ABSTRACT

Chinese medicine’s concept of qi mediates between a person’s mental-emotional life and the physiological processes producing and maintaining the body form. The pathogenic potential of human emotions and desires figured prominently in China’s ancient medical and philosophical texts and, more than any other type of qi, the sovereign and minister fire embody the influences and relationships between mental, emotional, sensory and physiological activities. Contemporary traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) textbooks rarely mention the minister fire, except as an illness mechanism that is identified with liver and gall bladder yang repletion patterns. The preferred term for its physiological influences today is the kidney yang qi.

The two parts of this paper examine the physiological and clinical implications of the minister fire. In the *Yellow Emperor’s* *Inner Canon* commentaries (after c. 100 BCE), minister fire is the complement of the heart’s sovereign fire; in the *Treatise on Cold Damage* commentaries (after c. 200 CE) it is an emergent property of the lifegate; and in TCM it is equivalent to the kidney yang. When Song-Jin-Yuan (960–1368) medicine revisited the *Inner Canon*’s division of the fire phase into ‘sovereign’ and ‘minister’, minister fire became a key physiological concept guiding some of China’s lasting medical developments, methods and formulas.

Part One begins with the pericardium and lifegate. Premodern references link the pericardium and lifegate with the minister fire that disseminates the orders of the sovereign fire. Together, the pericardium and lifegate reflect the communication between the heart and kidney visceral systems and disseminate their qi-influences – the pericardium communicating the executive influences of the sovereign fire, and the lifegate producing the physiological influences of the minister fire. The minister fire itself, and the pathogenic stirring of minister fire due to emotions and desires, will be the subject of Part Two.

KEYWORDS Chinese medicine, qi physiology, psychology, mind, body, morality, ideology
Introduction

Medical anthropologists and social scientists today recognise that emotions are an important bridge between mind and body, and between the individual and society. Nancy Schepper-Hughes and Margaret Lock showed how emotions entail personal feelings and cognitive orientations as well as public morality and cultural ideology. According to Schepper-Hughes and Lock, emotions affect not only our subjective experience of illness and pain, but also the imaging of ‘the well or poorly functioning social body and body politic’.

Chinese medicine’s notions of qi presuppose the same connections. The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon’s sociopolitical image of the body as empire or state represented the heart-spirit/mind (心神 xinshen) as the body’s sovereign ruler, and the sense organs (官 guan) as the ruler’s administrative officials. In the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) medical classics, the sense officials and their offices – the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind – were the ‘six catalysts of desire’. Each of the senses was prone to partiality, fascination and captivation by their own pleasures, and thereby ‘to subject the body to domination by external objects’.

The authors of the Inner Canon observed how the emotions affected the qi: for example, they could cause the qi to ascend (anger) or to descend (fear); they could relax and slow the qi (joy), or consume the qi (sadness). The Inner Canon defines minister fire as the heart-kidney and sanjiao-gall bladder channels (the shaoyin and shaoyang). The Nanjing (c. 100 CE) commentaries link it with the heart ruler-liver and sanjiao-gall bladder channels (the jueyin and jueyang). Zhu Danxi (朱丹溪 1280–1358 CE) identified minister fire with lifegate and said that minister fire is stored in the kidneys and liver and connected to the heart. According to Li Shizhen (李时珍 1518–1593 CE), minister fire inhabits the liver and gall bladder. Zhang Jiebin (张介宾 1563–1640 CE) identified it with the kidney, liver, sanjiao, gall bladder and pericardium. TCM has reconciled minister fire’s various representations by reassigning its physiological contributions to the kidney yang, and identifying its pathogenic influences with liver and gall bladder yang repletion patterns. Small wonder many contemporary authors have little to say about the minister fire.

To explore Chinese medicine’s early notions of physiological fire and its observations regarding the potentially disruptive influence of physiological fire when agitated or ‘stirred’ by emotions and desires, the paper will examine the minister fire’s premodern representations. Part One begins with the pericardium and lifegate, and minister fire itself will be the subject of Part Two. The discussion will show how the minister fire arises from the original yang qi held in the lower jiao (the kidney-lifegate) and connects with its executive expression in the upper jiao (the sovereign fire of the heart), and how their influences are managed by the liver and gall bladder...
and by the special ‘envoys’, the pericardium and sanjiao. These relationships embody the physiological and pathogenic relationships between minister fire and the body's physical, mental, emotional and sensory qi activities.

Parts One and Two itemise some of the developments in classic texts starting with the Han dynasty classics, the Inner Canon, the Classic of Difficult Issues (难经 Nanjing, originally c. 100 CE) and the Treatise On Cold Damage (伤寒论 Shanghan Lun, originally c. 200 CE). Many of the early notions concerning minister fire were refined and extended during the Song-Jin-Yuan dynasties (960–1368 CE). In the Song, desire's longstanding reputation for depleting the qi was extended to include its newfound role in pathogenic fire. Subsequently, Ming and Qing (1368–1662 and 1662–1911 CE) scholar physicians refined the classic aetiology of depleted yang qi in terms of the lifegate.

The Pericardium

In Chinese medicine today the pericardium is sometimes equated with the minister fire but only in the context of acupuncture and channel theory. In that context the pericardium is viewed as a qi-system that transmits the happiness, brightness and qi-influences of the sovereign heart. Manual texts almost never mention the pericardium however, and nor do the beginnings of acupuncture theorising in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).

None of the Han medical classics refer to the hand reverting yin (手厥阴 shou jueyin) channel, today's pericardium channel, or to the pericardium itself. The Inner Canon's Miraculous Pivot Treatise 71 introduces the 'heart enclosing network (心包络 xinbaoluo), an entity that surrounds and protects the heart so that evil qi cannot attack the heart directly. As a medical term, the heart enclosing network indicates a dual function of enclosing and protecting (包 bao) the heart as well as connecting (络 luo) it with the lungs and the other visceral systems (脏腑 zangfu). In the Inner Canon, the heart enclosing network is the envoy that communicates and carries out the heart’s orders.

The Plain Questions Treatise 56 introduced the 'heart ruler' (心主 xinzhu), and like the heart enclosing network, 'heart ruler' refers to an entity through which the heart's rules. In the Nanjing the heart ruler is a branch of the heart lesser yin (少阴 shaoyin) channel. The Nanjing and its commentaries state that the heart ruler, heart enclosing network and the triple burner (三焦 sangjiao) have ‘no form’ (无形 wuxing). The notion of no form signals their unique role in the Chinese medical body, that of linking non-physical and physical life phenomena. Just as the heart enclosing network/heart ruler is the special envoy of the sovereign heart, sanjiao is the envoy distributing source qi (元气 yuanqi) from the lifegate (命门 mingmen), also known as the ‘gate of orders’.

As envos of the heart-sovereign, the role of both the heart enclosing network and heart ruler sounds similar to the notion of the ‘minister’ (相 xiang) who transmits the emperor's orders. Both were relabelled ‘pericardium’ (心包 xinbao) from the Qin dynasty (1616–111 CE), perhaps because of recent physical evidence. In 1575, Li Chan (李梴) had identified the anatomical pericardium, the thin membranous sac surrounding the heart, as the physical substrate for the heart enclosing network. To distinguish between early conceptions and their later anatomical re-badging, I will use ‘heart protector’ hereafter for premodern references to the heart ruler and heart enclosing network.

The Nanjing associates the lifegate with zang type functions and the heart protector with channel functions, although neither in fact is the sixth zang. The majority of Han dynasty texts mention only five zang and six fu and the sanjiao has no yin visceral counterpart. One exceptional treatise however, the Plain Questions Treatise Eight, does describe twelve palace officials (官 guan). In TCM textbooks, Treatise Eight’s palace officials are the internal visceral systems, even though Treatise Eight’s twelfth official is not a physical organ and nor is it the heart protector or lifegate: it is the ‘chest centre’ (膻中 dazhong).

The Plain Questions Treatise Eight says that the chest centre holds the office of ‘ambassador’ and is the official envoy responsible for happiness and joy. It acts like an envoy serving in the sovereign’s inner chambers: it connects to the heart and lungs, it facilitates communication, disseminates the heart's commands, and happiness issues from it. Again, the chest centre’s envoy responsibilities sound similar to the minister and the heart protector, and in the Miraculous Pivot Treatise 35 the chest centre is the ‘palace’ of the heart protector (心主之宫城 xinzhu zhi gongcheng).

Although Treatise Eight itself does not associate the chest centre with any of the other organ-channel systems, its representation of the chest centre has been adopted widely in contemporary descriptions of the pericardium. Today,膻中 Dazhong is the Chinese name for the acupuncture CV 17. ‘Chest centre’ refers to CV 17’s location on the anterior midline of the chest in the middle of the sternum, and to its clinical applications to benefit and regulate chest qi (宗气 zongqi).

Given its various names and representations it is no surprise that the contemporary Chinese medical literature remains ambivalent about the heart protector-pericardium. The Miraculous Pivot Treatise 10 and Treatise 71’s heart enclosing network is a channel, the Nanjing’s heart ruler was an extension of the heart shaoyin channel, and the Plain Questions’ chest centre was not the sixth zang. Furthermore, last century's sociopolitical changes apparently led Chinese doctors
to avoid mentioning the pericardium because of its imperialist connotations. Although the anatomical term ‘pericardium’ (心包 xinbao) had been a recent addition to China’s medical discourses, its name is very similar to the xinbao, the Inner Canon’s servant and envoy of the heart-sovereign. As the protector and envoy of the heart-sovereign, the pericardium was deemed a feudalistic relic, and ‘sources from the Gang of Four era [in the 1970s] derided the metaphor’. 15

Nevertheless, Treatise Eight’s description of the twelve officials is still very influential in contemporary TCM basic theory. In TCM textbooks, the chest centre, heart ruler and heart enclosing network are all ‘pericardium’, and today’s notions of the pericardium are based on the chest centre/heart protector’s channel connections and associations rather than on their credentials as a zang functional system. Thus, the pericardium is the envoy in charge of happiness and joy, the ‘alarm’ (募 mu) point for the pericardium and for general upper jiao qi-functions is CV17 danzhong and, in TCM today, the fire phase of the ‘five phases’ (五行 wuxing) has two yin-yang pairs: the heart and the pericardium are the yin systems; their yang partner systems are the small intestine and sanjiao (三焦). Chinese medical historians note that the sixth yin-yang pair of systems was added to the fire phase after the Han, and the discussion will briefly touch on these developments to clarify their connections.

When Wang Bing (王冰 c. 710–805 CE) revised the Plain Questions in 762 CE, he added Treatises 66–71 and 74. These treatises introduce the five circulatory phases and six seasonal influences (五行六气 wuyun liuqi) doctrine;23–26 which split the five phases’ fire phase into sovereign and minister fires. The heart was associated with sovereign fire, and the heart protector and sanjiao (心包) point for the pericardium and for general upper jiao qi are paired with the heart protector or lifegate (命门 mingmen). In fact extant versions of the Han classics and their commentaries paired the sanjiao with the heart enclosing network (the Miraculous Pivot Treatise 10 and the Nanjing Issue 25); with the heart ruler (Nanjing Issues 25 and 38); and with the lifegate (the Pulse Canon, 脉经 Maijing, c. 250 CE). In each case, the yang-yin pair (the sanjiao paired with the heart protector or lifegate) represented the minister fire.11

The Inner Canon and Nanjing texts are mainly concerned with ‘external’ acupuncture therapy and, from that perspective, the heart protector-pericardium is the logical yin partner for the sanjiao. From the herbal perspective, which is more concerned with ‘internal’ visceral processes and transformations, the lifegate-sanjiao pairing would have been more convincing.

Zhang Zhongjing’s (张仲景 c. 142–220 CE) Treatise on Cold Damage is a herbal text and does not mention the chest centre, heart ruler or heart enclosing network. The Treatise on Cold Damage (originally c. 200 CE) and its commentaries allocated the governance of minister fire to the shaoyang (三焦-gall bladder), and held that minister fire inhabited the liver. In the Han dynasty, this represented a break with the Inner Canon. The Treatise on Cold Damage and the Inner Canon’s (Treatise 66–71, 74) explanation of the wuyun liuqi were largely ignored until the Song (960–1279 CE).

The wuyun liuqi’s association of minister fire with the shaoyang agreed with the Treatise on Cold Damage. The kidneys were no longer related only to water and the shaoyin as in the Inner Canon: the left and right kidneys were linked to the water and minister fire phases respectively – the taiyang and shaoyang. For Song dynasty (960–1279) physicians, the separation of fire into sovereign and minister fire was an important functional-physiological concept.

To explore these developments further, the discussion will now turn to the lifegate (命门 mingmen). Twentieth century senior physicians such as Qin Bowei (秦伯未 1901–1970) consider the lifegate a ‘crucial issue’ in Chinese medicine, and premodern texts link both the heart protector and lifegate with the minister fire carrying out the orders of the sovereign ruler.

The lifegate

The lifegate’s functional role has remained fairly consistent since the Nanjing: it lodges the essence and spirit/mind (精神 jingwen), gives rise to the source qi (元气), and in women it holds the womb. Historically though, its location has been difficult to pin down. In the Plain Questions Treatise Six and Miraculous Pivot Treatise Five, the term 命门 mingmen referred to the eyes.27–8 This location is largely ignored today although the meaning for 命门, ‘orders’, ‘fate’, ‘life’, ‘to name’29, is still applied to contemporary representations of the lifegate.

The Nanjing gives two locations for the lifegate. One is introduced in Issues 36 and 39 where the left kidney is the kidney and the right kidney is the lifegate. The other location is given in Issue 66, which states that the ‘moving qi’ (动气 dongqi) is an equivalent term for the lifegate and its source qi. In the Nanjing, the moving qi is located below the navel and between the two kidneys – the same location as the ‘minor heart’ (小xin). The Plain Questions Treatise 52 had identified an entity called the minor heart and located it in the centre of the body level with the second and third lumbar vertebrae. On the surface of the lower back, this location is level with the governing vessel acupoint GV4 (命门 mingmen). The Nanjing’s moving qi between the kidneys gives rise to the sanjiao and the channels, and constitutes the person’s life destiny (生命 shengqing).

In Nathan Sivin’s opinion13, whether the lifegate is the eyes, the minor heart, the right kidney, the moving qi, or simply ‘an immaterial locus of [qi]’, has never been settled in the received
literature or its twentieth century revisions. By the end of the sixteenth century however, the lifegate’s location was generally considered to be between the left and right kidney zang, that is, level with the lumbar two/three area – the location of the Inner Canon’s minor heart, and level with the acupoint GV 4.

Sivin has also observed that over the centuries, the Nanjing scholars found ‘several ingenious ways’ to prove that the lifegate and heart protector were the same thing. The Nanjing commentaries described the lifegate and heart protector’s functional relationships. The sanjiao arises from the lifegate in the lower jiao. It disseminates the kidney-lifegate’s source qi and yin-fluids, and the lifegate fire powers their movement and transformations. In the upper jiao, the sanjiao connects with the qi structures enveloping the heart, the heart protector.

Ming (1368–1644 CE) scholar physicians defined the lifegate and heart protector association by their role in minister fire’s physiological and pathogenic influences. In summing up the lifegate’s importance, Zhang Jiebin (张介宾 1560–1639 CE), the author of the Systematic Classic (类经, Leijing, 1624), had emphasised the heart’s connections with the minister fire and kidney-water: ‘The lifegate is the root of qi and is the house of fire and water. Without it, the yin qi of the five viscera would fail to have its nourishing effect and the yang qi of the five viscera would be left unmobilized’.

In women, these same upper and lower jiao (heart and kidney) connections are reflected in the uterine network (胞络 baoluo). The Plain Questions Treatise 33 says, the ‘uterine connecting network belongs to the heart and nets the uterus’. In Chinese medicine, the lifegate holds the uterus, and because the uterus is one of the extraordinary fu, it is governed by the kidneys. Li Dongyuan (李东垣 1180–1251 CE), the author of the Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach (脾胃论 Pweut Lun, 1249 CE), explained that minister fire is the fire of the lower jiao’s uterine network, and the uterine network connecting the kidneys and uterus also connects with the heart and upper body. In TCM, the uterine network’s role in regulating the menses is influenced by its connections with the heart and kidney qi-influences.

As the basis of the source qi, the physiological fire, and their dissemination through the zangfu and the channels, the lifegate’s moving qi is the source of life. The sanjiao and channel system arising from the lifegate extends its influences to the brain and bone marrow, to the limbs and the body surface, warming the skin and the tissue spaces and textures (腠理 coulu), steaming the three jiao, guiding and maintaining correct qi physiology. The shuyin (heart-kidney), the sanjiao-pericardium-lifegate associations, and the uterine network channels help transmit kidney jing-essence (water), and minister and sovereign (fire) influences between the upper and lower body. These connections ensure communication of the physiological fire of the sovereign and minister, and the mixing of water and fire in the sanjiao allows life to develop.

Summary

Chinese medicine’s notions of physiological fire begin with the heart and kidney-lifegate axis. The heart enclosing network, heart ruler and chest centre were the envoy of the heart-sovereign; in the lower jiao, the minister fire that arose from the lifegate also carried out the orders of the sovereign fire. The sanjiao arising from the lifegate in the lower jiao, and the heart protector enveloping the heart in the upper jiao are the representatives of the minister fire and the envoys of the source qi and sovereign fire. When the Nanjing uses ‘no form’ to describe the sanjiao and heart protector, it assigns them a role that mediates between the person’s life qi-influences and their materialisation, the body form.

In the Song, Chinese scholar physicians extended early concepts of physiological fire to explain the pathogenic effects of emotions and desires on the body interior. Song neo-Confucianism incorporated Buddhist ideas that associated physical heat with conscious awareness. The yang movement of emotions and desires easily disturbed physiological fire, and when the sovereign fire and its envoy are agitated, the minister fire loses its root in the lower jiao.

Well before the Song, China’s most ancient texts had recorded that the heart-mind (心 xin) was easily stirred by emotional and sensual influences and desires, and their pathogenic potential figured prominently in its early conceptions of illness. Perhaps more than other kinds of qi-influence, the minister fire mediates between a person’s mental-emotional life and the physiological processes producing and maintaining the body form. For example, the sovereign and minister fires, which are quiet and tranquil before sexual intercourse, ‘begin to stir’ when the sexual urge is felt. Desire activates the minister fire and the jing-essence, and minister fire activates the sexual-reproductive role of the liver and kidneys to ensure the continuation of life.

To illustrate how Chinese medical practice methods flow from its representations of the body, Part Two will explore the dynamics of physiological and pathogenic minister fire. Part Two will elaborate on the connections between the prenatal and postnatal aspects of physiological fire. Postnatally, the liver’s (jueyin) management of minister fire connects with the sovereign fire of the heart and its envoy, the pericardium, the shaoying facilitates the minister fire’s movement between the body interior and its surface, and the paper will highlight how premodern conceptions of the minister fire and its qi influences are mapped onto the medical body.
Emotions and Desires, Part One

M Garvey

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>baoluo</td>
<td>the uterine network, a secondary channel system connecting the heart and kidney (shaoyin)</td>
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<tr>
<td>couli</td>
<td>the sanjiao's network of spaces and textures</td>
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<tr>
<td>danzhong</td>
<td>the Plain Conversation Treatise Eight's 'chest centre'; the name of the acupoint CV17</td>
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<tr>
<td>dongqi</td>
<td>the moving qi between the kidneys; an alternative term for the lifegate</td>
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<tr>
<td>guan</td>
<td>officials; the Plain Conversation Treatise Eight's twelve administrative offices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huangdi Neijing</td>
<td>Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon (originally c. 100 BCE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jingshen</td>
<td>essence and spirit/mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jueyin</td>
<td>the reverting yin (one of the liujing/six channels), the pericardium-liver channels</td>
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<tr>
<td>junhuo</td>
<td>sovereign fire</td>
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<tr>
<td>liujing</td>
<td>the six channels; also known as: the six warps, and the six conformations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liuqi</td>
<td>the six qi (summer heat, cold, wind, dampness, dryness, fire)</td>
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<tr>
<td>mingmen</td>
<td>the lifegate, the gate of orders</td>
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<tr>
<td>muxue</td>
<td>alarm acupoint</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nanjing</td>
<td>Classic of Difficult Issues (originally c. 100 CE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sanjiao</td>
<td>triple burner, triple energiser (one of Chinese medicine's six yang organs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghan Lun</td>
<td>Treatise On Cold Damage (originally c. 200 CE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shanyang</td>
<td>the lesser yang (one of the liujing/six channels), the sanjiao-gall bladder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shaoyin</td>
<td>the lesser yin (one of the liujing/six channels), the heart-kidney axis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shengming</td>
<td>one's 'life destiny', as embodied by the lifegate/moving qi/gate of orders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shou jueyin</td>
<td>hand reverting yin channel, today's pericardium channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shou shaoyin</td>
<td>hand lesser yin channel, the heart channel; in the Nanjing, the heart ruler is a branch of the heart channel</td>
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GLOSSARY OF TERMS (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wuxing</td>
<td>five phases</td>
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<tr>
<td>wuxing</td>
<td>no form</td>
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<tr>
<td>xiang</td>
<td>the minister (who transmits the emperor's orders)</td>
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<tr>
<td>xianghuo</td>
<td>minister fire</td>
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<tr>
<td>xiaoxin</td>
<td>the minor heart</td>
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<tr>
<td>xin</td>
<td>heart; heart-mind</td>
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<tr>
<td>xinbao</td>
<td>the pericardium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xinbaoluo</td>
<td>heart enclosing network, the xinbaoluo surrounds and protects the heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xinshen</td>
<td>heart-spirit/mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xinzhu</td>
<td>the heart ruler; in the Nanjing, the heart ruler is a branch of the heart channel, the hand shaoyin</td>
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<tr>
<td>yangqi</td>
<td>physiological fire</td>
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<tr>
<td>yuanqi</td>
<td>source qi</td>
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<tr>
<td>zangfu</td>
<td>the internal visceral systems; the yin and yang organ systems</td>
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Clinical Commentary

Clinical decision-making is determined to a large extent by how the medical body is conceived. The two parts of this paper draw out the physiological and medical implications of the minister fire – a type of yang qi influence that mediates between the body’s physical, mental, emotional and sensory activities. The papers explore the dynamics of physiological and pathogenic minister fire and show how premodern conceptions of the minister fire’s qi influences are mapped onto the medical body. They offer an account of how contemporary clinicians can utilise traditional notions of minister fire to interpret disorder and select appropriate treatment strategies.
References


