

Ancient Chinese text revealed to be an anatomical atlas of the human body

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A part of a Taoist manuscript, ink on silk, 2nd century BCE, Han Dynasty, unearthed from Mawangdui tomb 3rd, Chansha, Hunan Province, China. Hunan Province Museum. Credit: WikiImages

The standard history of anatomy traces its roots back to classical Greece, but a new reading of a recently discovered Chinese text argues that the Chinese were also among the earliest anatomists.

Writing in *The Anatomical Record*, Vivien Shaw and Isabelle Winder of Bangor University, UK and Rui Diogo of Howard University, U.S., interpret the Mawangdui medical manuscripts found in a Chinese tomb in the early 1970s, as the earliest surviving anatomical description of the human body.

Discovered near Changsha, in South Central China, the manuscripts were placed in a tomb around 2,200 years ago in 168BCE. This new interpretation of the texts would make them the oldest surviving anatomical atlas in the world.

Vivien Shaw, who lectures in anatomy at Bangor University's School of Medical Sciences has studied the anatomy found in ancient Chinese medical texts for over seven years.

She explains: "We have to approach these texts from a different perspective than our current Western medical view of the body's separate systems of arteries, veins and nerves. The authors did not have this understanding, instead, they looked at the body from the viewpoint of traditional Chinese Medicine, which is based on the philosophical concept of complementary opposites of yin and yang, familiar to those in

the west who follow eastern spiritualism."

Co-author Izzy Winder of the School of Natural Sciences said: "What we have done is to reinterpret the texts, which describe eleven 'pathways' through the body. Some of these clearly map onto later acupuncture 'meridians.' We have been able to show significant parallels between the descriptions in the text and anatomical structures, and thus rediscover the ancient interest in the scientific study of the human form. Previous scholars have not seen the works as describing anatomy, because contemporary Confucian [cultural practices](#) venerated ancestors and so shunned dissection. However, we think that dissection was involved and that the authors would have had access to the bodies of criminals, as is recounted in later texts."

Vivien Shaw added: "Our findings re-write a key part of Chinese history. The contemporary Han era was a time of great learning and innovation across arts and sciences, so this type of classical anatomical science fits with the prevailing culture of the time. We believe that our interpretation of the [text](#) challenges the widespread belief that there is no scientific foundation for the 'anatomy of acupuncture,' by showing that the earliest physicians writing about meridians were in fact describing the physical body."

Modern acupuncture research is based on an assumption that it is the function of acupuncture meridians and points which are important. "Our interpretation shows that the original anatomists were making a map of the structure of the [body](#), not of its function."

More information: Vivien Shaw et al. Hiding in Plain Sight-ancient Chinese anatomy, *The Anatomical Record* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/ar.24503](#)

Provided by Bangor University

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