

## **Nurturing the Fetus in Medieval China**

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What did medieval Chinese doctors know about the changes that affected and transformed a woman's body during pregnancy? How did they visualize the development of the fetus? How did they conceptualize the mystery of creation inside the female body? While the fifth or sixth century text *Classic of Childbirth (Chanjing)* disappeared in China, its text and illustrations come down to us as quoted in the tenth-century Japanese compendium of Chinese medical texts, *Prescriptions from the Heart of Medicine (Ishimpō)*.

The illustrations depict a naked female body drawn in fine lines, passing through the changes of pregnancy month-by-month. The body is shown as transparent, thereby giving the viewer access to the normally hidden inside of the body. On the body's surface the artist has marked and named a number of points, identified in the accompanying text as precluded for acupuncture or moxibustion during the given month of pregnancy because of danger to the fetus. The figures also depict overall changes in the woman's form, from the increasing size of her thighs to the curvature of her back and her painfully protruding belly, emphasized by the sideways perspective in the drawing of the last month of pregnancy.

In the body's interior, the artist includes three components in each month's illustration: the fetus, gradually evolving from a dot into a monkey-like and then human figure; anatomical features that appear to depict the internal organ responsible for nurturing the fetus in the given month; and symmetrical pairs of red lines that link the fetus in the womb to the prohibited points

in the extremities, as well as to the head or neck. The supplementary text offers monthly information on the development of the fetus; on behavioral and dietary recommendations and prohibitions; and on the channels that nurture the fetus, marked with the prohibited acumoxa points.

Whether the mysterious red lines in the drawings were meant to correspond to the channels mentioned in the text—and therefore to standard acumoxa channels—is still subject to debate. The text’s description of the course of these channels is incongruent with the position of the red lines in the drawings. Consequently, some scholars have argued that the latter could even be additions by the Japanese editor of the original Chinese source, and therefore reflect a Japanese tradition of acumoxa or gynecology. Because the Chinese source text is lost, and no other depiction of pregnancy exists from this early period, we may never know the answer.

Nevertheless, we can trace parallels to the textual component of this passage far back into the early records: In the Mawangdui manuscripts from the second century BCE, we first see a sketchy month-by-month description of fetal development, instructions on prenatal care, and prohibitions for the mother. Medieval formularies like the *Priceless and Essential Prescriptions for Emergencies* (*Beiji qianjin yaofang*) from around 652 CE repeat this information, but supplement it with elements reflecting new medical developments. These include correlations between the months of pregnancy, the Five Phases, and the internal organs according to the theory of systematic correspondences; detailed descriptions of the specific channel and points prohibited for acumoxa treatment during each month of pregnancy; and complex and specific medicinal formulas for the prevention and treatment of pregnancy-related disorders.

The drawings in *Prescriptions from the Heart of Medicine* represent the culmination of this medical interest in nurturing the fetus (*yang tai* 養胎) in medieval China. They provide us with insights into the medical application of correlative thinking with Five Phase and yin-yang cosmology, of ideas about the female body and reproduction in medical and philosophical contexts, and of the early stages of acupuncture and moxibustion through the dissemination of both textual and visual information.

Ishimpo: published in 984, Qianjinfang ca. 652. 孫思邈《備急千金要方》Ca. 652 CE.

Modern editions:

- 編者：張瑞賢，劉更生, et al. 《千金方》Part I. 北京：華夏出版社，1996.
- 李景榮等校釋《備急千金要方校釋》. 北京：人民衛生出版社，1996.
- 主編：馬繼興《孫真人千金方》. 北京：人民衛生出版社，1995.

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