

The Animation of the Body: *Dumai* (the Central Vessel) and the Formation of the Conception of the Male Body in Early China

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the role of the idea of *dumai* (the “central vessel”) in the formation of the conception of the male body. The *dumai* is located on the central axis of the body; it is, literally, the “central vessel” of the “extraordinary eight vessels” (奇經八脈). The *dumai* originates in the male or female sexual organ, runs along the spine and connects to the kidneys and the brain, the two most important organs of the human body. The brain is made up of a marrow-like fluid. The marrow of the brain and spine interact with the essence (*jing*) of the kidneys. During sexual intercourse, male lose semen, and thus deplete the fluids of the brain. It was thought that sexual techniques could be used to reverse the process, retain semen, and channel renal fluids to supplement the brain. Men and women were thought to have the same vessels, and their organs shared the same basic structure, but among the functions of the vessels and related organs were discernable differences between the sexes.

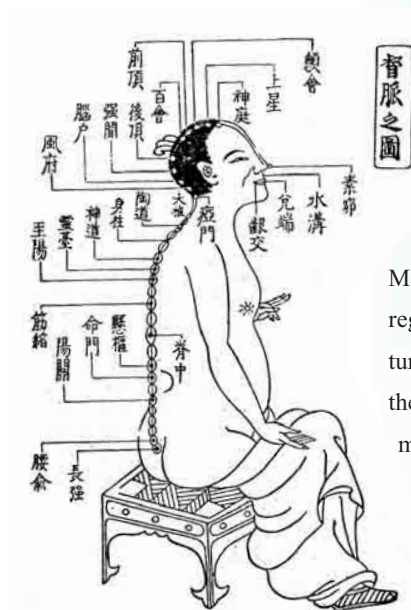


Illustration of the *dumai* vessel (Cheng Dan-an, 《古本十四經發揮》 Elucidation of the Fourteen Vessels in the Ancient Records)

The Art of the Bedchamber as a Core Method of Nourishing the Body in Ancient Chinese Medicine

In ancient China, classical medical texts, Taoist religious texts, and other writings enumerated a multitude of prescriptions for nourishing life (養生之道), techniques which were instrumental for healthy living, longevity, and even immortality. Methods of nourishing the body usually included fasting, strict dietary regimens, herbal therapy, breathing techniques, gymnastics, acupuncture, and moxibustion. However, one central technique of nourishing the body has rarely been researched in depth by historians of Chinese medicine: this technique is known as *fangzhongshu*, (房中術) or “the art of the bedchamber”. Mastery of “the art of the bedchamber” (or the sexual art) was viewed as giving men (in particular) the power to nourish life and achieve longevity. The sexual arts served as a therapeutic and prophylactic method which could remove and ward off diseases, and ensure ideal levels of *qi* (as well as its smooth circulation) throughout the body.

The therapeutic expectations of the masterful implementation of the sexual art in ancient China were enormous, yet, much like a double-edged sword, the improper execution of the sexual art could have most devastating consequences, leading to untold illnesses and in all likelihood premature death. Inappropriate methods of sexual intercourse categorically involved the excessive loss of semen caused by ejaculation during orgasm. The key to the mastery of the art of the bedchamber was the restriction of seminal emission. In fact, *jing*, (or essence, here mostly referring to semen) and *qi* was to be acquired, accumulated and circulated through-

out the body, and ultimately stored in the brain. The mastery of the art of the bedchamber is best encapsulated by its central technique known as “huanjingbunao” (還精補腦), or “returning the semen to nourish the brain”. This technique focused on the control of ejaculation, and the retention as well as redirection of semen to achieve its upward flow, via the *dumai* and *renmai* vessels, through the kidneys to the brain. Semen - the most precious type of fluid in the male body - was ultimately stored in the brain, and the smooth flow of semen and *qi* through the two major vessels was the cornerstone to ensuring masculine vitality and longevity.

Ancient Chinese medical texts are filled with exhortations concerning the dangers of excessive

人身有奇經八脈，先天大道之根，一炁之祖也。首衝脈，次任督，一原而三岐，皆起於胞中，督止於上，任止於下，衝脈出臍門穴，三脈總為經脈造化之原。八脈經云：人有八脈，俱屬陰神，閉而不開，惟神仙以陽炁沖開，故能得道。而採藥惟在陰，踏為先，上通泥丸，下透涌泉，和炁上朝，則陽長陰消，水中火起。此內修復命關也。而金丹所最關係者，則此脈。婦人受孕，擊抱在此，順之則人，逆之則仙。從此受氣，穿過玄門，旋繞尾間，方有變化。閉竅已悉於圖，玩之自得。

靜照圖說



Illustration of the human body, with special emphasis on the dumai vessel along the spine (Tao Su-si, Annotations of the Zhouyi Cantongqi 《周易參同契脈望》)

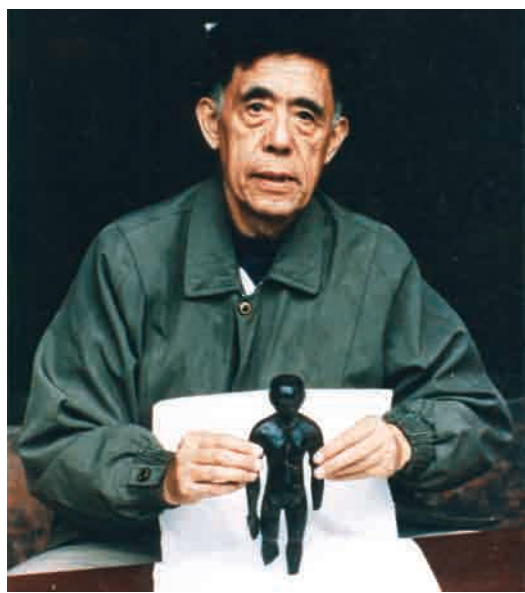


Illustration of an excavated lacquered figurine showing the dumai vessel from Mianyang, Sichuan (Mr. Ma Ji-xing is holding the figurine)

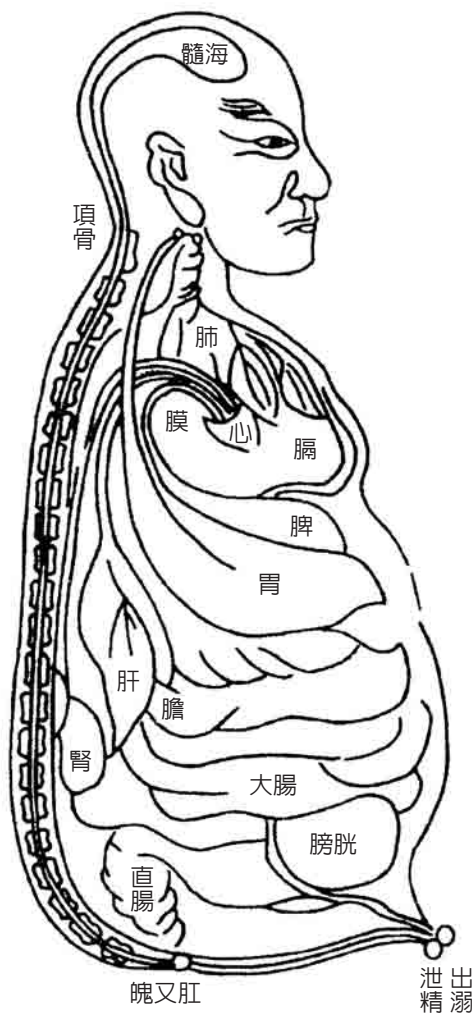


Illustration showing the close interaction between the marrow of the brain and spine with the essence of the kidney. (Shi Pei, 《臟腑指掌圖書》 Illustrated Manual of the Human Viscera)

ejaculation. These texts clearly show that throughout Chinese history, anxiety and even distress about the possible consequences of the excessive loss of semen constituted an elemental component of male existence. The power of the art of the bedchamber to nourish male bodies - and the destructive potential of inappropriate sexual techniques - influenced the conception of the male body in ancient China in profound and far-reaching ways. My research focuses on the formation of the conception of the male body in early China by using ancient medical texts and “the art of the bedchamber” as the center for discussion. It is my hope that this approach will allow us to understand more deeply the “mind-body

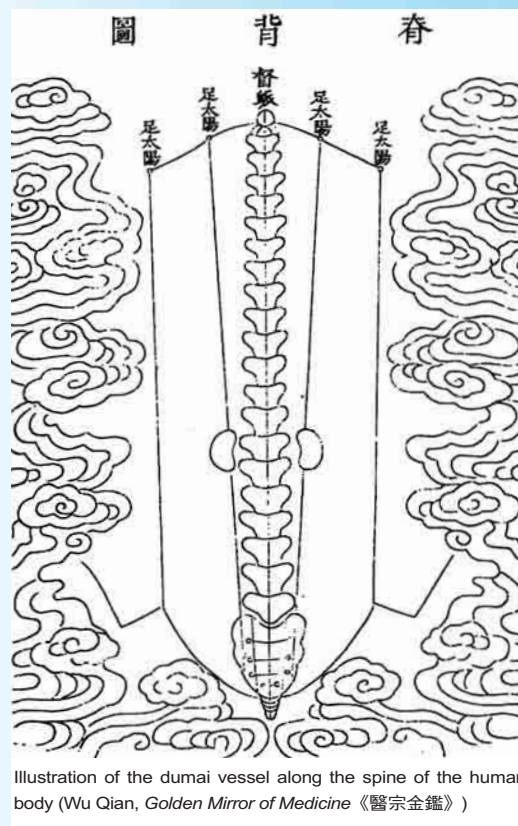


Illustration of the dumai vessel along the spine of the human body (Wu Qian, Golden Mirror of Medicine 《醫宗金鑑》)

experience” of men in ancient China as well as the cultural and social ramifications of “the art of the bedchamber”. Such research would perhaps allow us to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the history of gender and the body in China.

The Importance of the Dumai Vessel in Chinese Medicine and in the Art of the Bedchamber

Ancient medical texts reveal that the *dumai* (or “central vessel”) played a key role in the formation of the conception of the male body. The *dumai* is located on the central axis of the body; it is, literally the “central vessel” of the “extraordinary eight vessels” (奇經八脈). The *dumai* originates in the male or female sexual organ, runs along the spine and connects to the kidneys and the brain, the two most important organs of the human body. The brain is made up of a marrow-like fluid. The marrow of the brain and spine interact with the essence (*jing*) of the kidneys. When a person eats or drinks, he or she produces refined fluids that enter the bones,

lubricating the joints while nourishing the brain's marrow. These marrow-like fluids thus collect in the brain.

During sexual intercourse, males lose semen, and thus deplete the fluids of the brain. According to medical texts, excessive sexual activity not only saps the male body of semen, but also depletes the fluids of the brain. Fluids in the brain and kidneys may supplement one another, but only via the *dumai* vessel that runs along the spine. The principle sexual technique imperative to sustaining good health was to employ a variety of positions and methods to re-channel semen and kidney essence back through the *dumai* vessel along the spine and up to the brain, thus nourishing the marrow-like fluids in the brain. It was thought that such sexual techniques could be used to reverse the process, retain semen, and channel renal fluids to supplement the brain.

陳希夷降牛望月形

專治走精精欲走
時將左手中指塞
右鼻孔內右手中
指按尾閭穴把精
截住運氣六口



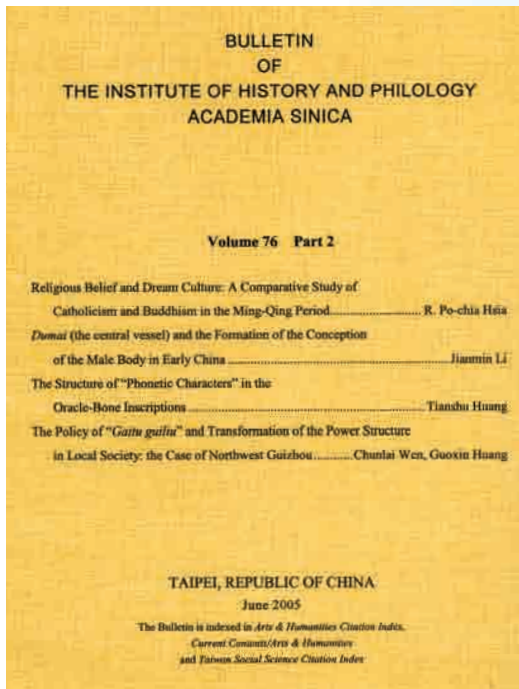
Semen is most precious, carefully guard against losing semen (Xi Yu-kang, 《內外功圖說輯要》 Illustrated Outline of Chinese Boxing)

The Unhindered Movement of Substances through the Renmai and Dumai Vessels

The system of vessels in Chinese medicine is extremely complex. The general population is completely unfamiliar with the technical terms associated with vessels, yet all know of the importance of the *dumai* and *renmai* vessels to sustaining health. The popular saying 「打通任督二脈」, or “breaking through the hindrances in the *renmai* and *dumai* vessels” actually implies that the core component of a problem has been resolved.

Collections of Chinese illustrative plates on methods of cultivating health clearly point to the pivotal role of the *renmai* and *dumai* vessels: In many depictions, the human vessels and channels are reduced to the *renmai* and *dumai* vessels. Indeed, some illustrations simply show the *dumai* vessel. In 1993, when lacquered figurines from the Western Han were excavated in the Mianyang region of Sichuan, the most striking feature arousing the interest of scholars was the clear delineation on the figurines of the *dumai* vessel running along the spine and extending from the nose to the anus. In his famous classic on nourishing the body, Zhuangzi (莊子) clearly states that the unhampered flow of energy, essence, and fluids through the *dumai* vessel is the basic tenet for the cultivation of good health. This suggests the core role played by the *dumai* vessel in the human body.

The *renmai* and *dumai* vessels run along the central axes of the human body: the *renmai* vessel is located in the anterior region while the *dumai* vessel runs along the spinal cord. Ancient Chinese medical experts compared the *renmai* and *dumai* vessels to the meridian extending between heaven and earth. Indeed, ancient Chinese medical texts abound with analogies between Chinese cosmic numerology and the human body. The ancient Chinese viewed the meridian as the pivotal axis around which cosmic *qi* and *yin-yang* revolved. Similarly, medical experts in ancient China regard-



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ed the *renmai* and *dumai* vessels as the central axes guiding the flow of essences and vital energy through the body. Still today, the *renmai* and *dumai* vessels are believed to be the two core vessels of the body, and the smooth, unhindered flow of substances through these vessels is viewed as crucial to sustaining and improving one's health.

The Imagination of the Male Body

Early Chinese medical literature contains discourses on the “essence of the kidneys”. Here, the use of the term essence also includes semen. It is important to note that in ancient Chinese medical literature, the term *shen* (腎) - often simply translated as kidneys - served as a general designation for the urogenital organs (kidneys and testes) and the network of brains, bones, and marrow connecting them via the *dumai* vessel. By the middle of the Eastern Han, a close relationship had been established between the kidneys and the respiratory function. The Nanjing 《難經》 viewed the kidneys as the “gateway to breathing”, a notion tied to changing conceptions of sexual techniques used to nourish the body. During this same period in which con-

ceptions of the body underwent essential transformation, the sexual technique of “returning the semen to nourish the brain” appeared in the Daoist *Xiang'er Commentary to the Laozi* 《老子想爾注》 written during the final years of the Eastern Han. The main tenet of the practice of “returning the semen to nourish the brain” was that men were not to release semen during sexual intercourse. In fact, the man was to absorb “the essence and breath” (*jingqi*) created by the woman during intercourse in order to supplement the fluids of the brain that he may have depleted. Medical discourses on sexual techniques centering on the vital role of the *dumai* vessel deeply permeated the “mind-body experience” of men in ancient China.

Three New Approaches in Research on the History of the Body

The system composed of the brain, marrow and bones, all of which are related to the *dumai*, was subsumed into the concept of the “abnormal *fu* organ” (奇恆之府), a relatively marginal concept in classical medical writings. Investigation into the system of “abnormal vessels” has revealed how little we understand about the place of fluids in classical medical literature. Research into fluids, following closely on research into *qi*, ought to become a more central concern to historians of Chinese medicine. Furthermore, in addition to exploring the conception of the body in classical medical texts, we also ought to explore the conception of the body and the sensory experience as expressed in the discourse on “nourishing the body.” Finally, we should play especial attention to conceptions of health in the medical literature related to sexual yoga. This material is not only helpful in understanding the eight extraordinary vessels more fully, but also will provide us with an opportunity to achieve new perspectives in the fields of the history of gender and the body in China.

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