There is a general tendency among scholars of medical history, when recovering and working with primary sources, to focus on the written word at the expense of material artefacts and visual evidence. This has, to a greater or lesser degree, hindered progress across the entire field.

Having spent much of the past 20 years recovering manuscripts, and reconstructing the illustrated scrolls that reveal the development of moxibustion, I have come to feel, more and more strongly, that one picture really is worth the proverbial thousand words. When examining historical data, I find myself wary if significant (or indeed essential) visual evidence is not to hand. This article sets out to show, with the help of some representative examples, the kind of pitfalls that await medical historians when they neglect visual information.

Case 1: The ‘Tiansheng Bronze Figure’ and Tiansheng Acupuncture Canon

There are a few acupuncture locations recorded in received literature from the early Han period such as Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 史記 (Records of the Historian),\(^1\) which details a treatment at the wai san yang wu hui 外三陽五會 (Outer Three Yang and Five Meetings, thought to be equivalent to the well known acupoint baihui 百會, One Hundred Meetings) on the crown of the head. Body channels are archaeologically attested in text and artefact from the 2nd century BCE, while the earliest extant set of points for needling can be found in a manuscript from c. 1st century CE recovered at the Wuwei 武威 tomb site in modern Gansu, which marks a series of locations sited along the spine, However, those points are not shown on channels. Thus the early evidence suggests a separate development of acupoints and channels. There are also many roughly contemporary acu-moxa points scattered through the Huangdi neijing 黃帝內經 recensions, a large corpus of medical writings that were compiled in various recensions over the course of the Han dynasty. However, there was not any systematic coordination of acupoints and channels until Huangfu Mi’s 皇甫謐 (215–82) Zhenjiu jiayi jing 針灸甲乙經 (282).

Thereafter, the first standardised national system of acu-moxa locations was established in 1026 (4th year of the Tiansheng reign period of the Northern Song dynasty), with the publication of Tongren shuxue zhenjiu tujing 銅人腧穴針灸圖經 (Illustrated Bronze Man Canon of Acupuncture and Moxibustion), also known as Tiansheng Zhenjing 天聖針經 (Tiansheng Acupuncture Canon). This classic text records 354 acu-moxa points, with methods for finding the points, therapeutic indications, and needling and moxibustion procedures. To reach a wider audience, it was not only published in book form, but also engraved on stone steles. In 1443 (8th year of the Zhengtong reign period of the Ming dynasty), new engravings were made under the auspices of the Imperial Academy of Medicine to replace the time-worn Song steles. Though the Ming stone engravings of the Illustrated Bronze Man Canon no longer survive, three complete rubbings exist in China and Japan.

These national standards were not just set down in writing; they were also given visible and tangible form in the ‘Tiansheng Bronze Man’ (Tiansheng tongren 天聖銅人), a standing human figure cast in bronze with the channels and points shown on the surface. Subsequently, no one seems ever to have questioned whether the prevailing interpretation of this canonical text was the correct one, let alone to have considered that it might have been interpreted differently in different epochs, or even by different individuals living in the same epoch. But then came the discovery of a replica of the Bronze Man, created during the Zhengtong era of the Ming (1436–49). All of a sudden, we became aware of a tremendous gulf between our present understanding of the words of the Bronze Man Canon and the intentions of the authors, and we gained a sense of the sheer variety of possible interpretations, both diachronic and synchronic. This was particularly true of the passages on the acu-moxa locations of the head, the shoulders, the abdomen and the back of the thighs. The three locations called hanyan 頷厭, xuanlu 懸顱, and xuanli 懸厘 are a case in point (see Table 1).\(^2\)

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1. Shiji 125, edn. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1972, p. 2,792.
2. Wang Wei 王惟 (Song period), Tongren shuxue zhenjiu tujing 銅人腧穴針灸圖經 (Illustrated Bronze Man Canon of Acupuncture and Moxibustion) (3juan edn). Rubbing of the stone engraving of the Ming Zhengtong era.
Figure 9.1  Replica of the Song Bronze Man, Ming Zhengtong era

Figure 9.2  *Tongren shuxue zhenjiu tujing*, Song (960–1279) lithograph

Figure 9.3  *Tongren shuxue zhenjiu tujing*, Ming (1368–1644) woodblock print

Figure 9.4  Head of the Ming Zhengtong Bronze Man, viewed from the side showing the locations of *hanyan*, *xuanlu*, and *xuanli* on the back of the head
In 1992, I was editing the Song text *Zhenjiu zisheng jing* (Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion for Nourishing Life), written by Wang Zhizhong 王执中 in 1220, which reproduces passages from the *Bronze Man Canon*. I noticed that, in describing the locations of *hanyan*, *xuanlu*, and *xuanli*, the term *nieru* (temples) of the original had been consistently replaced by *naokong* (‘Brain Hollow’ – an area at the back of the head). This was evidently not a scribal error, but a deliberate emendation (it is also reflected in the relevant charts). Yet elsewhere, Wang Zhizhong punctiliously follows the text of the *Bronze Man Canon*.

Where he does take issue with the location of an acu-moxa point, he indicates this in a footnote or comment, rather than correcting the original text. For example, describing *quepen* (Empty Bowl), Wang provides the alternative name, *tiancai* (Heaven’s Cover) and gives its location according to the *Bronze Man Canon* as *under* the shoulder, in the hollow of the Collar Bone. Wang notes that a number of texts such as the *Suwen* 素問 and the *Mingtang* 明堂 located a point with the same name *above* the shoulder in the hollow of the collarbone. Using the strength of combined evidence he suggests that the *Bronze Man Canon* was wrong.\(^3\) He also points out an error with the *Bronze Man Canon* location of an acu-moxa point below the elbow. The *shou yangming* 手陽明 (Hand Yangming) point of the channel, it states, lies 3 *cun* below *qu chi* (Pond at the Crook), whereas other texts such as *Mingtang* say it is 2 *cun* below.\(^4\)

So why in the earlier instance did Wang Zhizhong, careful textual scholar that he was, modify his original with such apparent insouciance? With the discovery of the Zhengtong replica of the Bronze Man, the puzzle was solved. Sure enough, on the Zhengtong Bronze Man, the three points *hanyan*, *xuanlu* and *xuanli* are shown on the back of the head. In all probability, when Wang Zhizhong was writing *Zhisheng jing*, he had access not only to the text of the *Bronze Man Canon*, but also to the original Tiansheng Bronze Man itself; otherwise, it is implausible that he would have altered the text in this fashion.

An extreme example of divergent interpretations of the same description of an acu-moxa location is provided by the *weiyang* 委陽 (Lateral to the Crook) point on the *zu taiyang* 足太陽 channel, on the lower leg.

**Huangdi mingtang jing** 黃帝明堂經 states:

Weiyang is anterior to *zu taiyang* (Greater Yang channel of the leg) and posterior to *shaoyang* 少陽 (Lesser Yang channel). It emerges between the two tendons at the distal edge of the popliteal fossa, 6 *cun* below the *fucheng* 扶承 (Hold and Support) point. This is a divergent collateral (*bieluo* 別絡) of *zu taiyang*.\(^4\)

Subsequent texts give much the same account of the location of *weiyang*. However, acupuncture charts and models display no such unanimity: in fact no two seem to show it in exactly the same position.

\(^3\) Wang Zhizhong, *Zhenjiu zisheng jing* 針灸資生經, juan 1; Huang Longxiang 1997, p. 252.

\(^4\) Huang Longxiang 1987, p. 235.
Were it not for the acu-moxa charts and Bronze Man figures, one wonders how much of the transmitted literature would be understood correctly. There is an old adage: 

*Yu zhi qu xue, wu tu mo ke* 欲指取穴, 無圖莫可 (roughly: If you want to find acu-moxa points, you cannot do without pictures).

The saying was used in reference to the selection of points for needling but it is equally applicable to the interpretation of texts on the location of points and channels. It explains why charts and models have been a requirement for acupuncture standards from the earliest times to the present day.

There is an important insight to be gained from this: Given the limitations of language and the variability of the human body, any description of an acu-moxa location is bound to involve some ambiguity, and is liable to be understood differently by different people. This is why visual artefacts including Bronze Man figures and acu-moxa charts play a vital and irreplaceable role in the understanding of early texts on acupuncture and moxibustion.

**Case 2: Acu-Moxa Charts and Acu-Moxa Prescriptions**

There are two main types of acu-moxa chart:

1. charts showing a full set of acupoints as recorded in the *Mingtang jing* 明堂經 (Illuminated Hall Canon – a common name for acupuncture texts), known anciently as *Mingtang tu* 明堂圖 (Illuminated Hall charts). The epithet 'Mingtang' refers to the 'Bright Hall', a ritual structure, reputedly of 12 rooms, through which the emperor would process to coordinate his ceremonies with the passage of the months. The acupuncture body, its channel structure and physiological rhythms are a microcosm of these divisions of time and space. Up until the Song dynasty, these charts normally came in groups of three, comprising a front view, a side view, and a back (or ‘prone’) view.

2. charts intended to assist in finding the therapeutic locations for specific acupuncture or moxibustion prescriptions. These charts show only the points required for the prescription, with labels identifying their position on the body (see Figs 6 and 7).

Among the texts recovered from Dunhuang is an anonymous illustrated manuscript of moxibustion remedies (now held in the British Library under the two catalogue numbers S.6168 and S.6262, and known by the modern descriptive title *Jiufa tu* 短法圖 – The Moxibustion Charts) (See Lo and Tlalim, Chapter 19, Figs 19.4 a and b; Wang Shumin, Chapter 1, Fig. 1.9, in this volume). In it there are two references to a location called *tianchuang* 天窗 (Celestial Window). In both cases, it is explicitly stated that this is a single point (*yi xue* 一穴). Over the last few decades, the manuscript has been examined time and time again by medical historians and specialists in Dunhuang studies, from China and elsewhere in the world, and yet they all seem to have turned a blind eye to this signally obvious fact, taking it for granted that *tianchuang* must refer to the familiar *tianchuang* location – a pair of points on either side of the neck. But one has only to look at the illustrative charts to see that the point in question is actually located on the midline of the forehead. Numerous further instances are readily to be found in the literature of the period. In *Qianjin yaofang* 千金要方 (Essential Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold Pieces) and *Qianjin yifang* 千金翼方 (Supplementary Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold Pieces), for example, the term *tianchuang* turns out almost invariably to refer to a location at the front of the head otherwise known as *xinhui* 凜會, or Fontanelle Meeting point. There is ample evidence here to confirm that the *xinhui* point was habitually known as *tianchuang* in the Sui (581–617) and Tang (618–907) periods, thereby enabling us to correct a distortion of history. And yet, before looking at the Dunhuang moxibustion charts, I
had examined pre-Song moxibustion prescriptions innumerable times without ever noticing this fact, which had been staring me in the face all along.

Uniquely and very strikingly, in the pre-Han literature on acupuncture and moxibustion, the 12 Specific Points (teding wei 特定穴) on the wrists and ankles all bear the same name as the corresponding channel. This can be seen in a prescription for hernia in Wushi’er bingfang 五十二病方 (52 remedies), a prescription text found in the Mawangdui 马王堆 Han tomb (sealed in 168 BCE).

The prescription reads: ‘Apply moxibustion to Taiyin 太陰; Taiyang 太陽 XX [two illegible characters]; excellent’. Research has established that ‘Taiyin’ and ‘Taiyang’ here refer to moxibustion locations, and not to channels. Because this peculiarity was not understood, terms such as zu yangming 足陽明 and shou yangming 手陽明 (Yang Brightness of the foot or hand) were long erroneously assumed to denote the channels with those names, rather than the acu-moxa points that were originally intended. The location charts in this rare manuscript constitute a vital piece of evidence, which allows a centuries-old enigma to be resolved.

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Case 3: The Twelve Waxing and Waning Trigrams of the Months (Xiao-Xi Gua 消息卦)

Arguably no single text on acupuncture and moxibustion has been misunderstood so thoroughly, or for so long, or by so many people, as the ‘Maijie’ 脉解 (Explanation of the mai 脉 or channels) chapter of Suwen 素問 (Plain Questions – one of the two parts of Huangdi neijing 黃帝內經 (The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor), the other being Lingshu 靈樞 (The Numinous Pivot). Huangdi neijing was written down in the Han period). This chapter discusses the signs and symptoms of diseases of six mai 脉 or channels – three Yang and three Yin. For centuries, it was taken for granted that this was an account of pathologies of the six Foot channels. With the sole exception of Yang Shangshan 楊上善 (585–670, early Tang), the physicians and scholars who studied the chapter explained the signs and symptoms it described in terms of the circulation in those channels. The Tang editor Wang Bing 王冰 (c. 710–805) had an inkling that Maijie possessed a different frame of reference from the ‘Jingmai’ 經脈 (Channels) chapter of Lingshu, which gives an account of signs and symptoms in relation to the channels. In a note appended to Maijie he writes:

This chapter is unconnected with the surrounding text, and gives a differing explanation of the aetiology of diseases of the channels. It bears little relation to the account in the Numinous Pivot.6

Wang Bing’s view was rejected by Song writers such as Lin Yi 林億 (fl. 11th century), and failed to spark further interest. In truth, the account of symptoms and signs in Maijie is based on the concept of the Twelve Waxing and Waning Trigrams of the months (xiao-xi gua 消息卦), which was current during the Han (Fig. 9); without knowing this, it is unintelligible. The significance of the chapter becomes self-evident when it is read in conjunction with the corresponding set of diagrams, which graphically represent the

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5 For a translation of this recipe, see Harper, 1998, p. 267.

6 Huangdi neijing, suwen 13 (Maijie), Wang Bing (c. 710–805) ed.
ascent of Yang Qi and decline of Yin Qi during the first half of the year and the opposite process during the second half.

When one considers the above examples, one cannot help but wonder how much of the enormous mass of available historical data has actually been interpreted accurately— and assuming that it has been accurately interpreted, how often it has been pieced together correctly to build up a historically accurate picture. In my view, any attempt by modern people to understand ancient texts is bound to be inadequate or inappropriate in places, simply because of the limits of written expression. In this regard, visual images can provide vital clues to help us make correct interpretive decisions. But even so, to fully comprehend the technical aspects of ancient texts, one’s technical experience and expertise would need to be equal to or greater than the original authors’.

Much of the time, historians are like the blind men in the fable of the elephant. Each of the men touches the elephant in a different place and tries to describe the whole beast, but when they compare notes they cannot agree as to its overall shape and nature. Similarly, we grope at partial truths, while the full story constantly eludes us, and it is a matter of luck if we can make head or tail of what we have in front of us. Where will we find the clues that will lead us out of the shadows into the light?

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