncture knowledge mainly served the elite class, and folk practices were mostly extensive. However, the prosperity of the commodity economy and the acceleration of urbanization in the Song Dynasty gave birth to a huge folk medical market, providing soil for the widespread dissemination of acupuncture. Moxibustion became the mainstream in the market due to its characteristics of "convenience, low cost and effectiveness", meeting the huge demand of the common people for low-cost and high-efficiency medical care. The Song society's pursuit of efficiency and utilitarianism also made acupuncture, as a therapy with quick results and controllable costs, occupy an important position in the medical market.

Ultimately, under the intertwined effects of the above multiple factors, the history of acupuncture acceptance between the Tang and Song dynasties presents its most tense aspect: the rise and fall of the status of acupuncture and moxibustion. The acupuncture major in the Imperial Medical Bureau of the Southern Song Dynasty was "completely vacant" for a long time, and acupuncture techniques declined at the elite education level. In typical mutual confirmation, moxibustion accounted for as high as 96.2% of folk acupuncture prescriptions in the Song Dynasty, making it an era of "supremacy of moxibustion alone" among the people. Acupuncture has a high technical threshold and high risks, and the Confucian physicians' tendency to "value theory over practice" limited its popularization among the people. In contrast, moxibustion achieved mass popularity among the people because it "can be performed by anyone", uses readily available materials, has low costs, and is combined with health preservation. This force of social economy and medical marketization ultimately brought about the "golden age" of moxibustion among the people, deepened the differentiation between acupuncture and moxibustion in terms of social acceptance, and formed the tension between the rational discipline of official elites and the utilitarian practices of the general public.

5. Conclusion

Tang Dynasty society was deeply influenced by the concept of interaction between heaven and humanity and beliefs in ghosts and spirits. It regarded the body as a microcosm connecting the secrets of heaven and humanity. As a mysterious magic that intervened in the bodily microcosm, acupuncture and moxibustion were mostly accepted based on awe of supernatural forces and dependence on destiny, making them typical bodily symbols of the interaction between heaven and humanity. By the Song Dynasty, acupuncture and moxibustion gradually transformed into a body governance technology serving secular people's livelihood and emphasizing utilitarianism and

rationality, and their acceptance was more based on economic rationality, predictable curative effects, and humanistic care. However, the transformation between the Tang and Song dynasties was not unidirectional or linear. Instead, it presented a development model of the hollowing out of official acupuncture education and the prosperity of folk moxibustion, while elite rationalization and the mystification of popular beliefs coexisted for a long time.

From the awe and forbearance of the temporality of taboos and pain in the Tang Dynasty to the attention to patients' bodily experiences and the exploration of anesthesia technology in the Song Dynasty, the use of acupuncture and moxibustion shifted from dependence on divine arts to the pursuit of convenience, low cost, and effectiveness of technology. At the same time, the humanization of pain narratives emerged in the Song Dynasty. The record of Emperor Zhezong's moxibustion pain and the application of Dou Cai's "Sleeping Holy Powder" both reflected the germination of medical humanism and the increasing weight of patients' bodily experiences in medical choices; bodily accessibility and gendered medical strategies embodied the tension and adjustment between benevolent medicine and Confucian ethics.

However, the scarcity of historical materials on the bodily experiences of the lower-class people in the Tang Dynasty leaves room for further deepening the discussion on the social construction of acupuncture efficacy. Future research can further expand the excavation of folk texts and local chronicles, and deepen the integrated research on acupuncture and moxibustion with Taoist health preservation and Buddhist charitable medical care, so as to depict a more comprehensive and detailed picture of acupuncture acceptance in the Tang and Song dynasties.

References

- [1] Huang, L. X. (2001). Outline of the academic history of Chinese acupuncture and moxibustion. Huaxia Publishing House.
- [2] Zhao, J. S. (2003). Interpretations of classical acupuncture and moxibustion theories. Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine Press.
- [3] Lin, Z. G., & Yan, L. (1995). History of acupuncture and moxibustion medicine. China Press of Traditional Chinese Medicine.
- [4] Yu, G. Z. (2011). A preliminary study of diseases and medical customs in the Tang dynasty. China Social Sciences Press.
- [5] Yu, G. Z. (2006). The rise and decline of moxibustion in folk medical practice during the Tang and Song dynasties: An analysis of the historical background of a technological choice. *Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 21(1), 62–73.
- [6] Yu, X. Z. (2014). Epidemics and society in Jiangnan during the Qing dynasty: A study in medical social history. Beijing Normal University Press.
- [7] Yu, X. Z. (2011). A study on the origins and development of the saying "a good physician is like a good prime minister": Also on the social status of physicians from the Song to Qing dynasties. *Historiography Quarterly*, (4), 120–131.
- [8] Li, Z. D. (2024). Women's medical history in China: Health care and gender between the Han and Tang dynasties. Zhejiang Ancient Books Publishing House.
- [9] Burke, P. (2023). What is the history of knowledge? (K. Zhang, Trans.). Peking University Press.
- [10] An, C. P. (2004). Medical transformation in an age of textual openness: A study of medicine and society in the Song dynasty (Doctoral dissertation, Heilongjiang University of Chinese Medicine).
- [11] Cheng, J. (2008). Research on medical institutions in the Tang dynasty (Master's thesis, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences).
- [12] Wang, X. T. (1985). A study of Zhen Quan's Illustrations of the Bronze Figure for Acupuncture Points and the officially compiled Illustrations of Acupuncture and Moxibustion Points in the Tang dynasty. *Chinese Journal of Medical History*, (2), 73–76.
- [13] Chen, H. (2018). The historical context of the medical classic Huangdi Neijing Taisu in the early Tang dynasty. *Journal of Sichuan University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, (1), 122–129.

- [14] Sun, S. M. (1983). *Qianjin yifang* (Supplement to prescriptions worth a thousand gold pieces). People's Medical Publishing House. (Original work published in the Tang dynasty)
- [15] Zhang, J. G. (2023). The formation of medical consultation and medication concepts among the populace during the Tang and Five Dynasties periods. *Academic Journal of Zhongzhou*, (1), 125–133.
- [16] Sun, S. M. (1998). Annotated edition of *Qianjin yifang* (p. 436). People's Medical Publishing House. (Original work published in the Tang dynasty)
- [17] Wang, H., et al. (1958). *Taiping Shenghui Fang* (Vol. 100). People's Medical Publishing House. (Original work compiled in the Song dynasty)
- [18] Liu, R. (2022). Shamanistic and medical beliefs, healing skills, and folk ghost-sacrifice therapies reflected in middle and late Tang epitaphs. *Problems in History Teaching*, (4), 46–52.
- [19] Xu, Y. (1999). Closed door (Bimen). In *Complete Tang Poems* (Vol. 11, Vol. 708). Zhonghua Book Company. (Original work published in the Tang dynasty)
- [20] Zhou, S. L., et al. (Eds.). (1992). *Collected epitaphs of the Tang dynasty*. Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- [21] Li, F., et al. (Eds.). (1961). *Taiping Guangji*. Zhonghua Book Company. (Original work compiled in the Song dynasty)
- [22] Su, S., & Shen, K. (1985). *Sushen Liangfang*. Zhonghua Book Company. (Original work compiled in the Song dynasty)
- [23] Liu, Z. J. (2021). A study of the interpretation of Cishu from the Laoguanshan Han bamboo slips and the evolution of acupuncture prescriptions from ancient to modern times (Master's thesis, Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine).
- [24] Zhou, M. (2006). *Wulin jiushi*. In *Complete Song Notes* (Series 8, Vol. 2). Elephant Press. (Original work published in the Song dynasty)
- [25] Cai, C. B. (1998). A brief discussion of medical practice in the Song dynasty. *Journal of Sichuan University* (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), (4), 93–100.
- [26] Zeng, B. (2006). *Zenggong Yilu*. In *Complete Song Notes* (Series 1, Vol. 8). Elephant Press. (Original work published in the Song dynasty)
- [27] Zhang, S. Z. (2006). *Juanyou Zalu*. In *Complete Song Notes* (Series 8, Vol. 9). Elephant Press. (Original work published in the Song dynasty)
- [28] Hua, C. Y. (2006). A preliminary study of medical education issues in the Imperial Medical Bureau during the Song dynasty (Master's thesis, Northwest University).
- [29] Gang, W. J., Wu, X. D., & Zhang, L. J. (2007). An overview of the development of official acupuncture and moxibustion education in ancient China (before 1840). *Chinese Journal of Basic Medicine in Traditional Chinese Medicine*, 13(3), 226–228.
- [30] Hong, M. (1981). *Yijian Zhi*. Zhonghua Book Company. (Original work published in the Song dynasty).