

5,000 Years of Acupuncture

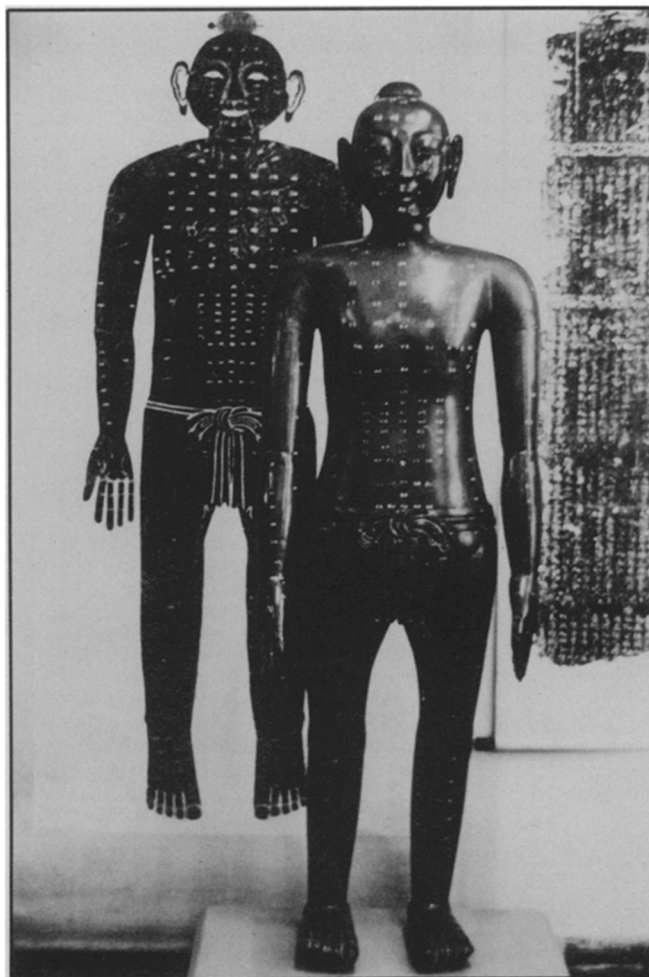
The history of acupuncture is cited in attempts to demonstrate its value

BY ROBERT J. TROTTER

"In Eastern countries most of the illnesses are boils and ulcers, they should be treated with *bian* stone." This statement comes from the *Treatise on the Suitable Prescriptions with Different Methods*, an ancient Chinese medical text cited by the Chinese to back up their claim that acupuncture is a time-tested procedure. The *bian* (sharp) stone, or "stone needle," was originally used "to pick at the body surface in order to cure diseases." The earliest extant mention of *bian* stones is in a text from the 6th century B.C., but Chinese archaeologists claim to have unearthed such instruments dating back at least 4,000 years and possibly 10,000 years.

Wang Xuetai of the Institute of Acupuncture and Moxibustion explains that acupuncture began as a means of relieving pain but gradually developed into a special healing art with stone needles being used to treat all kinds of diseases.

The use of metallic needles is said to have come with the Bronze Age, and there is evidence that by the early stage of the Warring States period (475 to 221 B.C.), when China was just entering the iron age, metallic needles were being used and the practice of acupuncture was widespread. Gold and silver needles were among the relics found when an ancient tomb (113 B.C.) in Hebei Province was excavated in



The Institute of Acupuncture and Moxibustion in Beijing has an acupuncture museum and a department for studying the history of acupuncture. Life size bronze dolls were used during the Ming Dynasty as teaching aids for aspiring acupuncturists. If the needle is inserted in the correct hole the doll squirts water.

*Patient getting moxibustion treatment, a medical technique often mentioned in connection with acupuncture. It consists of applying heat to various parts of the body. We saw the technique being applied but heard of no specific research being done. Moxibustion, nearly as ancient as acupuncture, originated in the north "when people warming themselves by the fire accidentally discovered that applying heat to or scorching the abdominal region might relieve the symptoms of abdominal pain, distention and fullness." As the technique developed, it evolved from direct cauterization of the skin to indirect cauterization and was applied to more and more illnesses and pains. Material used as an igniting substance during moxibustion included mugwort (moxa, or *Artemisia vulgaris*), sulphur, rush (lampwick) and the wax from mulberry and peach branches. Material for application between the igniting substance and the skin were: garlic, ginger, onion, scallion, leek, chive, salted soybean, pepper, honey locust, earth, mud with zigzag, grubs and toads.*



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1968, and Chinese records indicate that nine types of needles were used: the cutting needle for operating on abscesses, the arrow head needle for dispersing heat, the sharp-tip needle for venous pricking, the round head needle for massaging, the pressing needle for giving pressure to the points, the large needle, the long needle, the round-sharp and the filiform needles. The last three were used frequently for acupuncture treatment, and the filiform needle (thin, flexible) is the one most often used today.

At the very beginning, explains Wang, people did not know that there were acupuncture points. But based on the experiences of incising and pricking abscesses and ulcers with bian stones the idea of "puncture where there is a tenderness" evolved. Through repeated experiences it was gradually discovered that certain of the tender spots have connections with the trunk and internal organs, and the concept of acupuncture points was formed. At various times as many as 650 acupuncture points have been mentioned, but by 1817, 361 main points had been settled on.

By the 7th century acupuncture was apparently flourishing, and when the imperial college of medicine was founded during the Tong Dynasty it included a department specializing in acupuncture. The theoretical basis of acupuncture was studied and, says Wang, advances in therapeutic experiences and manipulation methods continued to be made until the 19th century. Then came hard times.

In 1822, the Qing Dynasty declared that "acupuncture and moxibustion are not suitable to be applied to the emperor." Following the Opium War in 1840, acupuncture was further denounced, and when Western medicine was introduced Chinese traditional medicine was smashed brutally, says Wang. Some even called acupuncture an "instrument of professional torture."

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, acupuncture gained a new life. The government called on all medical workers of the traditional and Western schools to unite and established numerous acupuncture institutes. Rigorous research methods are beginning to be applied at these institutes, and international training courses are being set up to export acupuncture. The acupuncture institute in Beijing, for instance, has trained more than 200 physicians from 50 countries (mostly from Asia and Africa, none from the United States).

The Chinese have managed to document the long history of acupuncture, but if they want to provide it with a future — at least outside of China — they will have to make their point in terms of Western science. And the Chinese researchers do seem to be taking this challenge seriously — not only to save face but in order to make a worthwhile contribution to the world of medicine. □