

Chapter 18

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE TRIPLE BURNER

FUNCTIONS 209

Mobilizes the Original Qi (*Yuan Qi*) 209
 Controls the transportation and penetration of Qi 210
 Controls the Water passages and the excretion of fluids 211

FOUR VIEWS OF THE TRIPLE BURNER 212

The Triple Burner as one of the six Yang organs 212
 The Triple Burner as a 'mobilizer of the Original Qi' (*Yuan Qi*) 213
 The Triple Burner as the three divisions of the body 214
 The Triple Burner as body cavities 216

OTHER ASPECTS 218

Mental aspect 218
 Dreams 220
 Relationship with the Pericardium 220

The Triple Burner is one of the most elusive topics of Chinese medicine and one that has been the subject of controversy for centuries. Although it is 'officially' one of the six Yang organs, Chinese doctors have always debated about the nature of the Triple Burner and in particular whether it has a 'form' or not, that is, whether it is an actual organ or a function.

After discussing the functions of the Triple Burner, it is appropriate to discuss four different views of the Triple Burner, which will throw light on its functions.

BOX 18.1 FUNCTIONS OF THE TRIPLE BURNER

- It mobilizes the Original Qi (*Yuan Qi*)
- It controls the transportation and penetration of Qi
- It controls the Water passages and the excretion of fluids

FUNCTIONS

The functions of the Triple Burner are listed in Box 18.1.

Mobilizes the Original Qi (*Yuan Qi*)

The Original Qi is a transformation of the Pre-Heaven Essence with the input of the Post-Heaven Essence. The Original Qi represents the Essence 'in action' in the form of Qi. The Original Qi resides in between the Kidneys and is closely related to the Fire of the Gate of Life (*Ming Men*) (Fig. 18.1). Chapter 66 of the 'Classic

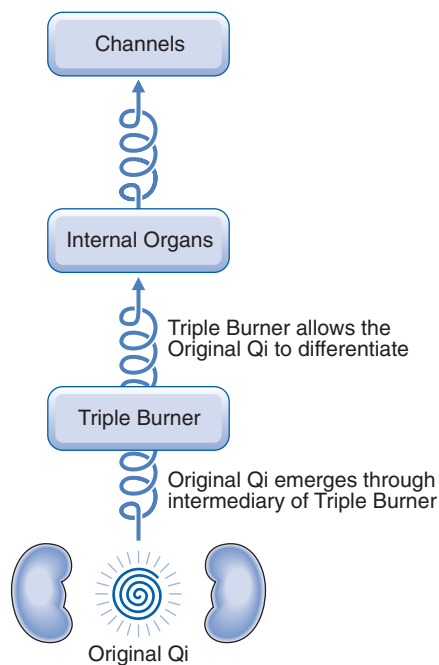


Figure 18.1 The Triple Burner as the mobilizer of the Original Qi

of Difficulties' clarifies the relationship between the Original Qi and the Triple Burner. It says: '*Below the umbilicus between the kidneys there is a Motive Force [Dong Qi] that is life-giving and is the root of the 12 channels: it is called Original Qi. The Triple Burner makes the Original Qi separate [into its different functions] and it controls the movement and passage of the three Qi [of the Upper, Middle and Lower Burner] through the five Yin and six Yang organs.*'¹

It is through the Triple Burner that the Original Qi can perform its functions. The Original Qi is closely related to the Gate of Life and shares its role of providing the heat necessary to all the body's functional activities. The following are examples of functions carried out by the Original Qi that are aided by the Triple Burner:

The Original Qi provides the heat necessary to the Spleen to transform and transport food essences and to the Kidneys to transform fluids. The Middle Burner makes sure that Original Qi reaches and assists the Spleen to transform and transport food essences and the Lower Burner ensures that Original Qi warms the Kidneys to transform fluids.

The Original Qi facilitates the transformation of Gathering Qi (*Zong Qi*) into True Qi (*Zhen Qi*). It can do this through the action of the Upper Burner in transporting Qi through the various passages in the chest.

The Original Qi facilitates the transformation of Food-Qi (*Gu Qi*) into Blood in the Heart. The Upper Burner ensures the smooth passage and transportation of Qi in the chest for this transformation to take place.

BOX 18.2 THE TRIPLE BURNER MOBILIZES THE ORIGINAL QI (YUAN QI)

- The Original Qi represents the transformation power of Qi in all internal organs
- The Triple Burner mobilizes the Original Qi by making it differentiate for different functions
- The Triple Burner allows the Original Qi to perform its various functions in relation to several organs

Thus the Original Qi represents the transformation power of Qi of all the Internal Organs; the Triple Burner helps the Original Qi to differentiate itself into its different forms to perform different functions in different places. Chapter 38 of the 'Classic of Difficulties' says: '*The Triple Burner is the place where the Original Qi is separated: it supports all of the Qi.*'²

This function of the Triple Burner is summarized in Box 18.2.

Controls the transportation and penetration of Qi

As we have seen in chapter 4, the movement of Qi to carry out its various functions is called the 'Qi Mechanism'. This Qi Mechanism relies on the ascending–descending and entering–exiting of Qi in different places and different organs. Each organ has a particular direction of flow of Qi. For example, Spleen-Qi ascends whereas Stomach-Qi descends. In each channel, Qi flows in an upward or downward direction. Qi also enters and exits in and out of various structures and organs. For example, Qi enters and exits the space between skin and muscles, the Membranes, the joint capsules, and all other cavities (Fig. 18.2).

The Triple Burner controls the ascending–descending and entering–exiting of Qi in the Qi Mechanism. One of the words most frequently used in Chinese books to describe this function of the Triple Burner is *tong* 通, which means 'free passage', 'to pass through', 'penetrate'. This describes the function of the Triple Burner in ensuring that Qi passes through in the Qi Mechanism, in all the cavities and in all organs. This whole process is called 'Qi transformation by the Triple Burner': the result of the Qi transformation is the production of Nutritive Qi (*Ying Qi*), Defensive Qi (*Wei Qi*), Blood and Body Fluids. That is also why the Triple Burner is said to control 'all kinds of Qi'.

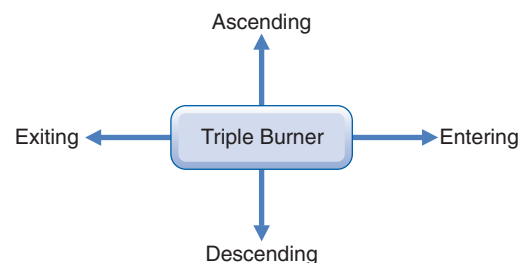


Figure 18.2 The Triple Burner and the Qi Mechanism

The 'Central Scripture Classic' (*Zhong Zang Jing*, Han dynasty) says:

*The Triple Burner is the three original Qi of the body, it is the Yang organ of clear [Qi], it controls the five Yin and six Yang organs, the Nutritive Qi and Defensive Qi, the channels and the Qi of the Interior and Exterior, left and right, above and below. When the Qi of the Triple Burner has free passage, Qi passes freely into the Interior; Exterior, left, right, above and below. The Triple Burner irrigates the body, harmonizes Interior and Exterior, benefits the left and nourishes the right, it conducts upwards and descends downwards.*³

As mentioned above, Chapter 66 of the 'Classic of Difficulties' confirms that the Triple Burner controls the movement of Qi in general: '*The Triple Burner makes the Original Qi separate [into its different functions] and it controls the movement and passage of the three Qi [of the Upper, Middle and Lower Burner] through the five Yin and six Yang organs.*'⁴ The 'three Qi' are the Qi of the Upper, Middle and Lower Burner; apart from referring generally to all the types of Qi in each Burner, this passage also refers specifically to the Gathering Qi (*Zong Qi*) in the Upper, Nutritive Qi (*Ying Qi*) in the Middle and Defensive Qi (*Wei Qi*) in the Lower Burner. Although the Defensive Qi exerts its influence primarily in the Upper Burner and the superficial layers of the body (the space between skin and muscles), it originates in the Lower Burner from the Gate of Life. Chapter 18 of the 'Spiritual Axis' says: '*The Nutritive Qi originates from the Middle Burner; the Defensive Qi originates from the Lower Burner.*'⁵

Chapter 38 of the 'Classic of Difficulties' confirms that the Triple Burner exerts its influence on all types of Qi: '*The Triple Burner is the place where the Original Qi is separated: it supports all of the Qi.*'⁶ Chapter 31 confirms the influence of the Triple Burner on the movement of Qi in all parts of the body: '*The Qi of the Triple Burner gathers in the avenues of Qi [Qi Jie].*'⁷ This means that the Triple Burner is responsible for the free passage of Qi in all channels but also all structures (such as cavities) of the body; *Qi Jie* is also an alternative name for the point ST-30.

CLINICAL NOTE

TB-6 Zhigou is the best point to stimulate the Triple Burner's function of transportation and penetration of Qi.

With regard to the movement of Qi, it is useful to compare and contrast this function of the Triple Burner with those of Liver in ensuring the free flow of Qi and of the Lungs in governing Qi:

The Liver ensures the free flow of Qi and this aids the ascending and descending of Qi, especially in the Stomach, Spleen and Intestines; the Triple Burner's influence on the ascending–descending and entering–exiting of Qi extends to all organs. The Triple Burner controls the entering and exiting of Qi in all parts of the body and especially the body cavities; the Liver has no such function in relation to the body cavities. The Lungs govern Qi in the sense of controlling the intake of air, breathing and the production of Gathering (*Zong*) Qi from Food-Qi (*Gu Qi*). The Triple Burner has no such function with regard to Qi. The Lungs also influence the ascending–descending and entering–exiting of Qi, but they do so mostly in the Upper Burner whereas the Triple Burner's function of transporting Qi exerts its influence on all organs and all three Burners.

This function of the Triple Burner is summarized in Box 18.3.

Controls the Water passages and the excretion of fluids

Chapter 8 of the 'Simple Questions' describes the functions of all the Internal Organs comparing them

BOX 18.3 THE TRIPLE BURNER CONTROLS THE TRANSPORTATION AND PENETRATION OF QI

- The Triple Burner controls the ascending–descending and entering–exiting of Qi in all organs and all parts of the body
- The Triple Burner controls the movement and 'penetration' of Qi in general
- The Triple Burner controls the three Qi, that is, Gathering Qi (Upper Burner), Nutritive Qi (Middle Burner) and Defensive Qi (Lower Burner)
- The Triple Burner controls all types of Qi and the avenues of Qi

to 'officials'; it says: *'The Triple Burner is the official in charge of irrigation and it controls the Water passages'*.⁸ This means that, just like the official who is in charge of irrigation, the Triple Burner is responsible for the transformation, transportation and excretion of fluids. This is one of the most important functions of the Triple Burner. The terms used in Chinese in connection with the Triple Burner's influence on the Body Fluids are often *shu* [疏], which means 'free flow', and *tong* [通], which means 'free passage' or 'making things go through'. Therefore the Triple Burner is like a system of canals and waterways to channel irrigation water through the proper fields and then out; this ensures that Body Fluids are transformed, transported and excreted properly.

The Triple Burner's function in relation to Body Fluids is closely dependent on its function of controlling the transportation and penetration of Qi. As described above, the Triple Burner influences the ascending–descending and entering–exiting of Qi in the Qi Mechanism; it is the coordinated and harmonized ascending–descending and entering–exiting of Qi in all organs and structures that ensures that the Body Fluids also ascend–descend and enter–exit in the proper way in all places. Essentially, the transformation and movement of fluids depend on Qi.

CLINICAL NOTE

The best points to influence the Triple Burner's transformation and excretion of fluids are not on the Triple Burner channel itself but on the Directing Vessel (*Ren Mai*), that is, Ren-17 Shanzhong for the Upper, Ren-9 Shuifen for the Middle and Ren-5 Shimen for the Lower Burner.

The end result of the complex process of transformation, transportation and excretion of fluids leads to the formation of various Body Fluids in each of the three Burners. The fluids of the Upper Burner are primarily sweat, which flows in the space between skin and muscles; those of the Middle Burner are the fluids produced by the Stomach, which moisten the body and integrate Blood; those of the Lower Burner are primarily urine and the small amount of fluids in the stools.

This function of the Triple Burner is summarized in Box 18.4.

BOX 18.4 THE TRIPLE BURNER CONTROLS THE WATER PASSAGES AND THE EXCRETION OF FLUIDS

- The Triple Burner is the official in charge of 'irrigation'
- It controls the transportation and excretion of fluids from the body
- Its transportation and excretion of Body Fluids is closely dependent on its transportation and penetration of Qi
- The transformation of fluids leads to sweat in Upper Burner, Stomach fluids in the Middle Burner, and urine in the Lower Burner

FOUR VIEWS OF THE TRIPLE BURNER

The four views of the Triple Burner discussed are:

1. the Triple Burner as one of the six Yang Organs
2. the Triple Burner as a mobilizer of the Original Qi (*Yuan Qi*)
3. the Triple Burner as three divisions of the body
4. the Triple Burner as body cavities.

The Triple Burner as one of the six Yang organs

Historically, this view is derived from the 'Yellow Emperor's Classic – Simple Questions'. The comment in chapter 8 about the Triple Burner being 'the official in charge of irrigation', mentioned in the previous section, is given in the context of a list of functions of all the organs, from which it appears that the 'Simple Questions' considers the Triple Burner as one of the six Yang organs. If this is the case, the Triple Burner has a 'form', that is, it is substantial, like all the other organs. Its function is similar to that of the other Yang organs: receiving food and drink, digesting and transforming it, transporting the nourishment and excreting the wastes.

The function of the Yang organs in general is often expressed in the Chinese word '*tong*' 通 which means 'making things go through' or 'ensuring a free passage', etc. The function of the Triple Burner, in addition, is often expressed in the Chinese word

'chu' 出 meaning 'excreting' or rather 'letting out'. The Triple Burner performs this letting out function in relation to the spreading of Defensive Qi (*Wei Qi*) in the Upper Burner, transportation of Nutritive Qi (*Ying Qi*) in the Middle Burner and excretion of Body Fluids in the Lower Burner. The 'Spiritual Axis' in chapter 18 says: *'The person receives Qi from food, food enters the stomach, then spreads to the Lungs and the five Yin organs and the six Yang organs, the clear part goes to the Nutritive Qi, the dirty part to the Defensive Qi.'*⁹ The capacity of the Nutritive and Defensive Qi to spread from the Stomach to the Lungs depends on the 'letting out' function of the Triple Burner. In other words, the Triple Burner controls the movement of various types of Qi at the various stages of Qi and Blood production, in particular ensuring that the various types of Qi are 'let out' in a smooth way and that dirty fluids are excreted properly.

Thus, the Triple Burner is a three-stage passageway contributing to the production of Nutritive and Defensive Qi after the separation of food into a clear and dirty part and to the excretion of fluids. The Upper Burner lets out Defensive Qi (directing it to the Lungs), the Middle Burner lets out Nutritive Qi (directing it to all the organs) and the Lower Burner lets out waste fluids (directing them to the Bladder). (Fig. 18.3).

The 'Yellow Emperor's Classic' variously describes the function of the Triple Burner as 'opening up', 'discharging Qi' and 'letting Qi out'. Malfunctions of the Triple Burner are variously described as 'not flowing smoothly', 'over-flowing' or 'being blocked'. In practice this means that an impairment of the Triple Burner function will manifest as a blockage of the various types of Qi or fluids in the three stages: a blockage of Defensive Qi in the Upper Burner (impairment of the Lungs' diffusing function), a blockage of Nutritive Qi in the Middle Burner (impairment of

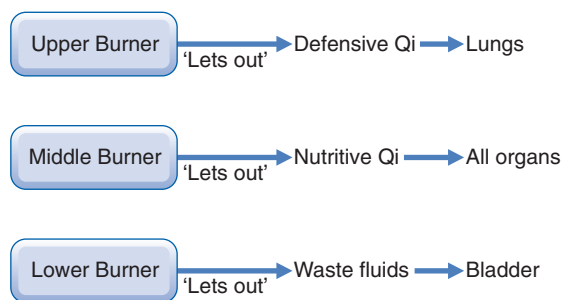


Figure 18.3 Letting-out function of the Triple Burner

BOX 18.5 THE TRIPLE BURNER AS ONE OF THE SIX YANG ORGANS

- From this point of view, the Triple Burner is a Yang organ and 'has a form'
- The Triple Burner has the function of maintaining free passage (*tong*) and of 'letting out', or excreting (*chu*)
- The Triple Burner lets out Defensive Qi in the Upper, Nutritive Qi in the Middle, and fluids in the Lower Burner

the Spleen's function of transportation) or a blockage of fluids in the Lower Burner (impairment of the Bladder's function of Qi transformation). These situations would cause sneezing, abdominal distension and retention of urine respectively.

This view of the Triple Burner is summarized in Box 18.5.

The Triple Burner as a 'Mobilizer of the Original Qi' (*Yuan Qi*)

This interpretation of the Triple Burner derives from the 'Classic of Difficulties', chapter 66.¹⁰ According to this classic, the Triple Burner 'has a name but no form'; that is, it is not an organ but a collection of functions, it is insubstantial. As mentioned above, the 'Classic of Difficulties' states that the Original Qi resides in the lower abdomen between the two Kidneys, it spreads to the five Yin and six Yang organs via the Triple Burner, it then enters the 12 channels and emerges at the Source (*Yuan*) points (see Fig. 18.1). From this came the interpretation of the Triple Burner as a 'mobilizer of the Original Qi', that is, the channel for expression of the Original Qi. The Triple Burner mobilizes the Original Qi to perform its various functions in different organs and different parts of the body; it allows the Original Qi to separate and differentiate for its different functions around the body.¹¹

Original Qi is also described in the same chapter as being the 'motive force (*Dong Qi*) between the Kidneys', activating all physiological functions of the body and providing heat for the digestion. This 'motive force between the Kidneys' can carry out its functions only through the intermediary and the mobilization of the Triple Burner. As mentioned before, Original Qi

provides the heat necessary for the digestion and transformation of food. Because the Triple Burner is a 'mobilizer of the Original Qi', it obviously has an influence on the process of digestion. This is clearly expressed in the 'Classic of Difficulties' in chapter 31, which states that the '*Triple Burner is the avenue of food and drink, the beginning and end of Qi*'.¹² It also states that the Upper Burner controls 'receiving but not excreting', the Middle Burner 'rotting and ripening of food and drink' and the Lower Burner 'excreting but not receiving'. All these expressions 'receiving', 'rotting and ripening' and 'excreting' describe a process of transportation, transformation and excretion of food and fluids by the Triple Burner.

From this point of view, there is therefore a convergence of views between the concept of Triple Burner in the 'Yellow Emperor's Classic' and the 'Classic of Difficulties', that is, between the Triple Burner as an organ and as a function, even though the starting point of these two classics is different. However, the 'Yellow Emperor's Classic' emphasizes the role of the Triple Burner in its 'letting out' function, seeing the three Burners as three avenues of excretion or 'letting out'. The 'Classic of Difficulties', on the contrary, places emphasis on the work of 'receiving', 'rotting and ripening' and 'excretion' of food and fluids, seeing digestion as a process of 'Qi transformation' activated by the Original Qi through the intermediary action of the Triple Burner.

This view of the Triple Burner is summarized in Box 18.6.

The Triple Burner as the three divisions of the body

This view of the Triple Burner is derived from both the 'Classic of Difficulties' (ch. 31) and the 'Spiritual

BOX 18.6 THE TRIPLE BURNER AS A MOBILIZER OF THE ORIGINAL QI

- According to this view, the Triple Burner 'has no form'
- The Triple Burner mobilizes the Original Qi emerging from between the Kidneys to make it differentiate in its different forms in different parts of the body for different functions

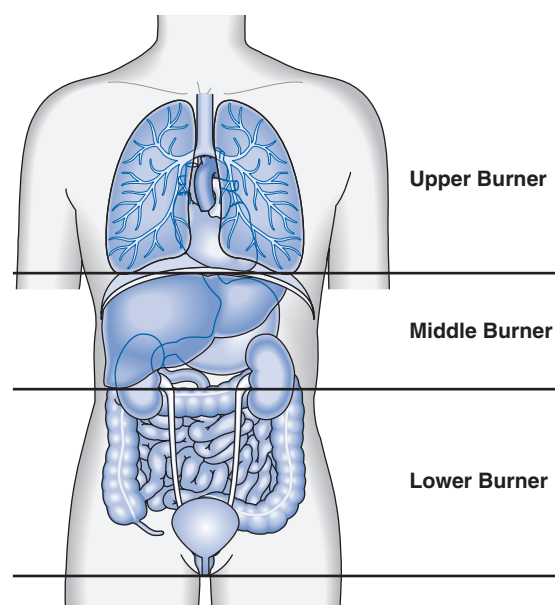


Figure 18.4 The three Burners as three divisions of the body (please note that the liver is anatomically in the Middle Burner but that, energetically, it is usually placed in the Lower Burner).

Axis' (ch. 18).¹³ The threefold division of the body is as follows: from the diaphragm upwards is the Upper Burner, between the diaphragm and the umbilicus is the Middle Burner, and below the umbilicus is the Lower Burner (Fig. 18.4). As far as organs and anatomical parts are concerned, the Upper Burner includes Heart, Lungs, Pericardium, throat and head; the Middle Burner includes Stomach, Spleen and Gall Bladder; the Lower Burner includes Liver, Kidneys, Intestines and Bladder.

The position of the Liver in the Lower Burner should be clarified. Anatomically, the Liver is in the Middle Burner and, indeed, some of its symptomatology occurs in the Middle Burner (e.g. hypochondrial pain, epigastric pain, belching, sour regurgitation, etc.). However, as the Liver has many complex functions and a very long channel, energetically it can also be placed in the Lower Burner. For example, from the point of view of gynaecology, the Liver's physiology and pathology are such that they place it definitely in the Lower Burner. Moreover, as one of the major functions of the Triple Burner is the transportation and transformation of food essences and fluids, this particular function in the Middle Burner is performed

by the Stomach and Spleen, not the Liver and that is why the Liver is usually placed in the Lower rather than Middle Burner.

The Upper Burner is like a mist

The main physiological process of the Upper Burner is that of distribution of fluids by the Lungs. They are distributed all over the body in the space between skin and muscles in the form of fine vapour. It is an aspect of the Lungs' diffusing function. For this reason the Upper Burner is compared to a 'mist'¹⁴ (Fig. 18.5).

The 'Spiritual Axis' in chapter 30 says: *'The Upper Burner opens outwards, spreads the five flavours of the food essences, pervades the skin, fills the body, moistens the skin and it is like mist'*.¹⁵

The Middle Burner is like a maceration chamber

The main physiological processes in the Middle Burner are those of digestion and transportation of food and drink (described as 'rotting and ripening') and the transportation of the nourishment extracted from food to all parts of the body. For this reason the Middle Burner is compared to a 'maceration chamber' or a 'bubbling cauldron'¹⁶ (see Fig. 18.5).

The 'Spiritual Axis' in chapter 18 says: *'The Middle Burner is situated in the Stomach . . . it receives Qi, expels the wastes, steams the Body Fluids, transforms the refined essences of food and connects upwards with the Lungs'*.¹⁷

The Lower Burner is like a ditch

The main physiological process in the Lower Burner is that of separation of the essences of food into a clean and dirty part, with the excretion of the dirty part. In particular, the Lower Burner directs the separation of the clean from the dirty part of the fluids and facilitates the excretion of urine. For this reason the Lower Burner is compared to a 'drainage ditch'.¹⁸ (see Fig. 18.5).

The 'Spiritual Axis' in chapter 18 says: *'Food and drink first enter the stomach, the waste products go to the large intestine in the Lower Burner which oozes downwards, secretes the fluids and transmits them to the bladder'*.¹⁹

In conclusion, the threefold division of the Triple Burner is a summarization of the functions of all the Yang organs (but including also the Lungs and Spleen) in their work of receiving, digesting, transforming, absorbing, nourishing and excreting. The organs within each division are not separate from the Three Burners themselves. From acupuncture's perspective in particular, the Lungs and Heart are the Upper Burner, the Stomach and Spleen are the Middle Burner and the Liver, Kidneys, Bladder and Intestines are the Lower Burner.

The threefold division of the body can also be seen as a summarization of the mutual assistance and transformation into each other of the Gathering Qi (Upper Burner), Nutritive Qi (Middle Burner) and Original Qi (Lower Burner).

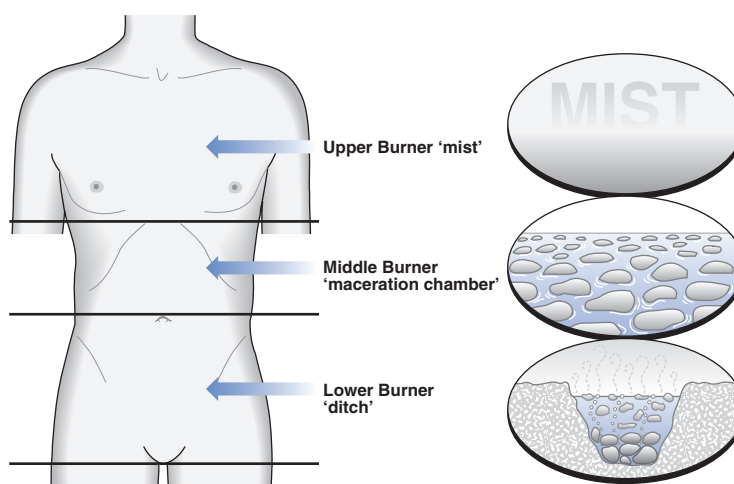


Figure 18.5 The three divisions of the body

BOX 18.7 THE TRIPLE BURNER AS THREE DIVISIONS OF THE BODY

- Upper Burner: from the diaphragm upwards (Lungs, Heart and Pericardium)
- Middle Burner: between the diaphragm and the umbilicus (Stomach, Spleen and Gall Bladder)
- Lower Burner: below the umbilicus (Liver, Kidneys, Bladder, Small and Large Intestine)

The three burners and fluids:

- Upper Burner is like a *mist* (sweat)
- Middle Burner is like a *maceration chamber* (Stomach fluids)
- Lower Burner is like a *ditch* (urine)

The Qi of the three burners

- Upper Burner: Gathering Qi (*Zong Qi*)
- Middle Burner: Nutritive Qi (*Ying Qi*)
- Lower Burner: Original Qi (*Yuan Qi*)

This view of the Triple Burner is summarized in Box 18.7.

The Triple Burner as body cavities

The Triple Burner is a system of body cavities. There are many cavities in the body, some large, some small. For example, the chest cavity, the abdominal cavity, the pelvic cavity, the joints cavities, the space between skin and muscles, the space above the diaphragm, the spaces in between the Membranes, and the spaces between these and the abdominal cavity. Such cavities are called *Cou* 腠 in Chinese medicine, the term *Cou* usually used in conjunction with *Li* 理 meaning 'texture'. Although the term *Cou Li* is often used to indicate the space between skin and muscles, such space is only one of the cavities of the body.

The cavities of the body are generally irrigated and lubricated by various fluids and the Triple Burner controls these cavities also because it controls the transformation, transportation and excretion of fluids in all parts of the body. Moreover, the Triple Burner controls the movement of Qi in and out of such cavities. This movement is the 'entering and exiting' of Qi in the Qi Mechanism (see ch. 4). The entering and exiting of Qi in and out of the cavities is extremely important both for the proper circulation of Qi and for the



The body cavities are:

- the chest cavity
- the abdominal cavity
- the pelvic cavity
- the joint capsules
- the space between the skin and muscles
- the space above the diaphragm
- the spaces in between the Membranes
- the spaces between the Membranes and the abdominal cavity.

transformation and transportation of Body Fluids in and out of such cavities (Fig. 18.6).

The abdominal cavity contains the Membranes (*Huang*); these include the superficial and deep fascia, the mesentery, the omentum and the stroma enveloping all internal organs (Figs 18.7–18.10). The superficial and deep fascia are connective tissues that envelope the muscles. The mesentery is the double layer of peritoneum attached to the abdominal wall and enclosing in its fold the abdominal viscera. The

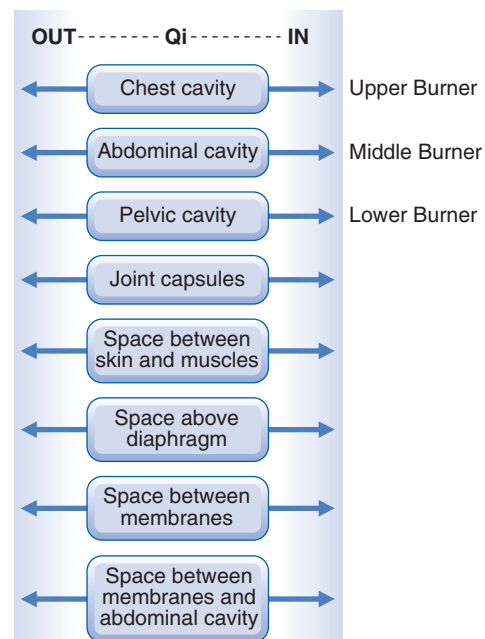


Figure 18.6 The entering and exiting of Qi in the body cavities

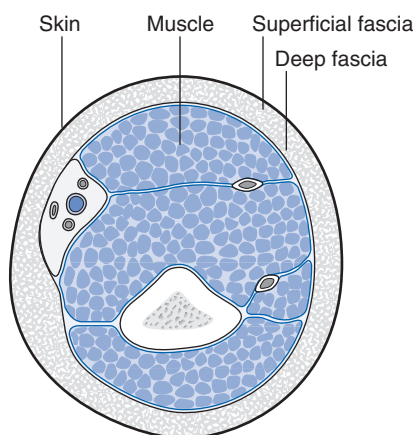


Figure 18.7 Superficial and deep fascia

omentum is a fold of peritoneum passing from the stomach to another abdominal organ. The stroma is the framework, usually of connective tissue, of an organ. The Membranes have the function of wrapping, anchoring and connecting the organs. In other words, the organs in the abdominal cavity are not in a kind of vacuum connected by acupuncture channels. Rather, they occupy a solid space that is surrounded by Membranes. The Triple Burner is responsible for the movement of Qi in and out of the Membranes.

Therefore, when seen as a system of body cavities, the Triple Burner is not an organ but a complex of

cavities outside or in between the Internal Organs. The 'Classic of Categories' (*Lei Jing*, 1624) by Zhang Jing Yue says: '*Outside the internal organs and inside the body [that is, between the skin and the internal organs], wrapping the internal organs like a net, there is cavity that is a Fu. It has the name of a ditch but the shape of a Fu [Yang organ].*'²⁰ It also says: '*The Internal Organs have substance; the cavities are like a bag that contains that substance.*'²¹ The Selected Historical Theories of Chinese Medicine (*Zhong Yi Li Dai Yi Lun Xuan*) says: '*There is a Minister Fire in the body which moves within the cavities and up and down in between the Membranes: it is called the Triple Burner.*'²²

The same book clarifies the relationship between the Triple Burner, Pericardium and cavities (Fig. 18.11): '*The Heart is the Emperor who has a Minister. The Triple Burner cavities are like a capital which houses both the Emperor and the Minister. The Pericardium in the centre of the chest is like a palace that houses only the Emperor. The palace is inside and is Yin, the capital is outside and is Yang; hence the Triple Burner is a Yang organ and the Pericardium a Yin organ.*'²³

In the chest cavity, the Triple Burner controls the entering and exiting of Qi, which is governed by the Gathering Qi. In the abdominal and pelvic cavity, the Triple Burner controls the transportation and transformation of Qi in the Membranes. In the space between skin and muscles, the Triple Burner controls the diffusing of Defensive Qi and the entering and

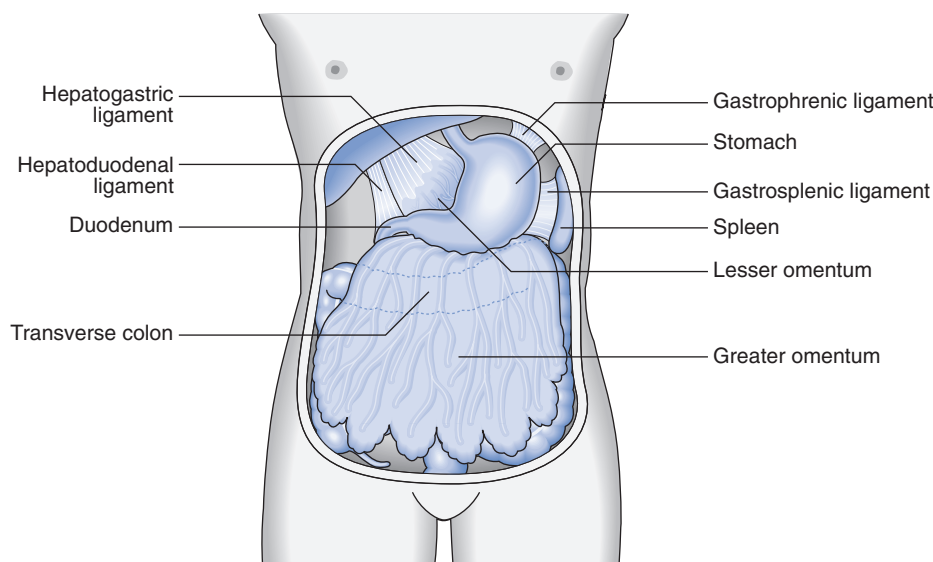


Figure 18.8 Omentum

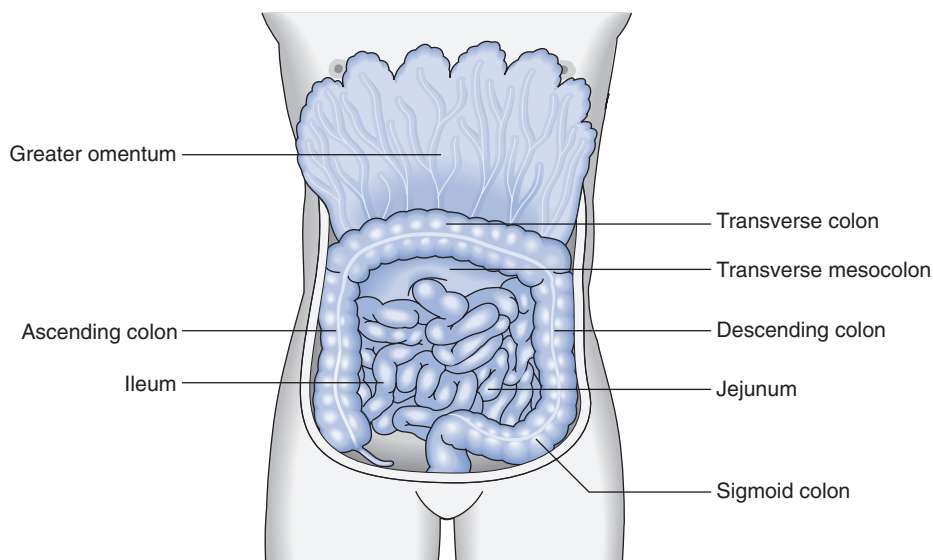


Figure 18.9 Omentum

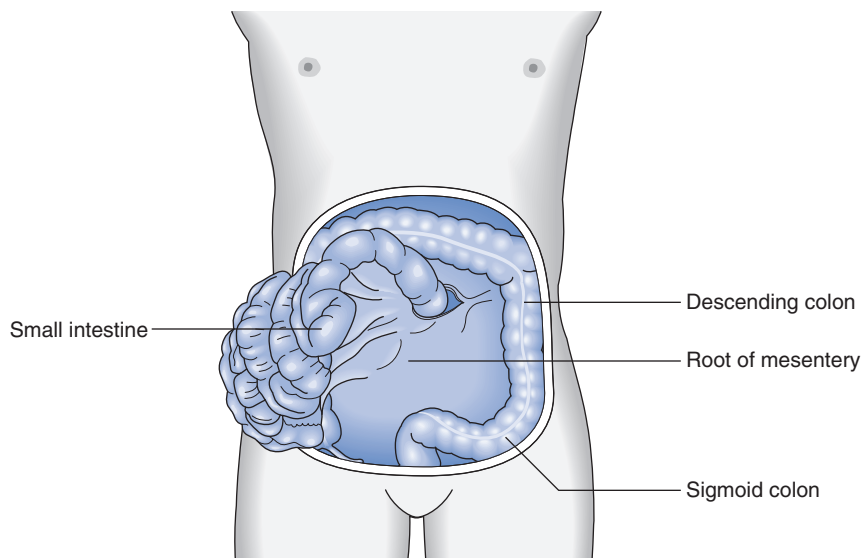


Figure 18.10 Mesentery

exiting of Qi in and out of that space. This function of the Triple Burner regulates the flow of Defensive Qi in this space, the opening and closing of pores and sweating. In the joint cavities, the Triple Burner controls the entering and exiting of Qi and fluids in the joint capsules; this contributes to irrigating and lubricating the synovial membranes.

This view of the Triple Burner is summarized in Box 18.8.

OTHER ASPECTS

Mental aspect

The mental–emotional aspect of the Triple Burner is determined by its dual nature as pertaining to the character of both Fire and Wood. The Triple Burner pertains to Fire as it is exteriorly–interiorly related to the Pericardium but also because it is the emissary of

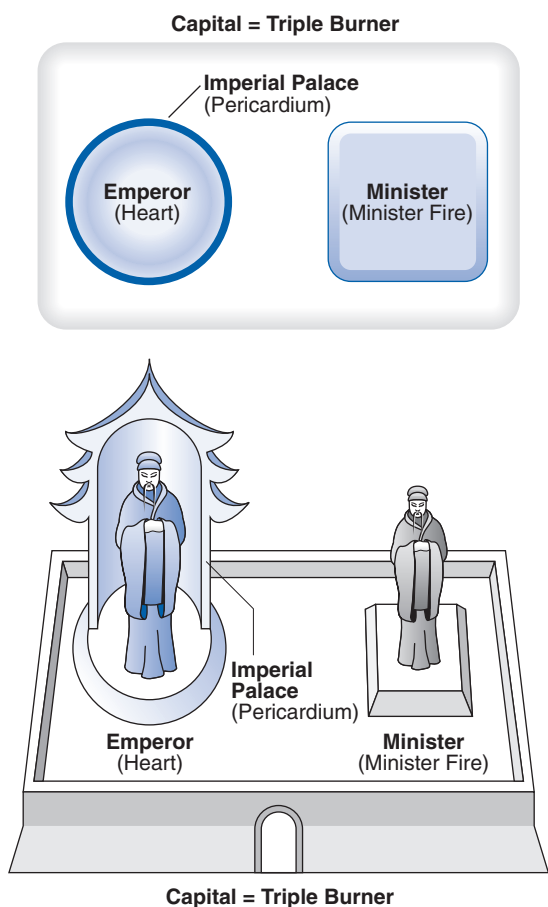


Figure 18.11 Relationship between the Pericardium, Triple Burner and body cavities

the Original Qi (*Yuan Qi*) and of the Fire of the Gate of Life (*Ming Men*). It partakes of the character of Wood as it is connected to the Gall Bladder within the Lesser Yang channels. These two aspects are not unrelated as, as we have seen, the Minister Fire between the

BOX 18.8 THE TRIPLE BURNER AS BODY CAVITIES

- The Triple Burner is a system of body cavities
- The Upper Burner is the chest cavity; the Middle Burner the upper abdominal cavity; the Lower Burner the lower abdominal and pelvic cavity
- The Triple Burner controls the 'penetration' of Qi in and out of the cavities and the entering–exiting of Qi
- In the abdominal cavity, the Triple Burner controls the entering–exiting of Qi in and out of the Membranes
- In the chest cavity, the Triple Burner controls the entering and exiting of the Gathering Qi (*Zong Qi*)
- In the space between skin and muscles, the Triple Burner controls the entering and exiting of Defensive Qi (*Wei Qi*)
- In the joint cavities, the Triple Burner controls the entering and exiting of Qi and fluids in the joint capsules

Kidneys ascends to connect with the Triple Burner, the Gall Bladder and the Pericardium (Fig. 18.12).

The Triple Burner's character of Fire means that this organ/channel is involved in assisting the Mind (*Shen*) and Ethereal Soul (*Hun*) especially in forming and maintaining relationships. As the Triple Burner is the 'hinge' between the Yang channels (with the Greater Yang opening on to the Exterior and the Bright Yang opening onto the Interior), it acts as the 'hinge' also on a psychic level, that is, in the emotional balance between the outgoing movement towards other people and relating and the inward movement

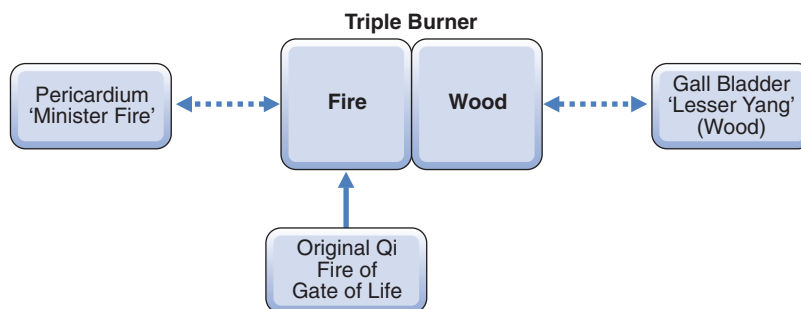


Figure 18.12 Relationship between the Triple Burner, Pericardium and Gall Bladder

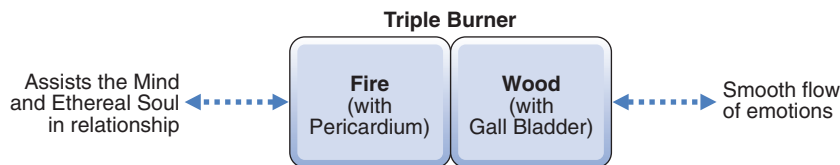


Figure 18.13 Emotional influence of the Triple Burner

towards oneself. The Pericardium has also this function within the Yin as it pertains to the Terminal Yin that is the 'hinge' between the Greater Yin and the Lesser Yin.

In so far as it partakes of the character of Wood, the Triple Burner has a similar mental–emotional influence as the Liver, that is, it also promotes the 'free flow' of emotions in a smooth way so that emotions are freely expressed and not repressed. Just as, on a physical level, the Triple Burner controls the movement of Qi in all organs and structures, on a mental–emotional level, it controls the smooth flow of Qi between the Mind and the Ethereal Soul so that emotions do not turn into long-term 'moods', which happens when Qi stagnates (Fig. 18.13).

This aspect of the Triple Burner is summarized in Box 18.9.

Dreams

Dreams of flying indicate Emptiness in the Lower Burner.²³

Dreams of falling indicate Fullness in the Lower Burner.²⁴

Relationship with the Pericardium

Although they are interiorly–exteriorly related, the relationship between the Pericardium and Triple

BOX 18.9 MENTAL ASPECT OF TRIPLE BURNER

- Fire nature (with Pericardium): as pertaining to Fire, the Triple Burner assists the Mind (*Shen*) and Ethereal Soul (*Hun*) in maintaining relationships
- Wood nature (with Gall Bladder): as pertaining to Wood, the Triple Burner assists the Liver in ensuring the smooth flow of emotions

Burner is somewhat tenuous. In the same way as for the Heart and Small Intestine, the relationship between Triple Burner and Pericardium is more applicable to the channels, rather than to the interaction of the organs themselves.

The 'Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine' and the 'Classic of Difficulties' always refer to the 'five Yin and six Yang organs' (omitting the Pericardium), but also to the '12 channels' (including the Pericardium). Originally the Pericardium was not considered as separate from the Heart; the two were considered a single organ, which is perfectly logical considering their close anatomical relationship. In fact, when the 'Spiritual Axis' lists the Source points of the five Yin organs in chapter 1, it lists Daling (PE-7) as the Source point of the Heart.²⁵

A passage from chapter 38 of the 'Classic of Difficulties' makes it clear that the Pericardium and Heart were, in those times, considered as one organ. It says: *'The Yin organs are five; only the Yang organs are six: why is that so? The Yang organs are six because of the Triple Burner . . . it has a name but no form, and its channel pertains to the Hand Lesser Yang. [The Triple Burner] is a Yang organ and that is why these are six.'*²⁶

This passage is revealing because of its starting question; in fact, the very question *'the Yin organs are five, why are there six Yang organs?'* implies that it is taken for granted that the Heart and Pericardium are part of the same organ and that therefore it is strange that the Yang organs are six. The answer explains that the Yang organs are six owing to the existence of the Triple Burner. However, within the reply, it says that the Triple Burner *'has a name but no form'* thus implying that the Triple Burner is different from the other regular Yang organs and their total makes six only by adding the Triple Burner.²⁷

Chapter 39 of the 'Classic of Difficulties' is even more specific about the fact that the Triple Burner is a Yang organ that is not actually associated with a Yin organ: *'Each of the Yin organs has a Yang one associated with it. The Triple Burner is also a Yang organ but it is not*

*associated with any of the Yin organs. That is why some say that there are only five Yang organs.*²⁸

With the development of the channel theory, the Triple Burner was associated with the Pericardium (given their corresponding position on the arm) and their number totalled 12, including the Triple Burner and Pericardium channels.

Although the Pericardium and Triple Burner channels are exteriorly–interiorly related within the Five-Element scheme, there is hardly a close relationship between these two organs. In fact, some Chinese teachers and doctors go so far as saying that the Pericardium and Triple Burner organs are not interiorly–exteriorly related as are the other organs.

As channels, the Pericardium and Triple Burner channels have a close and symmetrical relationship. The Triple Burner belongs to the Lesser Yang channels, which are the ‘hinge’ between the Greater Yang and the Bright Yang channels; the Pericardium pertains to the Terminal Yin channels, which are the ‘hinge’ between the Greater Yin and Lesser Yin channels. Being the ‘hinge’ implies that these channels can connect the Yang and Yin channels (i.e. the Triple Burner can connect the three Yang and the Pericardium the three Yin channels).

Being the ‘hinge’ on a psychological level means that these channels are ‘mediators’ in the sense that they can affect a person’s capacity to relate to other people and the external world. The Triple Burner and Pericardium channels affect the mental–emotional state because the Minister Fire rises towards these two channels. Therefore when the Minister Fire is aroused by emotional problems and it rises towards the Pericardium and Triple Burner channels, points of these channels can be used to clear Heat and calm the Mind.

Finally, the Pericardium and Triple Burner channels are symmetrical in so far as the former is the opening point of the Yin Linking Vessel (*Yin Wei Mai*) and the latter of the Yang Linking Vessel (*Yang Wei Mai*); this is another reason why these two channels connect the three Yin and three Yang respectively.

The ‘Medicine Treasure’ even says that the Triple Burner is interiorly–exteriorly related to the Gate of Life (*Ming Men*).²⁹ Since the Gate of Life is also called the ‘Ministerial Fire’, this explains the attribution of Triple Burner to Fire and specifically Minister Fire in the Five-Element context. The Pericardium is obviously closely connected to the Heart and naturally belongs

to the Fire element, hence the connection between Pericardium and Triple Burner within the Fire Element and their name of ‘Minister Fire’.

The ‘Selected Historical Theories of Chinese Medicine’ clarifies the relationship between the Triple Burner and Pericardium: *‘The Heart is the Emperor who has a Minister. The Triple Burner cavities are like a capital which houses both the Emperor and the Minister. The Pericardium in the centre of the chest is like a palace that houses only the Emperor. The palace is inside and is Yin, the capital is outside and is Yang; hence the Triple Burner is a Yang organ and the Pericardium a Yin organ.’*³⁰

This relationship is summarized in Box 18.10.

BOX 18.10 RELATIONSHIP OF THE TRIPLE BURNER WITH THE PERICARDIUM

- Although the Pericardium and Triple Burner channels are exteriorly–interiorly related within the Five-Element scheme, there is not a close relationship between these two organs
- As channels, the Pericardium and Triple Burner channels have a close and symmetrical relationship: the Triple Burner belongs to the Lesser Yang channels, which are the ‘hinge’ between the Greater Yang and the Bright Yang channels; the Pericardium pertains to the Terminal Yin channels, which are the ‘hinge’ between the Greater Yin and Lesser Yin channels
- The Triple Burner and Pericardium channels affect the mental–emotional state because the Minister Fire rises towards these two channels; therefore points on these channels can be used to clear Heat and calm the Mind
- The Pericardium is the opening point of the Yin Linking Vessel (*Yin Wei Mai*) and the Triple Burner of the Yang Linking Vessel (*Yang Wei Mai*), another reason why these two channels connect the three Yin and three Yang respectively
- The Triple Burner is interiorly–exteriorly related to the Gate of Life (*Ming Men*), which is also called the ‘Ministerial Fire’, the Pericardium is closely connected to the Heart and belongs to the Fire element

LEARNING OUTCOMES

In this chapter you will have learned:

1. The role of the Triple Burner in 'mobilizing' Original Qi, enabling it to differentiate in order to perform its various functions in the different organs
2. The influence of the Triple Burner on the Qi Mechanism, controlling the movement of all types of Qi and ensuring Qi passes freely through all cavities and organs
3. The similarities and differences between the Triple Burner's, Liver's and Lungs' influence on the movement of Qi
4. The importance of the Triple Burner's function of controlling the transformation, transportation and excretion of fluids
5. The four different views of the Triple Burner: As a Yang organ with form; as a mobilizer of the Original Qi without form; as a threefold division of the body; as a system of Cavities
6. The mental-emotional influence of the Triple Burner, characterised by the qualities of both Fire and Wood
7. Dreams reflecting disharmonies of the Triple burner
8. The relationship between the Triple Burner and the Pericardium, and questions that have historically surrounded this link.

NOTES

1. Nanjing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine 1979 A Revised Explanation of the Classic of Difficulties (*Nan Jing Jiao Shi 难经校释*). People's Health Publishing House, Beijing, first published c. AD 100, p 144.
2. Ibid., p 94.
3. Hua Tuo 1985 Classic of the Central Scripture (*Zhong Zang Jing 中藏经*). Jiangsu Science Publishing House, Nanjing, p 39. Written in Han dynasty.
4. Classic of Difficulties, p 144.
5. 1981 Spiritual Axis (*Ling Shu Jing 灵枢经*). People's Health Publishing House, Beijing, first published c. 100 BC, p 52.
6. Classic of Difficulties, p 94.
7. Ibid., p 80.
8. 1979 The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine – Simple Questions (*Huang Ti Nei Jing Su Wen 黄帝内经素问*). People's Health Publishing House, Beijing, first published c. 100 BC, p 59.
9. Spiritual Axis, p 51.
10. Classic of Difficulties, p 144.
11. Steve Clavey has proposed this interpretation of the passage of chapter 66 of the 'Classic of Difficulties'. The crucial sentence is: 'San Jiao zhe, Yuan Qi zhi bie shi' 三焦者, 原气之别使. The words 'bie shi' are translated as 'emissary' or 'envoy' (for example, by Unschuld). Clavey proposes that 'bie shi' has the meaning of 'to separate', that is, the Triple Burner has the function of making the Original Qi separate and differentiate to assume different roles in different parts of the body. (See Clavey S 2003 Fluid Physiology and Pathology in Traditional Chinese Medicine, Edinburgh, p 35.)
12. Classic of Difficulties, p 79.
13. Spiritual Axis p 52 and Classic of Difficulties, p 79.
14. Medicine Treasure cited in Wang Xin Hua 1983 Selected Historical Theories of Chinese Medicine (*Zhong Yi Li Dai Yi Lun Xuan 中医历代医论选*). Jiangsu Scientific Publishing House, Nanjing, p 2.
15. Spiritual Axis, p 71.
16. Selected Historical Theories of Chinese Medicine, p 2.
17. Spiritual Axis, p 52.
18. Selected Historical Theories of Chinese Medicine, p 2.
19. Spiritual Axis, p 52.
20. Cited in Wang Xue Tai 1988 Great Treatise of Chinese Acupuncture (*Zhong Guo Zhen Jiu Da Quan 中国针灸大全*). Henan Science Publishing House, Henan, p 46.
21. Cited in Selected Historical Theories in Chinese Medicine, p 161.
22. Ibid., p 159.
23. Simple Questions, p 102.
24. Ibid., p 102.
25. Spiritual Axis, p 3.
26. Classic of Difficulties, p 94.
27. Ibid., p 94. To add to the confusion, chapter 39 even says that there are five Yang organs (excluding the Triple Burner) and six Yin organs (not, as one would expect, counting the Pericardium, but counting the Kidneys as two organs).
28. Ibid., p 95.
29. Cited in Selected Historical Theories of Chinese Medicine, p 2.
30. Ibid., p 161.