

The Dance of Water & Fire: Study of the Triple Heater & the Mingmen

By Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée



Excerpted from her book: **Heart Master, Triple Heater** which was transcribed and edited from a seminar given in London by Claude Larre and Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée in 1986.

The Triple Heater: *fu* par excellence!

The role of the triple heater is a complicated one. Elisabeth's study of the **Neijing** texts allows us to start by defining the *fu*, their shared functions, extent of those roles, and the connections between the *fu*:

There is another presentation of the *fu* in **Su wen** chapter 11. The stomach, large intestine, small intestine, triple heater and bladder are named. These five *fu* are produced by the *qi* of heaven, and the *qi* is in the image of heaven and thus diffuses, but does not keep or store. So when you have five *fu* represented in the digestive tract it is not the triple heater that is absent, but the gallbladder. The triple heater has all these aspects of reception, transformation, diffusion and elimination, even at the level of digestion. This is what is meant when it is said in the **Neijing Jingyi** that the three heaters are 'the pathways for the entry and exit of liquids and grains'. This refers not only to the act of swallowing and excreting, but to everything that allows me to receive and introduce something into my body

that is other than myself, something that comes from outside. It is also that which gives the ability to eliminate everything that cannot be integrated and assimilated into my being.

Between these two activities are all of the transformations governed by the triple heater. The triple heater gives the unity to all these operations between entry and exit. The details may be governed by one organ or another, but the whole thing is governed by the triple heater, so it gives a unity to all this functioning. Between entry and exit there is all the transmission, all the circulation, all the transformation and this is also the best definition of the *fu* of the digestive tract, as is said in **Su wen** chapter 11. The triple heater is therefore the *fu* par excellence since it encompasses all the possible transformations of *qi*, and is the greatest agent for circulation. It is indeed a *fu* which retains and stores nothing, but which makes everything circulate in various ways to distribute *qi* throughout the body, and through the *qi* ensures the circulation of liquids in the body right up until their evacuation.

We will see, particularly in the **Ling shu**, that the triple heater is rooted at the deepest level of being. The **Nan jing** tells us that the triple heater has a very close relationship with *ming men*, that it develops throughout the whole body and that its influence extends right up to the outer layers of the skin. We will also see that it represents the mixing of water and fire, allowing the development of all life.

'The triple heater is responsible for the opening up of passages and irrigation. The waterways stem from it.'

– **Su wen** chapter 8

If we look at **Su wen** chapter 8, the first thing we see is that the triple heater can break through passages and pathways. It has the concentrated strength of the *shao yang* which allows passing through obstacles and a clearing of the ways so that all the irrigation and streams in the body can circulate freely and keep the *qi* moving.

The Triple Heater: Fire Minister

Now we will look at the commentary of a great doctor from the beginning of the 17th century, Zhang Jiebin. He says:

'The triple heater, although it is the fu of all the drainage and irrigation of the middle, is also that which gathers together and protects all the yang.'

That is to say, it does not only have the regulation of fluids under its command, but also the regulation of the yang, and it has as its title the fire minister. It is also the fu of the fire in the middle of the water, which is a way of indicating that the fire is within the kidneys, the fire of *ming men* between the two kidneys. It is the yin power, dependent on the bladder and it connects with the water of the kidneys. Because of this we say the lower heater is like an irrigation canal, a duct, a drain. So the interpretation of Zhang Jiebin is that it is a yin power when it is in a descending movement, and this connects it with the water of the kidneys. Higher up it is yang and it connects with the *bao luo*, the protections and connections of the heart, and it ensures free communication with the fire of the heart. The text concludes like this:

'The triple heater, its upper limit and its extreme point below, make it similar to the six junctions, liu he, of the universe, and there is nothing that it does not envelop or surround.'

Minister fire is linked with *ming men* and with the triple heater, and with all the network of connections around the heart. It is the way in which fire appears and circulates everywhere in the being. This fire is necessary for the proper functioning of each organ. It is said that without the fire of *ming men*, no organ could function or even exist.

This fire minister travels and circulates, rises and falls, ensures all free communication and all the connections and concentrations which can then give the form of life. It is the same as the fire that circulates between heaven and earth and which makes life appear and germinate. So we can understand the deep relationship between the fire of *ming men* and the triple heater as this diffusion and blossoming of an efficient and active fire throughout all parts of the individual. We can also understand how *xin zhu* (heart master/pericardium) and the protections and connections of the heart use the same fire minister in order to ensure their function. Here we also have a communication between anterior and posterior heaven, that is between everything that is at the origin of the being and everything that is for the reconstitution of the being in line with these original models.

Several passages in the *Ling shu* confirm the strong connection of the triple heater with the kidneys and the bladder, and the affirmation that the triple heater ensures the circulation and irrigation of liquids and qi in the body. It is capable of doing this because it takes strength from the fire of the kidneys, and because it plays the role of an intermediary at every level of life. Fire and water, in a human body as well as in the universe between heaven and earth, freely exchange their full usefulness and efficiency. There is no vital water without fire to transform it and no fire of life without water to fix and express it.

Author Bio:

From the early 1970s, Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée has dedicated her life to the study, analysis and teaching of classical Chinese medicine. Mentored by Father Claude Larre, a famous scholar of ancient Chinese texts who was studying the Huainanzi and translating the Laozi, Elisabeth began to study Chinese at Paris University in the late 1960's. She studied classical texts at University and spent a year in Taiwan studying the modern language with a native speaker.

In the mid 1980's, Elisabeth began to accompany Father Larre on his teaching engagements in both the UK and the US. Father Larre's subtle understanding of the background culture and philosophy and Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée's knowledge of the medical texts combined to produce a unique teaching team for almost twenty years until Father Larre's death in 2001.

Since the passing of her mentor, Elisabeth has continued to devote herself to studying and teaching worldwide, working with both medical and philosophical classical Chinese texts. She continuously expands her understanding of the intricate workings of the body via the quality and movement of Qi, and of the greater context of human life between heaven and earth.

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