

# Remembering Wang Ju-Yi (王居易)

## Abstract

This article is a eulogy of the Beijing doctor, teacher and author Wang Ju-Yi, written by his apprentices.



On August 5th, 2017 the East Asian medical community lost one of its greatest advocates and thinkers with the passing of Beijing professor Wang Ju-Yi. While Dr. Wang lived and worked his entire life in Beijing, his influence extended far beyond the borders of China. Known to many outside of China as the author of *Applied Channel Theory in Chinese Medicine* (Eastland Press, 2008), Dr. Wang practised acupuncture for over half a century. He never stopped thinking and working - giving a series of lectures in Beijing just months before his death at the age of 80. During these final months, Dr. Wang asserted that,

*What I am calling, 'Applied Channel Theory' (经络医学 jīng luò yī xué) is about researching traditional conceptions of the channels. By beginning from a place rooted in a recognition of the theories from our classical texts, we can come to an understanding of their physiological scope and clinical application. It is important to point out how this differs from much of the modern approach to acupuncture channel research. Most modern approaches strive to ascertain the physical location; the material substances of the channels. I would advocate coming at this from a different angle. We*

*might instead focus on furthering our understanding of the observational process by which classical physicians came to understand the channels and their patterns of physiology and clinical application. Our task is to strive to research what these early physicians understood the channels to be and the details of the theoretical systems they devised ... With the knowledge of their clinical vision, we can describe a 'way of thinking' that I believe will actually be a great stimulus. Chinese medicine is no longer Chinese. This is now a world medicine and the way of thinking described in our foundational texts will inspire innovations in all 21st century medicine.*

Dr. Wang was born in the small hutong/alleys of Beijing the very year the Japanese army entered the city (1937). He witnessed so much of the change that China and Chinese medicine underwent in the 20th century. He described how his family took him into the countryside during years of war in north China where he was twice rescued from drowning - once from a stream as an infant and again after falling into a well a few years later. Somewhat fittingly, he then told of returning to Beijing and learning to swim through the moats/canals around the old city wall and ancient lakes within the old city. He and his friends would run through a city still surrounded by ancient walls then float on their backs surrounded by dramatic change. By the time he finished high school, the Republic of China had been replaced with the People's Republic. Dr. Wang described lining up in Tiananmen Square with his high school (in the rain) as Chairman Mao and the People's Liberation Army marched through the city. As was often the case with Dr. Wang, his timing was good. He finished high school just as the new government finished its plans to open five new colleges of traditional Chinese medicine around the country. He and 25 other students enrolled in the first class of the new Beijing College of Chinese Medicine (北京中医学院 Běi jīng zhōng yī xué yuàn) in 1956. Upon graduation in 1962, Dr. Wang began seeing patients at the Beijing Hospital of Chinese Medicine and was charged with traveling to surrounding provinces to research other types of

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'folk medicine' for integration into the new education system. What many of us now think of as 'Traditional Chinese Medicine/TCM' did not yet exist. These early years were a period of accumulation, consolidation and codification for Chinese medicine in China. In many ways Dr. Wang was fortunate to develop his understanding before this work was done. He learned through a more syncretic approach drawn from teachers representing a variety of earlier schools of thought. Most importantly for students of Chinese medical history, his understanding of acupuncture was highly influenced by conceptions of the six channels (六经 *liù jīng*) described in the *Inner Classic* (内经 *Nèi jīng*) and the related physiological systems of the *Treatise on Cold Damage* (伤寒论 *Shāng hán lùn*).

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Dr. Wang reported treating hundreds of patients each day with four other doctors and a host of assisting nurses when the acupuncture department of his hospital was relocated to a temple complex next to the Forbidden City. Weeks (and sometimes months) were also spent treating patients and training barefoot doctors in nearby Miyun county. It was during this period of what for many of us today would be a staggering patient load that Dr. Wang began palpating the channels for diagnostic clues. He later described how there were patients who didn't respond to any of the protocols and clinical tricks his teachers and books had taught. Always voraciously curious, Dr. Wang began the slow accumulation of his unique clinical approach by trying to improve results in those patients. He described a process by which he would encounter a difficult case, write down notes, then dig through classical texts for new ideas. By mining the classics for clinical insight, he was able to slowly accumulate a greater understanding of the physiological model described in those texts. During the 1960s, he began to add systemic palpation of the channels to fine-tune his diagnosis.



By the end of the 1970s, Dr. Wang had begun teaching small groups in the hospital where he worked. Possibly because of this experience and his skill as a teacher, the Chinese government sent him on one of the earliest

international teaching missions to Greece in 1978. As Dr. Wang recounted, this experience was a turning point,

*I went to Greece to teach in the late 1970s and for the first time encountered Chinese Medicine in the world outside. I saw patients with a doctor there and also gave lectures to groups of Greek doctors. One experience at a conference had a profound effect on me. I remember that there was a group of doctors and other scholars of Chinese medicine. I can't remember the exact subject, but I gave a lecture on concepts from the Inner Classic or Classic of Difficulties (难经 *Nán jīng*). After the lecture, a few of the doctors and an old French priest came up to me and said, 'This is the information we want to hear. This is the kind of information we think will be clinically useful and information we can't find. Please research and teach this more!' So many times, I have found in my life that there has been this circular influence from students. The interests and questions they ask inspire me to research more deeply and to consider questions I had not thought of. The development of my approach owes quite a bit to the stimulus provided by students from around the world.*



This symbiotic relationship between students and teacher, East and West, was very much a part of Dr. Wang's life. He went back to Beijing from Greece but travelled around the world teaching for the rest of his life. In each case, he brought information and was shaped by the experience. Not only did it shape his research, it also shaped his teaching style. Over time he developed a teaching style that encouraged questions and welcomed debate. When difficult or unusual questions were posed to him, he often would reply, 'Good idea, I will think about that more.' For those of us who studied with him for years, we could sometimes even see our own questions weave into his ever-evolving clinical conceptions.

Having been appointed director of the Xuanwu TCM Hospital in 1982, Dr. Wang left two years later to work as the Director of the Department of Acupuncture and Moxibustion at the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences and was Editor-in-chief of the journal *Chinese Acupuncture and Moxibustion* (中国针灸 *Zhōng guó zhēn jiū*). In the years after his retirement in 1997, he opened the

Wang Ju-yi Applied Channel Theory Research Center and Clinic and welcomed students from all over the world. Many of us were fortunate to help organise and translate for groups of students during this era (maybe some of you reading this were on those trips). Recordings of lectures from classes given at this time were used to create the *Applied Channel Theory in Chinese Medicine* text - a work that has now been translated into German, French, Italian and Russian.

By the beginning of the current decade, the Chinese government began to take note of the retired doctor with a growing following of foreign students. Dr. Wang always had broad relationships with doctors, administrators and officials in the Chinese medical community but preferred to keep a low profile. Never one to seek high position, he considered himself primarily to be a clinician. Nevertheless, by 2012 Dr. Wang received official recognition from the Beijing Administration of Chinese Medicine as a renowned physician and established a 'work station'. This included some support from the Huguosi TCM hospital and an apprenticeship programme for local doctors assigned to learn his clinical methods. In 2013, Dr. Wang acknowledged the graduation of his first group of apprentices at a ceremony in Beijing. Of interest to the Chinese government at the time, none of this first group of apprentices were born in China. All Chinese speakers, they were from the United States and Canada. In the ceremony for these apprentices, the Director of the Beijing Administration of Chinese Medicine noted that, 'We need to focus on what Dr. Wang is teaching or we may find that the Chinese medical students of the future will have to go abroad to study!' Many took note as Dr. Wang's final years saw the addition of Chinese apprentices who will keep his work alive in China. In recent years, Dr. Wang published two books in Chinese, *An Introduction to Applied Channel Theory* (《经络医学概论》2016) and *Wang Ju-yi's Case Studies in Applied Channel Theory* (《王居易针灸医案讲习录》2014), which has led to a resurgence in interest in Dr. Wang's teachings. This year, just weeks before he passed, Dr. Wang was given the high honour of being designated a 'National Grandmaster' by the Beijing Administration of Chinese Medicine.

For the many of us who have known Dr. Wang, we will remember his smiling face and joy when working with students and patients. His life was a bridge between a time almost lost and the online, evidenced-based, multi-approach melting pot we see in Chinese medicine today. He moved with a slow, deliberative pace less recognisable in modern China. Reflecting his own personality, Dr. Wang described the learning of Chinese medicine to have a similar, irrigation-like pace. He often described the function of the acupuncture channels and the nurturing of students as being a process like watering plants. Never hurrying, always watching and re-thinking. He never stopped evolving his understanding and firmly insisted

that we should all build upon the approach he developed. His name, Ju-Yi (居易) might be translated as 'plain and simple'. Despite the wealth of his knowledge and experience he managed to keep it that way. We have lost a teacher, a father and a friend. He will be missed by many.

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