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# From Meridians to Systems Medicine: Reflections Sixty Years Later — Reflections on Professor Jin Guanyuan's Keynote Address, *"The Past, Present, and Future of Acupuncture Medicine: Perspectives and Reflections from Systems Medicine"*

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As the First International Symposium on Acu-Reflex Point Acupuncture and the Academic Commemoration of Professor Jin Guanyuan's Sixty Years in Medicine draws to a close, we find ourselves reflecting on a day that has been far more than a well-organized and intellectually stimulating academic gathering. It has also been a remarkable occasion through which we have witnessed six decades of scholarly inheritance, clinical exploration, and intellectual exchange in the field of acupuncture.

Throughout the conference, seven distinguished experts from diverse areas of acupuncture research delivered inspiring and thought-provoking addresses. At the same time, leaders from twenty-five institutions and individuals—including colleges of traditional Chinese medicine, research organizations, and professional acupuncture associations—sent congratulatory messages and best wishes. Together, they expressed their deep respect for Professor Jin Guanyuan's six decades of academic contributions and clinical achievements, while also demonstrating the broad influence that Acu-Reflex Point Acupuncture has achieved within both national and international academic communities.

The fifteen presentations delivered by Professor Jin Guanyuan's disciples offered a comprehensive overview of the development, transmission, and innovation of Acu-Reflex Point Acupuncture over the past several decades. These presentations represented not merely a display of academic achievements, but also the continuation and evolution of a distinctive body of knowledge and scholarly spirit across generations.

The most significant academic highlight of this conference, however, was Professor Jin Guanyuan's keynote address, *"The Past, Present, and Future of Acupuncture Medicine: Perspectives and Reflections from Systems Medicine."* More than a retrospective review of his sixty-year academic journey, the lecture constituted a profound reflection on the future direction of acupuncture medicine. Moving from traditional meridian theory to contemporary systems medicine, and from clinical observation to the frontiers of life sciences, Professor Jin offered a new perspective for understanding the essential nature of acupuncture while elevating the conference beyond the realm of academic exchange alone to one of broader intellectual and philosophical significance.

It is important to note that the presentations given by Professor Jin's fifteen disciples were not merely repetitions of their mentor's ideas. Rather, they demonstrated how the theory of Acu-Reflex Point Acupuncture has been applied and expanded across a wide range of clinical conditions. From headaches, neck, shoulder, low back, and leg pain, to knee disorders, post-stroke functional impairments, neuropathic pain, autonomic nervous system regulation, and the management of chronic diseases, both the theoretical framework and clinical value of Acu-Reflex Point Acupuncture were presented from multiple perspectives. In a meaningful sense, these presentations collectively traced the trajectory of Acu-Reflex Point Acupuncture—from its original theoretical conception to its ongoing clinical validation—and provided a practical foundation for Professor Jin's subsequent reflections on the future of acupuncture from the perspective of systems medicine.

If today's conference can be described as an academic gathering of distinction, what it has revealed is far more than the developmental history of a particular school of acupuncture. It has also embodied the transmission of a spirit—a spirit of persistent inquiry through which generations of acupuncture practitioners have sought to understand the fundamental truths of medicine. It is within this broader context that Professor Jin Guanyuan's reflections on *"The Past, Present, and Future of Acupuncture Medicine"* deserve our careful consideration and deeper contemplation.

Throughout the development of modern acupuncture, scholars have continually sought to answer a fundamental question: What, in essence, is acupuncture? For more than a century, efforts to explain this ancient

medical tradition have never ceased. Interpretations have ranged from attempts to identify the physical reality of meridians, to neurological, humoral, and fascial theories, and more recently to explanations based on functional brain imaging, artificial intelligence, and neuromodulation technologies. Yet despite these evolving scientific frameworks, the quest to understand and reinterpret acupuncture has remained an ongoing endeavor.

Yet the question has not become any simpler. On the occasion of his sixtieth anniversary in medicine, Professor Jin Guanyuan, in his keynote address at the First International Symposium on Acu-Reflex Point Acupuncture (ARPA 2026), "The Past, Present, and Future of Acupuncture Medicine: Perspectives and Reflections from Systems Medicine," did not attempt to provide yet another definitive answer to this enduring question. Instead, drawing upon six decades of clinical practice and scientific investigation as an acupuncture physiologist, he reexamined the historical trajectory of acupuncture medicine from a broader and more reflective perspective.

What makes this lecture particularly thought-provoking is not the introduction of new techniques or technologies, but rather its effort to revisit a more fundamental question: What is it that is truly worth preserving in acupuncture? Looking back over more than two millennia of acupuncture history, practitioners were once deeply committed to the concept of meridians; later, attention shifted toward acupoints; and in more recent times, considerable effort has been devoted to explaining acupuncture through various frameworks of modern science. Yet, as Professor Jin emphasized, meridians, acupoints, and even specific therapeutic techniques may all evolve with the passage of time. What has endured across centuries may not be any particular anatomical structure or technical method, but rather a set of underlying principles—an appreciation of interconnectedness, dynamic regulation, and the restoration of balance within living systems.

Taken a step further, this discussion extends far beyond acupuncture itself. In many ways, the history of humanity's understanding of life is a history of moving beyond reductionism and toward an increasingly holistic view of biological reality. From organs to tissues, from cells to genes, and from genes to networks and systems, the evolution of modern life sciences has repeatedly demonstrated that life is not merely the sum of its individual parts. Rather, it is an integrated whole characterized by relationships, feedback mechanisms, and emergent properties.

The enduring relevance of acupuncture over several millennia may therefore lie not simply in its preservation of an ancient therapeutic technique, but in the fact that it touched, at a remarkably early stage, upon this fundamental intuition of biological wholeness. Long before the language of systems science existed, acupuncture sought to understand health and disease through patterns of interconnectedness and dynamic balance within the living organism.

It is within this context that Professor Jin Guanyuan places the theory of Acu-Reflex Point Acupuncture (ARPA), which he has advocated for many years, within the broader framework of systems medicine. He proposes a conceptual pathway that runs throughout his lecture: Systemic imbalance → formation of reflex points → stimulation of reflex points → sensory, motor, and autonomic regulation → system reconstruction → restoration of dynamic equilibrium.

This framework not only inherits the classical principles of the *Huangdi Neijing* (*The Yellow Classic of Medicine*)—such as the ideas that "internal disorders manifest externally" and that "the ultimate goal of treatment is the restoration of balance"—but also incorporates insights from modern cybernetics, complexity science, and contemporary neuroscience. In doing so, it offers a new interpretive framework through which traditional acupuncture can be understood from the perspective of system regulation and dynamic adaptation.

From the perspective of the history of acupuncture, the significance of Acu-Reflex Point Acupuncture may lie not merely in the introduction of a new therapeutic technique, but in its attempt to establish a conceptual bridge between traditional acupuncture and modern physiology. Traditional meridian theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of the body as a whole, whereas modern medicine focuses on physiological changes that are observable, measurable, and verifiable. The theory of reflex points seeks to connect these two perspectives by exploring the relationship between localized changes on the body surface and the functional state of the organism as an integrated system. Regardless of how this theory may evolve in the future, the research pathway it embodies—discovering patterns through clinical observation and then using those patterns to guide treatment—carries important methodological significance in its own right.

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Professor Jin's lecture did not remain confined to the traditional proposition that "acupuncture is effective." Instead, it directed considerable attention to the challenges and unresolved questions confronting modern acupuncture. The lecture offered candid and thoughtful reflections on a number of long-standing controversies, including the search for a physical basis of meridians, the overextension of holographic theories, the overinterpretation of fascial models, the effects of sham acupuncture, the limitations of randomized controlled trials, questions of stimulation dosage, and the very boundaries of acupuncture itself.

Such reflection may, in fact, be more valuable than any single theory. A truly mature discipline is not defined solely by its ability to demonstrate its validity; more importantly, it is characterized by the willingness to acknowledge its limitations and to continually refine its understanding in light of new evidence and deeper inquiry. In this sense, the intellectual honesty and self-critical spirit evident throughout the lecture may be among its most enduring contributions.

From the perspective of the philosophy of science, this capacity for self-correction is precisely one of science's most essential virtues. Throughout the history of medicine, countless theories once regarded as unquestionable truths have eventually been revised, refined, or even abandoned. What has endured is not any particular conclusion, but rather a methodology grounded in continual questioning, rigorous verification, and the ongoing revision of knowledge. For this reason, the future development of acupuncture may depend less on proving that the ancients were always correct than on continually seeking a deeper understanding of what they actually observed and understood.

Professor Jin's perspective neither remains confined to a simple repetition of traditional theories nor succumbs to uncritical optimism fueled by modern technological advances. Instead, it consistently reflects an attitude of openness, intellectual caution, and a commitment to continuous inquiry. Indeed, this spirit has characterized Professor Jin's academic journey for the past sixty years. From his early years as a barefoot doctor in the late 1960s, to his subsequent roles as a hospital acupuncturist and a university researcher in physiology; from the practice of traditional clinical acupuncture to the development of reflex point theory within the framework of systems medicine; from the *Huangdi Neijing* (*The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*) to the age of artificial intelligence—the times have changed, and theories have evolved. Yet what has remained constant is a profound respect for clinical phenomena and an unwavering pursuit of the fundamental nature of medicine.

Perhaps the greatest medical ideas are never the most complicated. At its core, the *Huangdi Neijing* (*The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*) is fundamentally concerned with the principles of yin-yang balance and the therapeutic goal of restoring equilibrium. Modern physiology, in turn, is centered upon the concepts of homeostasis and physiological regulation. Systems medicine emphasizes understanding and guiding the dynamic equilibrium of living systems through the lens of interconnected networks and their interactions. The terminology differs, and the languages of explanation are separated by centuries, yet the underlying intellectual vision resonates remarkably across time.

If the greatest achievement of twentieth-century medicine was the discovery of the constituent parts of life, then one of the central challenges confronting twenty-first-century medicine is to understand how those parts come together to form an integrated whole. In this sense, the rise of systems medicine represents a significant shift in medical epistemology—from analysis to synthesis, from structure to relationships, and from linear causality to the feedback loops and emergent properties of complex systems. Within this broader intellectual transformation, acupuncture, whatever form it may take in the future, may once again find its place and significance in the evolving understanding of life and health.

Looking back on the history of medical development, humanity's understanding of life has undergone a long intellectual journey—from viewing life as an integrated whole, to dissecting it into its constituent parts, and ultimately returning to a holistic perspective informed by a deeper understanding of those parts. Ancient medicine approached life through the observation of the organism as a whole. Modern medicine, through analytical methods, uncovered the structural and functional components of living systems. Systems medicine, in turn, seeks to understand how these components interact to form a coherent and dynamic whole.

In a broader sense, this trajectory represents not only the evolution of medical theory but also a cycle and elevation in humanity's way of understanding the world. Whether acupuncture continues to evolve and thrive in the future may depend less on preserving every aspect of its ancient form than on its ability to offer new insights into the nature of complex living systems and the principles that govern them.

It is therefore particularly meaningful that Professor Jin concluded his lecture with the observation: *"What may ultimately endure in the future is perhaps neither the needle nor the acupoint, but the underlying ideas of dynamic regulation and the restoration of balance."*

What is expressed in this statement extends far beyond a prediction about the future of acupuncture. Rather, it reads as the reflection of a physician and scholar who, after sixty years of clinical practice, research, and contemplation, has arrived at a renewed understanding of the very nature of medicine itself.

Perhaps what this lecture ultimately leaves to future generations is not merely a set of answers about acupuncture. More importantly, it offers a spirit of continual reflection, intellectual openness, and unceasing exploration. For the progress of science has never been about discovering a final and immutable answer; rather, it is about moving ever closer to the truth through the cumulative efforts of successive generations. Faced with something as profoundly complex as life itself, humanity may never possess the ultimate answer. Yet we can continue to expand the boundaries of our understanding and deepen our appreciation of the mysteries of living systems.

I quote Cao Cao's poet to end my talk: An old warhorse at the manger still longs to gallop a thousand miles; a hero in his twilight years never abandons his lofty aspirations.

For a scholar who has devoted sixty years to the practice and study of medicine, this lecture represents both a summation of the past and an expectation for the future. Perhaps this is the deepest significance of Professor Jin Guanyuan's keynote address, *"The Past, Present, and Future of Acupuncture Medicine."*

And for all of us gathered here today, the conclusion of this conference may not be an ending at all. Rather, it may mark the beginning of another journey of inquiry, discovery, and exploration.



SPELL: OK