

Pestle Needle Therapy

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Abstract

Pestle Needle Therapy is an acupuncture method characterised by a unique set of points, specialised tools and their specific methods of manipulation. Until modern times it has remained a secret method, passed down through a lineage to its modern inheritor, Li Zhong Yu, Professor of Acupuncture at the Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. This article describes the tools, theory and treatment methods of Pestle Needle Therapy, and includes examples of treatment protocols as well as a case history.

Introduction

Pestle Needle (*Tai Ji Chu Zhen* 太极杵针) Therapy is an acupuncture method characterised by a unique set of points, specialised tools and their specific methods of manipulation. Despite the tools being called “needles” (*zhen*), as with some of the original Nine Needles that feature in the *Huang Di Nei Jing Ling Shu* (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic Divine Pivot), they are non-penetrative devices. This method of acupuncture is not found in the classic texts, although it is based on the same Chinese medical theory as conventional acupuncture, including the theories of yin-yang, the five phases and channel theory.

Pestle needles do not pierce the skin; rather they are used to stroke, rub or press the points and channels of the body



Figure 1: A set of pestle needles

The origin of Pestle Needle Therapy is somewhat vague, but we know that up until modern times it has been kept as a secret method of acupuncture. Its history began with a person named Li Er Fei, who is said to have learned the use of Pestle Needles from the Daoist hermit *Ru Huan Zhen Ren* (如幻真人, “Mysterious Perfected Person”) on Wudang Mountain (Hubei province). The modern inheritor of Pestle Needle Therapy is Li Zhong Yu, Professor of Acupuncture at the Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine (CDUTCM) and the fourteenth generation descendant of Li Er Fei. Since Pestle Needle Therapy has not been taught outside of the Li family until the current generation, it is currently taught only at CDUTCM. In the rest of China it is known as a specialised method from Chengdu (Sichuan province).

Like conventional acupuncture, Pestle Needle Therapy is easy and convenient to use because it is applied without the need for medicines or herbs. It has few side effects and because the “needles” do not penetrate the skin, patients who are fearful of acupuncture are more likely to find Pestle Needle Therapy tolerable. That said, pestle needle stimulation can be an intense sensation, and at times may even be more painful than acupuncture or massage.

The pestle needles

The most striking aspect of Pestle Needle Therapy is the use of a unique set of needles. Despite their name, pestle needles do not pierce the skin; rather they are used to stroke, rub or press the points and channels of the body. Pestle needles produced today in Chengdu are usually made of brass. The original set of needles given to Li Er Fei were made of hard wood, although they can be made of other materials such as stainless steel or jade (normally decorative and not used in actual therapy). There are four different needles, each with a different shape and use, with designs illustrative of their Daoist heritage:

Qi Yao Hun Yuan Chu (七曜混元杵):

The first needle is called *Qi Yao Hun Yuan Chu*, or the “Seven Brilliances, Primeval Origin Pestle”. “Seven Brilliances” is a reference to the Big Dipper constellation (*Bei Dou Qi Xing*), whilst “Primeval Origin” refers to the Daoist concept of the undifferentiated oneness of the universe that is thought to be the origin of all things. The needle is 10.5 centimetres long, and consists of a row of seven short prongs at one end (the “Seven Brilliances”), with the other end formed into a single rounded base (the “Primeval Origin”).

Wu Xing San Tai Chu (五星三台杵):

The second needle is called *Wu Xing San Tai Chu*, or the “Five Stars, Three Platforms Pestle”. “Five Stars” is a reference to the five constellations that represent the five phases in the heavens: the Azure Dragon, Red Phoenix, White Tiger, Black Tortoise and Yellow Dragon. The “Three Platforms” refers to several core concepts of Daoist philosophy. Firstly they can represent the so-called Three Treasures (*San Bao*) of the human body, the *jing* (essence), *qi* (vitality) and *shen* (spirit-mind). Three also represents the number of “burners” (the *san jiao*) of the body where Daoist self-cultivation occurs. Finally, a core feature of Daoism is the belief in the Three Purities (*San Qing*); these are the highest of the Daoist gods and are known as the Universal Lord of the Primordial Beginning (*Yuanshi Tianzun*), the Universal Lord of the Numinous Treasure (*Lingbao Tianzun*) and the Universal Lord of the Way and its Virtue (*Daode Tianzun*). The needle is 11.5 centimetres in length and is thinner in diameter than the first needle. The “Five Stars” end has five prongs arranged in a cross (one in the centre and the others at north, east, south and west of this), and the “Three Platforms” end has three prongs arranged in a straight line.

Jin Gang Chu (金钢杵):

The third needle is the *Jin Gang Chu*, or “Golden Steel Pestle”, which is also 10.5 centimetres in length. Both ends of the *Jin Gang Chu* represent the number one, with one end forming a dull point and the other flat and round like the *Qi Yao Hun Yuan Chu*.

Kui Xing Bi (奎星笔):

The *Kui Xing Bi* pestle needle is of a similar shape to the *Jin Gang Chu*, having a pointed and a flat end. This needle is much smaller, however, at only eight centimetres in length and considerably thinner. The term *Kui Xing* refers to one of the constellations in the 28 Mansions of Chinese astrology that represents the God of Literature. The word *bi* here means a writing brush. Thus *Kui Xing Bi* could be translated as the “God of Literature’s Writing Brush”. It should be

noted that consistent with their Daoist origin, only the yang numbers one, three, five and seven are represented on the needles; Daoist alchemical practice is concerned with transcendence of the yin-material world and the transmutation of matter (yin) into spirit (yang) – hence the symbolic importance of yang numbers in Daoism.

Pestle Needle Therapy points

As already mentioned, Pestle Needle Therapy is essentially based on traditional Chinese medical channel theory, although it uses its own unique set of points. These “points”, however, are not acupoints in the traditional definition (i.e. discreet individual locations on the body), but are rather zones of stimulation. During a course of treatment, both conventional acupuncture points, as well as specific pestle needle point zones are stimulated.

Ba Zhen Xue (八阵穴):

The first set of specific points used in Pestle Needle Therapy are known as *Ba Zhen Xue* (“Eight Columns Points”). There are 11 groups of *Ba Zhen Xue*, each arranged around a specific point on the Du Mai (Governing Vessel). For example, the *Bai Hui Ba Zhen* (百会八阵, Hundred Meetings Eight Columns) are named after Baihui DU-20. The centre of each *Ba Zhen* group is a particular Du Mai point, which is surrounded by 24 other points in the shape of concentric hexagrams increasing in size (see Figure 2). If a *Ba Zhen* group is to be stimulated, each of the 25 points in the group is stimulated in succession. Generally speaking, clinical indications for use of the *Ba Zhen* points correspond closely with those of the Du Mai point which they surround (see Table 1).

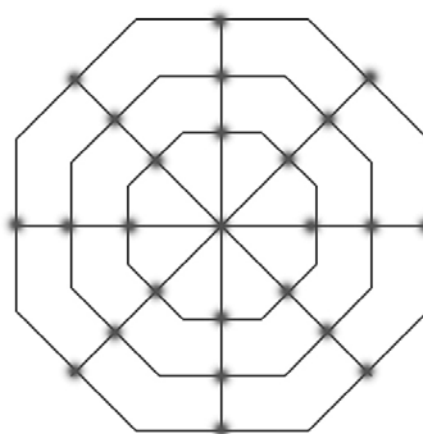


Figure 2: Bagua layout of the *Ba Zhen Xue*

Point name	Centre Point	Indications
Bai Hui Ba Zhen	Baihui DU-20	Post stroke hemiplegia, aphasia, migraine, dizziness and vertigo, tinnitus and deafness, ringing in the brain, insomnia, forgetfulness, wilting of the limbs and body, mania and withdrawal, epilepsy, psycho-emotional diseases
Feng Fu Ba Zhen	Fengfu DU-16	Stroke, aphasia, headache, pain and stiffness of the neck, dizziness, nasal congestion, nosebleed, swelling and pain of the throat, pain in the oral cavity, tinnitus and deafness, insomnia, forgetfulness, epilepsy, childhood fright wind, hemiplegia, wilting and limpness of the four limbs, spasms
Da Zhui Ba Zhen	Dazhui DU-14	Stiffness and pain in the neck, external contraction of heat, coughing and panting, malaria, steaming bone night sweating, epilepsy, wind papules, shoulder and arm pain
Shen Zhu Ba Zhen	Shenzhu DU-12	External contraction of heat, coughing and panting, malaria, mania and withdrawal, epilepsy, impediment and pain of the spine, childhood fright wind, floating welling abscesses, chest impediment, nausea and vomiting, wilting and limpness of the upper limbs, paralysis or numbness of the upper limbs
Shen Dao Ba Zhen	Shendao DU-11	Palpitations, fearful throbbing, chest impediment, heart pain, vexation and oppression of the heart and chest, insomnia, forgetfulness, coughing, panting, childhood fright wind, floating welling abscesses, oesophageal constriction, nausea and vomiting, belching
Zhi Yang Ba Zhen	Zhiyang DU-9	Disease patterns of the Liver, Gall Bladder, Spleen and Stomach viscera and bowels; chest and ribside fullness and pain, nausea and vomiting, stomach pain, glomus and fullness, jaundice, coughing and panting, malaria, hiccup, sour putrid belching, diarrhea
Jin Suo Ba Zhen	Jinsuo DU-8	Epilepsy, stiffness of the spine, stomach pain, abdominal distension, ribside pain, nausea and vomiting, belching, hiccup, jaundice, diarrhea; disease patterns of the liver, gallbladder, spleen and stomach viscera and bowels
Ji Zhong Ba Zhen	Jizhong DU-6	Chest and abdomen distension and pain, diarrhea, jaundice, epilepsy, dysentery, pediatric gan disease, rectal prolapse; diseases of the spleen and stomach
Ming Men Ba Zhen	Mingmen DU-4	Abdominal pain, diarrhea, lumbar pain, seminal emission, impotence, leukorrhoea, irregular menstruation, dysmenorrhea, blocked menstruation, tinnitus, water swelling, incontinence, numbness of the lower extremities, wilting and limpness, paralysis, dribbling urinary block
Yao Yang Guan Ba Zhen	Yaoyangguan DU-3	Abdominal pain, abdominal distension, diarrhea, dysentery, rectal prolapse, constipation, seminal emission, yang wilting (impotence), premature ejaculation, irregular menstruation, painful menstruation, menstrual block, vaginal discharge, lumbar and hip stiffness and pain; wilting and limpness, rigidity, spasm, pain, or numbness of the lower limbs
Yao Shu Ba Zhen	Yaoshu DU-2	Abdominal pain, abdominal distension, diarrhoea, constipation, rectal prolapse, irregular menstruation, painful menstruation, menstrual block, flooding and spotting, hemorrhoid, lumbar stiffness and pain, wilting impediment of the lower limbs, pain of the lower limbs, seminal emission, yang wilting, premature ejaculation, vaginal discharge

Table 1: Indications for the Ba Zhen Xue

He Che Lu (河车路):

The *He Che Lu* (literally, “River Cart Road”) are a set of lines, rather than individual points, which traverse the surface of the body. One *He Che Lu* runs up the dorsal midline (the *Du Mai*) and one along the ventral midline (the *Ren Mai*, or Conception Vessel). There are other lines to the right and left of both the front and back midlines, situated at 0.5, 1.5 and 3.0 cun lateral to the midline, making a total of seven parallel lines on the front and back of the trunk. These lines are stimulated by pressing, rubbing or stroking with the pestle needles. The various segments of the *He Che Lu* have their own specific indications (see Table 2).

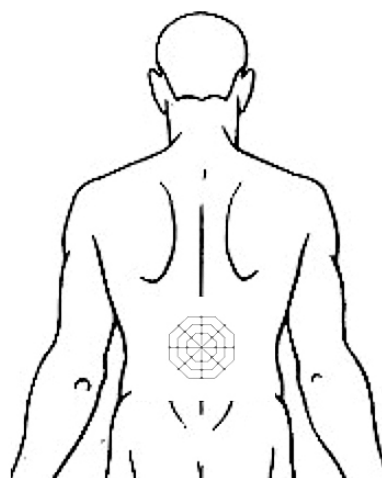
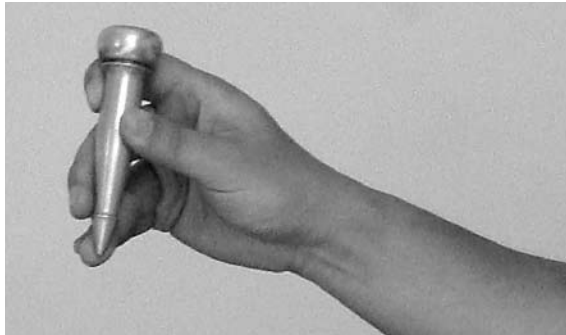


Figure 3 (left):
The *Ming Men Ba Zhen* group of points

Table 2 (below):
Indications for the *He Chu Lu*

Body region	Name	Location	Indications
Head	He Chu Yin-Nao Line	Between Yintang (M-HN-3) and Naohu DU-17	Post stroke hemiplegia, wilting and limpness of the limbs, spasms, tugging wind, head wind, insomnia, forgetfulness, dizziness and vertigo, epilepsy, mania, diseases of the ears, eyes and nose, diseases of the five offices (nose, eyes, lips, tongue, and ears)
	He Chu Nao-Zhui Line	Between Naohu DU-17 and Dazhui DU-14	Diseases of the eyes, ears, mouth, nose, tongue, teeth, and throat; dizziness and vertigo, headache, neck rigidity, insomnia, forgetfulness
Back	He Chu Zhui-Zhi Line	Between Dazhui DU-14 and Zhiyang DU-9	Coughing, panting, common cold, initial stage warm disease, malaria [area from Dazhui DU-14 to Taodao DU-13, out to Fengmen BL-12]; chest oppression, palpitations, fearful throbbing, insomnia, forgetfulness, heart pain, diseases of the heart and lungs, dysphagia occlusion, hiccough, nausea and vomiting, diseases of the Spleen and Stomach [area from Feishu BL-13 down to Geshu BL-17]
	He Chu Yang-Ming Line	Between Zhiyang DU-9 and Mingmen DU-4	Stomach duct pain, ribside pain, abdominal distension, diarrhea, dysentery, belching, nausea and vomiting, hiccough, constipation, frequent urination, urinary urgency, painful urination, haematuria, enuresis, irregular menstruation, painful menstruation, menstrual block, flooding and spotting, menstrual diseases, seminal emission, yang wilting; wilting, limpness, or paralysis of the lower limbs
	He Chu Ming-Qiang Line	Between Mingmen DU-4 and Changqiang DU-1	Stiffness of the spine, lumbar pain, enuresis, frequent urination, diarrhea, seminal emission, yang wilting, abdominal pain, abdominal distension, irregular menstruation, painful menstruation, menstrual block, red and white vaginal discharge, miscarriage, clouded head, tinnitus, deafness, epilepsy, fright and fear, counterflow cold of the hands and feet, wilting impediment of the lower limbs, post-stroke hemiplegia, limp aching in the low back and knees without strength, tidal fever and nightsweats, steaming bone consumptive fever, dysentery, constipation
Chest and Abdomen	He Chu Tian-Shan Line	Between Tiantu REN-22 and Shanzhong REN-17	Acute and chronic diseases of the esophagus, heart, lungs, chest, and diaphragm; for example, chest impediment, palpitations, insomnia, forgetfulness, coughing, panting, hiccough, nausea and vomiting, belching
	He Chu Shan-Que Line	Between Shanzhong REN-17 and Shenque REN-8	Diseases of the spleen, stomach, liver, gallbladder; for example, distension and fullness, or pain of the stomach duct, belching, hiccough, nausea and vomiting, chest impediment, ribside pain, diarrhea, jaundice
	He Chu Que-Ji Line	Between Shenque REN-8 and Zhongji REN-3	Diseases of the large intestine, small intestine, urethra, bladder, pelvic cavity, and uterus; for example, strangury, dribbling urinary block, haematuria, diarrhea, abdominal distension, dysentery, constipation, smaller-abdominal pain, irregular menstruation, menstrual block, painful menstruation, flooding and spotting, red and white vaginal discharge, seminal emission, yang wilting, male infertility, mounting qi

Figure 4:
Holding the
Jin Gang Chu



***Ba Kuo Xue* (八廓穴):**

The *Ba Kuo Xue* ("Eight Hollows Points") are areas of stimulation situated around the eyes, nose and ears. There are eight points around these sense organs, which are named after the trigrams in the Early Heaven arrangement of the *Ba Gua* (*Xian Tian Ba Gua*). They are used for local treatment of diseases of the eyes, nose and ears, and are stimulated with gentle pressing.

In addition to stimulating the *Ba Zhen Xue*, *He Che Lu*, and *Ba Kuo Xue*, during the course of treatment pestle needles are used to stimulate regular channel points, as well as local areas of dysfunction such as *ahshi* points. A *Ba Zhen Xue* pattern can also be created over any local area. For example, if a patient presents with ankle pain, a *Ba Zhen Xue* pattern can be superimposed on the ankle, with the centre located at the main site of pain.

Needle Manipulation

Pestle Needle Therapy uses five types of needle manipulation that are different from typical acupuncture needle manipulations, although some are reminiscent of *tuina* techniques. The more gentle manipulations are generally used to prepare an area of the body for treatment, with the more vigorous ones usually reserved for remedial therapy.

Upward-downward manipulation (*Sheng Jiang Shou Fa* 升降手法): Upward-downward manipulation is primarily used to relax the patient and prepare different areas of the body for remedial treatment. During upward-downward manipulation the pestle needles are used to stroke or massage parts of the body using a linear movement. An example of the upward-downward manipulation would be using the prongs of the *Qi Yao Hun Yuan Chu* or the *Wu Xing San Tai Chu* to comb through the hair or gently scrape down the back of the neck. The blunter ends of the pestles can be used to push more deeply down the muscles of the back, such the upper trapezius or paraspinal muscles. Upward-downward manipulation can also be used along the lines of the *He Che Lu*, or along local areas of pain or dysfunction.

Circling manipulation (*Yun Zhuan Shou Fa* 运转手法): Circling manipulation, like upward-downward manipulation, is used to relax and prepare an area of the body for remedial intervention. During circling manipulation, the large blunt ends of the pestle needles (for example the *Jin Gang Chu* or *Qi Yao Hun Yuan Chu*) are used to "round rub" (spiraling outwards and then inwards) over a specific location prior to more vigorous treatment. Circling manipulation is commonly performed on the *Ba Zhen Xue* points of the back, or over any local area of pain or dysfunction. For example, for patients with shoulder pain, circling manipulation is applied over the area of pain in order to relax the soft tissues prior to deeper treatment.

Tapping manipulation (*Dian Kou Shou Fa* 点叩手法): Tapping manipulation can be used either for relaxing or preparing an area for remedial intervention (as above), or for actual treatment. During tapping manipulation, the three-, five- or seven-pronged ends of the *Qi Yao Hun Yuan Chu* or *Wu Xing San Tai Chu* are used to tap along the *He Che Lu*. When using tapping manipulation for treatment, variations on hand technique can be used to supplement or drain: gentle, high frequency tapping is employed to supplement, while stronger and slower frequency tapping is used to drain.

Opening-closing manipulation (*Kai He Shou Fa* 开阖手法): The final two manipulations, opening-closing and separating, are more vigorous and are used for remedial stimulation. Opening-closing manipulation involves using one of the pointed ends of a pestle needle to repeatedly press and release (i.e. open and close) a specific point. For example, when a *Ba Zhen Xue* group of points is treated with opening-closing manipulation, each of the points in the group is pressed and released repeatedly in succession, each point being treated for 30 seconds or more before moving onto the next. The principle of using opening-closing manipulation for supplementation or drainage is similar to those mentioned above for tapping manipulation, with gentle, high frequency pressing used to supplement, and stronger, slower frequency pressing used to drain.

Separating manipulation (*Fen Li Shou Fa* 分理手法): In the separating manipulation, the pointed or linear pronged ends of a pestle needle are used to press between muscle groups to gently push them apart and thus break up adhesions. Separating manipulation can also mean to press deeply into a muscle to massage across its fibers. Throughout separating manipulation the pestle needle is held stationary against the skin and then moved back and forth. This manipulation dredges the channels to remove stagnation.

Treatment

Pestle Needle Therapy, like the other branches of modern professional Chinese medicine, begins with a detailed diagnosis of both the disease (*bian bing*) and the pattern (*bian zheng*). Once a treatment principle has been established and points chosen, stimulation with the pestle needles begins with gentle preparatory techniques and moves to more vigorous remedial manipulation. Pestle Needle Therapy can either be used as the sole intervention, in which case a treatment session can last between 30 and 45 minutes, or in conjunction with conventional acupuncture treatment, tuina or Chinese herbal medicine.

Examples of treatment protocols

As examples of Pestle Needle Therapy treatment protocols, there follows a description of the treatment of two patterns of headache: For the treatment of headache due to external contraction of wind evils, the treatment principles are aimed at expelling wind, resolving the exterior, freeing the network vessels and stopping pain. Stimulation is therefore applied to the *Bai Hui Ba Zhen*, *Feng Fu Ba Zhen* and *Da Zhui Ba Zhen* with the single point tip of the *Jin Gang Chu* or *Kui Xing Bi*. The *He Che Lu* between Naohu DU-17 and Dazhui DU-14 are stroked with the three-pronged end of the *Wu Xing San Tai Chu* or the seven-pronged *Qi Yao Hun Yuan Chu*. To finish, Quchi L.I.-11, Hegu L.I.-4, and Taiyang (M-HN-9) are stimulated with opening-closing manipulation. All of these points and areas would be treated with a dispersing technique, and if either wind-cold or wind-dampness is present, moxibustion would be applied.

For headache due to patterns of internal vacuity, the treatment principles would focus on boosting qi, nourishing blood, warming and supplementing the Kidney yang, supplementing and boosting Kidney jing, harmonising the network vessels and stopping pain. The main points used are the *Bai Hui Ba Zhen*, *Zhi Yang Ba Zhen*, *Ming Men Ba Zhen* and *Qi Hai Ba Zhen*, followed by stimulation of the *He Che Lu* from Dazhui DU-14 to Changqiang DU-1. Supplementing methods would be used for all of these areas, as is appropriate for the specific pattern diagnosis. Finally Zusanli ST-36 and Sanyinjiao SP-6 would be stimulated with a supplementing method using opening-closing manipulation, with moxibustion applied to further warm and supplement the yang.

Case study: Acute neck pain

A 60 year-old female presented in my clinic complaining of acute neck pain of three days duration. The pain, a strong sensation of pulling and tightness, was located along the right upper trapezius and scalene muscles, and would at times radiate up to the occiput or down to the shoulder on the affected side. The patient was diagnosed with moving impediment (*xing bi*) due to external contraction of wind evils. Treatment principles therefore aimed to expel wind,

resolve the exterior, free the network vessels and stop pain.

Conventional acupuncture treatment was applied at Sanyinjiao SP-6 bilaterally, Qiuxu GB-40 contralaterally, and Zhongzhu SJ-3 threaded to Houxi SI-3 ipsilaterally. The patient was asked to mobilise the neck while the four needles were stimulated with even technique. The needles were retained for 45 minutes, with a similar stimulation repeated intermittently. After removing these needles, the rounded end of the *Jin Gang Chu* was used with circling manipulation around the *Da Zhui Ba Zhen*. The opening-closing manipulation was then applied to the points of the *Da Zhui Ba Zhen* with the pointed end of the *Jin Gang Chu*, followed by upward-downward manipulation using its rounded end along the *He Che Lu* from Dazhui DU-14 down to Zhiyang DU-9 on the affected side. Tapping manipulation was applied along the upper trapezius with the seven-pronged end of the *Qi Yao Hun Yuan Chu*, followed by opening-closing with the pointed end of the *Jin Gang Chu* at Fengchi GB-20, Jianjing GB-21, Tianzong SI-11, Zhongzhu SJ-3 and ah-shi points in the neck area.

This single treatment effected an almost total amelioration of symptoms such that no further treatment was necessary.

Conclusion

Pestle Needle Therapy is an example of the extremely heterogeneous nature of Chinese acumoxa therapy. It is a unique system of classical acupuncture rarely seen in China or the West. Pestle Needle Therapy is easy to apply and, for those already familiar with acupuncture channel theory, easy to learn and master. Since they are non-penetrative, pestle needles may offer another treatment option for patients who are overly sensitive or fearful of conventional acupuncture. At the very least, they are a glimpse into the vast treasure trove of Chinese medicine that we have inherited today. ■

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