

Clinical Application and Research Progress of Acupuncture and Moxibustion for Beauty and Anti-aging

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Abstract: *Objective:* To summarize the theoretical and practical research progress of acupuncture cosmetology in anti-aging. *Methods:* By searching CNKI for literature on acupuncture cosmetology and anti-aging from the past decade, the diagnostic and treatment research overview of acupuncture cosmetology was analyzed and compiled. *Results:* Traditional Chinese acupuncture therapy demonstrates diverse methods in anti-aging cosmetology, particularly in treating melasma and acne, with advantages over Western medication alone. *Conclusion:* Acupuncture cosmetology offers varied forms, significant effects, simplicity, minimal side effects, and high safety in addressing melasma, acne, and anti-aging.

Keywords: Acupuncture; Cosmetology; Anti-aging; Traditional Chinese Medicine theory

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1. Introduction

Aesthetic acupuncture is a therapeutic modality rooted in the holistic concept of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). It adopts acupuncture and moxibustion as intervention approaches, and achieves the goals of skin maintenance, facial beautification, and anti-aging by stimulating local skin and acupoints ^[1].

With the advancement of the social economy and the improvement of life quality, anti-aging, aesthetic, and health-preserving therapies have become a key concern among modern populations. As the essence of classical TCM, the application of acupuncture in cosmetic anti-aging can be traced back to the era of Huangdi Neijing (The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic). Through continuous inheritance and innovative development by physicians of subsequent generations, a unique theoretical framework and therapeutic system have been established.

Compared with modern cosmetic technologies, aesthetic acupuncture for anti-aging possesses prominent

strengths including holistic conditioning, a high safety profile, the absence of adverse reactions, and long-lasting therapeutic effects, which are highly consistent with the modern aesthetic pursuit of “natural, healthy and eco-friendly” beauty concepts.

In recent years, integrated research combining traditional Chinese and Western medicine has been continuously deepened. The mechanisms underlying aesthetic acupuncture anti-aging have been progressively verified via scientific experiments, and its scope of clinical application keeps expanding ^[2]. This paper systematically sorts out the theoretical foundations, clinical practices, and advances in modern research of anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture, so as to provide theoretical support for relevant research and clinical application.

2. TCM theoretical basis of anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture

2.1. Zang-Fu organs as the root, qi and blood as the function

The core theory of anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture originates from the holistic TCM concept that “Zang-fu organs serve as the fundamental root, while Qi and blood exert functional effects”. Facial aging is directly correlated with the waxing and waning of visceral functions. Huangdi Neijing · Lingshu · Maiduo (Spiritual Pivot · Vessel Measure) records: “The twelve regular meridians and three hundred and sixty-five collaterals transport Qi and blood upward to the face and all orifices”, which clarifies that facial luster or withering hinges entirely on nourishment supplied by visceral Qi and blood.

The heart governs blood vessels. Suwen · Liujie Zangxiang Lun (Plain Questions · Treatise on the Six Sections and Manifestations of the Viscera) states: “The heart is the root of vitality, and its splendor manifests on the face.” Sufficient heart blood endows the face with a ruddy complexion and radiance; deficient heart blood deprives the face of nourishment, leading to dull and haggard skin. The lung governs the skin and body hair. Lingshu · JueQi (Spiritual Pivot · Discourse on the Essential Substances) notes: “The upper jiao disperses and diffuses the refined nutrients from grains, irrigating the skin, filling the body, and moisturizing the hair, just as mist and dew moisten the earth.” When the lung’s diffusing and descending functions work normally, body fluids are distributed to the skin, yielding delicate and smooth complexions.

The spleen is the acquired foundation of human life. Suwen · Wei Lun (Plain Questions · Treatise on Atrophy) records that “the spleen governs all muscles of the body”. Vigorous spleen transportation generates abundant Qi and blood, plumping and tightening the skin; impaired spleen transportation causes Qi-blood insufficiency, resulting in sallow complexion and sagging skin. The kidney is the innate foundation. Suwen · Shanggu Tianzhen Lun (Plain Questions · Treatise on the Natural Truths of Ancients) elaborates that the kidney stores essence, and “essence generates blood, while blood nourishes essence”. Abundant kidney essence fuels primordial Qi, and facial skin nourished by essence and blood effectively delays senescence.

By stimulating specific acupoints, acupuncture regulates visceral Qi movement and tonifies Qi, blood, Yin and Yang, harmonizing the functions of the heart, lung, spleen, kidney and other Zang-fu organs. It fundamentally improves skin conditions and achieves anti-aging and facial rejuvenation effects.

2.2. Unblocked meridians harmonize Qi and blood

Meridians and collaterals serve as the passages for the circulation of Qi and blood within the human body. They connect Zang-fu viscera internally and link limbs and joints externally, organically integrating all bodily parts into a unified whole. Nutrient supply and metabolism of facial skin entirely rely on the unobstructed

flow of the meridian-collateral system. Once the circulation of meridian Qi and blood becomes obstructed, facial skin will suffer insufficient nourishment, triggering various cutaneous disorders such as pigmented macules, wrinkles, and acne. By stimulating specific acupoints distributed along meridians, acupuncture can effectively eliminate meridian stagnation, harmonize the circulation of Qi and blood, and guarantee adequate nourishment of facial skin by Qi-blood substances.

Huangdi Neijing · Lingshu · Maiduo (The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic · Spiritual Pivot · Vessel Measurements) states: "The twelve regular meridians and three hundred and sixty-five collaterals transport their Qi and blood upward to the face and outward to all orifices", which explicitly confirms that facial radiance or withering is determined by nourishment from visceral Qi and blood. The core meridian theory underlying anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture lies in the principle that "unblocked meridians harmonize Qi and blood". As the transit routes of Qi and blood, meridians directly sustain the moist glow and vitality of facial skin. Another passage from Huangdi Neijing · Lingshu · Benzang (Spiritual Pivot · Original Viscera) records: "Meridians function to circulate Qi and blood, nourish Yin and Yang, moisten tendons and bones, and lubricate joints", clarifying that meridians exert vital effects on nourishing viscera and skin as well as regulating Yin-Yang balance.

The face is the convergence site of all Yang meridians. Lingshu · Xieli Zangfu Bingxing (Spiritual Pivot · Manifestations of Pathogens, Viscera and Diseases) documents that "all Yang meridians converge upon the face". The three Yang meridians of both hands and feet traverse the head and face, continuously transporting Qi and blood nutrients to the facial region to sustain skin elasticity and luster. Meridian congestion and impaired Qi-blood circulation lead to the pathological state described in Suwen · Tiaojing Lun (Plain Questions · Treatise on Regulating Meridians): "Disharmony between Qi and blood gives rise to all kinds of diseases", which easily manifests as dull facial complexion, wrinkle formation and pigmentation.

Acupuncture stimulates acupoints on the face and along meridian courses, such as Cuanzhu (BL2), Jiache (ST6) and Hegu (LI4), to fulfill the therapeutic principle cited from Suwen · Zhizhen Yao Da Lun (Plain Questions · Treatise on the Supreme Truth): "Unblock Qi and blood, smooth their circulation, and restore harmonious balance". It dissipates meridian stasis and facilitates the upward ascent of refined Qi-blood nutrients to nourish the face. Furthermore, meridians communicate with Zang-fu organs; unblocking meridians indirectly regulates visceral functions, achieving synergistic conditioning of the "meridian – Qi-blood – Zang-fu" system. This maintains lasting and stable anti-aging and facial rejuvenation effects by dredging the transport pathways of vital substances.

2.3. Abundant Qi, sufficient body fluids bring radiant skin

Qi, blood, and body fluids constitute the material foundation of human vital activities and directly determine the aging condition of facial skin. Huangdi Neijing · Lingshu · Benshen (The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic · Spiritual Pivot · Original Spirit) records: "When Qi and blood are harmonized, nutrient and defensive Qi circulate unobstructedly, the five Zang-organs are fully formed, spirit resides in the heart, and hun and po are complete; only then a human body takes shape." This indicates that harmonious Qi and blood are the root of physical health and external facial beauty.

Qi exerts propelling and warming effects. Suwen · ShengQi Tongtian Lun (Plain Questions · Treatise on the Communications of Vital Yang) states: "Yang Qi, when refined, nourishes the spirit; when gentle, nourishes the tendons". Sufficient Qi drives the distribution of Qi, blood, and body fluids upward to the face,

rendering the skin warm and ruddy. Depleted Qi fails to propel nutrient circulation, leaving the face deprived of warming nourishment, thus appearing pale and haggard.

Blood is regarded as “the fundamental substance of the skin and interstitial spaces”. Lingshu · JueQi (Spiritual Pivot · Discourse on Essential Substances) notes: “The middle jiao receives food Qi, extracts refined juices, transforms them into red fluid, which is named blood.” Blood nourishes the skin and soft tissues to maintain a delicate, elastic complexion. Blood deficiency leads to a sallow facial complexion and premature wrinkle formation.

Body fluids moisturize and lubricate the skin. As recorded in Suwen · Jingmai Bie lun (Plain Questions · Separate Treatise on Meridians): “Drink enters the stomach, essence Qi diffuses freely, and is transported upward to the spleen; the spleen disperses the refined essence and ascends it to the lung”. Ample body fluids keep the skin moist and plump, while fluid deficiency causes dry, flaking skin.

Acupuncture regulates corresponding acupoints to tonify Qi, nourish blood, generate fluids, and relieve dryness. For instance, Zusanli (ST36) tonifies Qi, Xuehai (SP10) nourishes blood, and Sanyinjiao (SP6) engenders body fluids. This therapy fills and harmonizes Qi, blood, and body fluids at the material level to realize facial anti-aging and rejuvenation, fulfilling the therapeutic effect that “harmonious Qi, blood, and body fluids manifest as a beautiful complexion”.

3. Clinical applications of anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture

Anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture boasts extensive clinical application scenarios and diversified therapeutic modalities. Appropriate acupuncture techniques, acupoint combinations, and adjuvant therapies can be flexibly selected according to individual aesthetic demands and physical disparities.

3.1. Conventional acupuncture techniques

3.1.1. Body acupuncture

As one of the core modalities of anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture, body acupuncture intervenes at acupoints across the whole body to regulate visceral functions and Qi-blood circulation. Commonly adopted acupoints consist of local facial acupoints (Yangbai (GB14), Cuanzhu (BL2), Sibai (ST2), Jiache (ST6), Dicang (ST4), etc.) and distal acupoints (Zusanli (ST36), Sanyinjiao (SP6), Xuehai (SP10), Shenshu (BL23), Pishu (BL20), etc.)^[3]. The uniform reinforcing-reducing manipulation is generally applied during acupuncture, while reinforcing or reducing manipulations are adjusted flexibly based on syndrome differentiation. Specifically, reinforcing manipulation is administered to patients with Qi-blood deficiency, whereas reducing manipulation is adopted for those with Qi stagnation and blood stasis.

3.1.2. Facial acupuncture

This therapy directly targets facial skin and acupoints. By stimulating meridian Qi and blood on the face, it improves facial microcirculation and accelerates skin metabolism^[4]. Its mainstream modalities include facial filiform needle acupuncture and facial intradermal needle embedding. For facial acupuncture, the angle and depth of needle insertion must be strictly controlled to prevent injuries to facial nerves and blood vessels; shallow insertion with gentle and mild manipulation is routinely used. Intradermal needle embedding prolongs acupuncture stimulation and sustains therapeutic efficacy, which is suitable for patients requiring long-term intervention.

3.1.3. Moxibustion therapy

Moxibustion delivers thermal stimulation to acupoints to warm and unblock meridians, dispel cold and eliminate dampness, as well as tonify Qi and nourish blood. It is indicated for pale complexion, skin sagging, cold limbs, and other conditions induced by deficiency-cold constitution. Frequently used acupoints include Guanyuan (CV4), Qihai (CV6), Zusanli (ST36), Pishu (BL20), etc., and mild moxibustion and sparrow-pecking moxibustion are common operational methods^[5]. Special precautions should be taken to avoid skin scalding during moxibustion, with extra caution required for facial moxibustion.

3.1.4. Pricking bloodletting with cupping therapy

Pricking bloodletting combined with cupping achieves favorable therapeutic effects on skin disorders such as acne and chloasma induced by blood stasis, heat toxin, and other pathogenic factors. This intervention involves pricking selected acupoints or skin regions to draw a small amount of blood, followed by cupping to eliminate stagnant blood and internal heat toxins, thus ameliorating local Qi-blood circulation. The bladder meridian on the back, Xuehai (SP10), and Weizhong (BL40) are the primary operational sites^[6].

3.2. Acupuncture therapy for common anti-aging dermatological disorders

3.2.1. Facial wrinkles

Traditional Chinese Medicine holds that wrinkle formation is closely associated with meridian obstruction. Meridians and collaterals serve as the transport pathways of Qi and blood inside the human body; they internally connect Zang-fu organs and externally extend to the skin and body hair, integrating internal organs, limbs, and joints into an organic whole. Unobstructed meridians and abundant Qi and blood nourish facial skin sufficiently, thus preventing wrinkle formation. The core therapeutic principles for wrinkles are tonifying the kidney to replenish essence, boosting Qi and nourishing blood, and unblocking collaterals to eliminate wrinkles.

Selected Acupoints: Ashi points, Cuanzhu (BL2), Sizhukong (SJ23), Tongziliao (GB1), Quchi (LI11), Hegu (LI4), Zusanli (ST36), SanYinjiao (SP6). Ashi points are located at the deepest or widest segment of each facial wrinkle.

Acupuncture Manipulation: Horizontal needle insertion is adopted. For patients with deep wrinkles or sagging skin, a skin-stretching insertion technique is applied: the practitioner stretches the skin on both sides of the wrinkle with the index and middle fingers of the left hand to tense the skin, holds the needle with the right hand, inserts the needle subcutaneously between the two fingers, and places the needle shaft parallel to the wrinkle. No reinforcing-reducing manipulation is performed after insertion, and deqi sensation is not mandatory. Relevant clinical studies confirm that acupuncture can reduce wrinkles by improving facial microcirculation, elevating cutaneous collagen content, and enhancing skin elasticity.

3.2.2. Melasma

Melasma, commonly known as “butterfly macule”, is mainly induced by liver Qi stagnation, Qi-blood stasis, spleen deficiency with damp accumulation, and other pathogenic factors^[7]. Its primary therapeutic strategies are soothing the liver and regulating Qi, activating blood circulation to resolve stasis, and invigorating the spleen to eliminate dampness^[8–10].

Common Acupoints: Local facial acupoints include Quanliao (SI18), Taiyang (EX-HN5), Sibai (ST2), Yangbai (GB14); distal acupoints consist of Hegu (LI4), Taichong (LR3), Xuehai (SP10), Sanyinjiao (SP6),

Pishu (BL20), Ganshu (BL18)^[11].

Acupuncture Manipulation: Shallow insertion with uniform reinforcing-reducing manipulation is applied to facial acupoints. Among distal acupoints, reducing manipulation is used for Hegu (LI4) and Taichong (LR3), while reinforcing or uniform reinforcing-reducing manipulation is adopted for Xuehai (SP10), Sanyinjiao (SP6), Pishu (BL20) and Ganshu (BL18).

Treatment Course: Therapy is administered 1–2 times per week, 30 minutes per session, with 10 sessions forming one treatment course. Generally, 2–3 consecutive courses are required^[12,13].

3.2.3. Acne

Acne development is frequently linked to wind-heat in the lung meridian, damp-heat in the stomach and intestines, liver Qi stagnation, and other pathogenic factors. The main therapeutic principles are clearing heat and detoxifying, draining dampness and resolving phlegm, as well as soothing the liver and regulating Qi^[14].

Common Acupoints: Local facial acupoints include Cuanzhu (BL2), Sibai (ST2), Taiyang (EX-HN5), Jiache (ST6); distal acupoints involve Hegu (LI4), Quchi (LI11), Zusanli (ST36), Sanyinjiao (SP6), Neiting (ST44).

Acupuncture Manipulation: Shallow insertion with uniform reinforcing-reducing manipulation is applied to facial acupoints. For distal acupoints, reducing manipulation is performed on Hegu (LI4), Quchi (LI11), and Neiting (ST44), whereas uniform reinforcing-reducing manipulation is used for Zusanli (ST36) and Sanyinjiao (SP6)^[15].

Treatment Course: Treatment is delivered 1–2 times weekly for 30 minutes per session, with 10 sessions as one course; 2–3 courses are generally needed. For acne patients with severe inflammatory lesions, collateral pricking bloodletting therapy can be combined, with swift pricking bloodletting at Erjian (EX-HN6) and Dazhui (GV14), once or twice weekly^[16,17]. Acupuncture exerts therapeutic effects against acne by regulating endocrine function, inhibiting sebaceous gland secretion, and alleviating inflammatory responses^[18,19].

4. Advances in modern research on anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture

In recent years, with the rapid advancement of modern medical technology, researchers have conducted in-depth investigations into the mechanisms of anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture from multiple dimensions, including molecular biology, cytology, and immunology, yielding a series of valuable research findings.

4.1. Improvement of skin microcirculation

Nutrient supply and metabolism of the skin rely heavily on a sound microcirculatory system. Studies have demonstrated that acupoint stimulation via acupuncture triggers local vasodilation, elevates cutaneous blood flow, and optimizes skin microcirculation. For instance, measurements using a laser Doppler flowmeter have revealed that acupuncture on facial acupoints produces a marked, long-lasting increase in facial skin blood perfusion. Improved microcirculation delivers more oxygen and nutrients to skin tissue and accelerates the excretion of metabolic waste, thereby maintaining a healthy skin state characterized by ruddy complexion, delicate texture, and sufficient elasticity.

4.2. Regulation of endocrine function

Endocrine disorders are one of the key triggers for skin aging, pigmented lesions, acne, and other cutaneous

disorders. Acupuncture modulates the functional activity of endocrine axes such as the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and hypothalamic-pituitary-thyroid (HPT) axis to alleviate endocrine dysregulation. Relevant research indicates that acupuncture reduces serum lipid peroxide (LPO) levels, enhances the activity of superoxide dismutase (SOD), strengthens systemic antioxidant capacity, and mitigates free radical-induced damage to skin cells. Meanwhile, acupuncture regulates sex hormone profiles: it decreases testosterone levels and elevates estrogen levels, thus ameliorating diverse skin disorders stemming from sex hormone imbalance^[20].

4.3. Modulation of cutaneous collagen metabolism

Collagen constitutes the primary structural component of the skin dermis, and alterations in its content and architecture serve as a hallmark of skin aging. With aging, dermal collagen content gradually declines and collagen structure becomes disorganized, which subsequently induces wrinkle formation and skin sagging. Experimental evidence confirms that acupuncture facilitates the proliferation and viability of dermal fibroblasts, augments collagen synthesis, and optimizes the structural arrangement of collagen fibers. For example, immunohistochemical detection in animal experiments has proven that acupuncture significantly elevates collagen content within the mouse dermis, rendering collagen fibers more orderly and compactly arranged.

5. Prospects

Anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture boasts distinctive theoretical merits and satisfactory clinical efficacy, endowing it with broad development prospects in the modern aesthetic health care industry. Nevertheless, the field still faces several urgent challenges to be addressed amid its development:

5.1. Further expansion of indications

Apart from conventional indications including acne removal, melasma lightening, and wrinkle reduction, its therapeutic scope will gradually extend to alopecia treatment, body shape management, skin barrier repair, and other fields, realizing holistic aesthetic conditioning that nourishes the body from inside out.

5.2. Obvious trend of cross-disciplinary integration

It forms a complementary therapeutic system with modern skin care and photoelectric medical aesthetics. For instance, acupuncture can serve as a post-procedural rehabilitation intervention after phototherapy; it alleviates postoperative erythema and swelling and accelerates recovery by regulating Qi and blood circulation, establishing a synergistic treatment model integrating “technological medical aesthetics and traditional acupuncture”.

5.3. Rising public acceptance

With the popularization of concepts such as “natural beauty” and “green medical aesthetics”, aesthetic acupuncture will break away from the label of a “niche therapy”. Through standardized science popularization and experiential services, it will be introduced into more medical aesthetic institutions and daily beauty service scenarios.

With the deepening of integrated traditional Chinese and Western medicine research, anti-aging aesthetic

acupuncture is expected to achieve greater breakthroughs in theoretical innovation, technical research and development, as well as clinical application. It is believed that with the joint efforts of numerous researchers and clinicians, anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture will make greater contributions to the cause of human health and beauty.

6. Summary

Traditional Chinese medicine aesthetic therapies derive from nature, follow the laws of Yin-Yang balance, and conform to standardized therapeutic principles. Centered on the holistic concept, they pursue harmonious beauty. Aesthetic acupuncture regulates both physical appearance and mental spirit, delivers simultaneous treatment of root causes and superficial symptoms, erases wrinkles, maintains facial youthfulness, and delays aging.

The primary therapeutic strategies of anti-aging aesthetic acupuncture involve regulating Yang Qi to refresh the brain and harmonizing Qi and blood. Acupoints from Yang meridians are prioritized to reinforce Yang Qi in the head and face, boost Yang circulation, and unblock the flow of nourishing Qi and blood to the facial region upward. Fully nourished skin thereby gains a ruddy, soft, and lustrous complexion, ultimately fulfilling the goals of facial rejuvenation and anti-aging.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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