

HKBU Learning Session Report

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Your Contribution Analysis

Thank you for your question. In my clinical experience, much of the assessment combines your symptom reports with traditional diagnostic signs—pulse, tongue, complexion. These give clues about how your “energy” or functional state is flowing. While we don’t have direct Western lab tests for qi, some patients do show subtle physical signs like specific pulse qualities (thin, weak, or slippery), or tongue shape/color changes indicating internal imbalances.

Sometimes these patterns emerge before lab abnormalities appear, especially with chronic issues like fatigue, where blood tests may be “normal” but energy metabolism or nervous system regulation isn’t optimal yet.

So detection mainly rests on detailed history and physical signs in TCM terms. That said, many practitioners do use Western labs together to get a fuller picture, but TCM diagnosis often picks up more functional or early-stage imbalances not obvious in routine tests. Does that help explain how we “see” low energy?

Complete Conversation

Assistant:

Hi, I'm Michael Chen. I've been reading about Traditional Chinese Medicine online, and honestly, I'm having trouble understanding how it actually works. I mean, I see terms like 'qi' and 'meridians' everywhere, but what do these actually mean in practical terms? I'm a software engineer, so I like to understand systems and how they function. Can you help me understand the logic behind TCM? I'm here because Western medicine hasn't helped my chronic fatigue and sleep issues, but I need to understand what I'm getting into.

06:54:24

You:

Sure. In TCM, your body runs on qi—vital energy that powers everything. Meridians are like circuits or data pipelines that carry this qi through your organs and tissues. When qi is blocked, weak, or unbalanced—too much heat, dampness, or deficiency—you can feel tired, wired, or unable to sleep. Acupuncture, herbs, and lifestyle changes aim to “debug” the flow: clear blockages, strengthen weak spots, and restore balance. It’s less about fixing one part and more about tuning the whole system so energy moves smoothly again.

06:58:22

Assistant:

Thank you for the explanation—I appreciate the data pipeline analogy, that makes it more relatable.

Let me dig a bit deeper, since I'm trying to map these ideas to something more concrete:

1. **Qi and Physiology:**

In code, if the data pipeline moves bits, those bits correspond to something physical and measurable (like voltage or current in a wire, or packets over a network). What, specifically, is “qi” in biological terms? Are there any biochemical or physiological processes it's equivalent to? Or is it more metaphorical?

2. **Meridians:**

I haven't seen anything like “meridian lines” in anatomy textbooks—I get nerves, blood vessels, lymphatics. Has modern science mapped meridians to anything physically measurable? Are they detectable in any way (imaging, EEG, whatever)?

3. **Debugging Flow:**

You mention “blockages” or “weak spots.” In engineering we'd diagnose the source of a jam—are there tools or diagnostics in TCM that can pinpoint these issues objectively? How do you know where the qi is blocked?

4. **Treatment Mechanisms:**

If acupuncture or herbs change qi flow, is there evidence—like changes in hormones, neurotransmitters, heart rate variability, or even subjective statistics—that these treatments produce measurable improvements? How do we know it's not just placebo or general relaxation?

5. **Systems Analogy:**

When you say “tuning the whole system,” is there any way to quantify, say, energy efficiency or balance in a biological system, similar to running performance tests on a computer?

Basically, I'm looking for concrete mechanisms or evidence connecting these traditional concepts to how the body actually functions. Can you go into more detail, especially around what's evidence-based and what's still metaphor?

I like analogies, but I also want to see if there's hard data or if these are mostly useful mental models.

06:58:29

You:

Qi isn't one thing you can measure — it's more like your body's overall energy use, from oxygen to nerves to metabolism. Meridians don't show up on scans, but some studies see differences in connective tissue or electrical activity along those lines. When we say “blockage,” we're really noticing patterns — poor sleep, tension, weak digestion — by checking pulse, tongue, symptoms.

Acupuncture and herbs do shift hormones, nerves, stress signals — so it's not just placebo. Think of it as system level tuning, not single part repair.

07:00:14

Assistant:

Thank you, that's a helpful start—especially your point about system-level tuning versus single-part repair. Let me give you some feedback and push a bit further on clarity and specifics, since I still want to understand more concretely:

****1. Qi as Aggregate Energy Use:****

I appreciate you mapping “qi” to concepts like metabolism, nerve signaling, and oxygen use. That does help relate it to biological processes I recognize. But I want to check: is “qi” just shorthand for “overall physiological vitality,” or is there something you think is fundamentally missing in current medical/biological models that qi captures? For instance, would a TCM practitioner consider someone who has good lab results but feels tired as “low in qi,” indicating an aspect of health labs miss?

****2. Meridians and Anatomy:****

You mentioned connective tissue and electrical activity—can you elaborate or point to specific studies? (For example, has anyone done an fMRI or electrical conductivity test showing a correlation to acupuncture points or meridians?) Or is the meridian map mainly a clinical observation tool?

****3. TCM Diagnosis Methods:****

So, the equivalent of an “error log” is the collection of symptoms, tongue, pulse, etc.—not a direct measurement, but a pattern diagnosis. Do practitioners ever use modern diagnostics (bloodwork, imaging) alongside traditional assessments? Is there any research on the reliability (inter-rater or otherwise) of pulse or tongue diagnosis?

****4. Acupuncture/Herbal Effects:****

You mention changes in hormones, nerves, and stress signals—are there measurable changes pre- and post-treatment? For example, do cortisol levels or heart rate variability improve in chronic fatigue patients after acupuncture, statistically speaking? Is there a way to distinguish these effects from placebo or relaxation responses in controlled studies?

****5. Quantifying Outcomes:****

With system tuning: are there objective outcomes TCM tracks (like time to fall asleep, total sleep hours, cognitive test scores), or is it mostly subjective “feel better” reports? As an engineer, I'm used to hard metrics!

****Feedback:****

- The analogies are helpful; relating qi to metabolism and system energy is much clearer than vague descriptions.

- I'd encourage you to offer specific scientific data or studies when you suggest physiological effects, so I can assess the evidence for myself.
- I appreciate you didn't push mystical explanations—that builds trust and helps me stay engaged as someone who values science.

07:00:26

You:

Please remember you are visiting a clinic - you should act like you are talking to a chinese med professional

07:01:31

Assistant:

Absolutely, thanks for the reminder! Here's how I would continue, adopting the patient role and engaging you (the practitioner) as an analytically minded, scientifically oriented client in your TCM clinic. We're in PHASE 2: Core TCM Concepts, pressing for specific, logical connections and evidence.

Okay, I think I'm starting to get what you're saying: qi is a kind of umbrella concept for energy states or the sum total of the body's different regulatory processes—everything from metabolism to neurochemistry.

But as someone working with code and concrete systems all day, I can't help but want more precision. For example, if my "qi" is low (even if my bloodwork looks fine), how would that actually show up physically? Like, would it mean my ATP production is down, or maybe my nervous system isn't communicating right? Or—do you see "qi" as something that points to a gap in current medical explanations?

About the meridians—has anyone actually mapped those lines to nerves, blood vessels, fascia, or something we can see under a microscope? You mentioned electrical differences—do you have a study or a practical example? I'm honestly curious if this holds up under imaging or if it's more of a symbolic/clinical framework.

With this pattern diagnosis—pulse, tongue, all that—I have to ask: how reliable is it? If two TCM practitioners assess my pulse, will they usually agree on what they find, or is there a lot of variation? And do you ever cross-check with Western tests, like blood pressure or lab panels, or do you keep the systems separate?

For the effects—I've definitely read that acupuncture can trigger endorphins or regulate cortisol. Has this been shown in people like me—with chronic fatigue or insomnia—over and above placebo? Like, are there before-and-after numbers for sleep quality or cognitive scores, or is it

mainly reports of “feeling better”?

Sorry if I'm bombarding you—I just find analogies helpful, but I also want to know where the models become measurement and not just metaphor. What metrics, if any, do you use to track improvement? How will I know your approach is working for someone like me?

07:01:40

You:

right and each turn you should only talk rather briefly

07:02:00

Assistant:

Understood, thanks for clarifying! Here's my next brief response as Michael, staying focused and concise:

—

Thanks, that helps. If we stick to the analogy—let's say my energy pipeline is underpowered—how would you actually detect that beyond just my own reporting that I'm tired? Are there any physical indicators you'd check, or is it mainly based on how I describe my symptoms? And, have you seen any cases where TCM picked up on issues before Western tests did?

07:02:03

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