Introduction

The tongue has many relationships and connections in the body, both to the meridians and the internal organs. It is therefore very useful and important during inspection for confirming diagnosis. It can present strong visual indicators of a person's overall harmony or disharmony.

The tongue has a special relationship with the Heart, in that the Heart opens to the tongue. The tongue is said to be an "offshoot" of the Heart, or "flowers" into the Heart.

The normal tongue in Traditional Chinese Medicine has a light red or pinkish body with a thin white coating.
Connections

Channels/Meridians Reaching the Tongue

- **Heart Channel** (Hand Shaoyin)
  - The Luo connecting channel connects to the root of the tongue.
- **Spleen Channel** (Foot Taiyin)
  - An internal branch of the primary channel spreads over the lower surface of the tongue.
  - The tongue is penetrated by the Spleen Divergent channel
- **Kidney Channel** (Foot Shaoyin)
  - An internal branch of the primary channel terminates at the base of the tongue.
- **Bladder Channel** (Foot Taiyang)
  - A branch of the muscle/sinew channel binds to the root of the tongue.
- **San Jiao Channel** (Hand Shaoyang)
  - A branch of the San Jiao muscle channel links with the root of the tongue.

Tongue areas as they correspond to internal organs in Chinese Medicine
Tongue Diagnosis (Jīrūrī)

CONDITIONS: A discoloration and/or sensitivity of a part of the tongue indicates a disorder in the organ corresponding to that segment (see diagram). A whitish tongue indicates Kapha derangement, a yellow tongue indicates Pitta, and a black-to-brown coloration indicates Vata disorder. Dehydrated tongue is symptomatic of a decrease in plasma, while a pale tongue indicates a decrease in the blood cells.

Note: This diagram is used to look at one's own tongue in a mirror.
Tongue Diagnosis Method and Cautions

- **Lighting**
  Sunlight will give the most accurate color of the tongue body and coat. If sunlight is not available, use a second light source such as a small flashlight to compare the tongue color to the original light source.
- **Position**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colors and Coats</th>
<th>Indications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pale</strong></td>
<td>The pale tongue is less red than a normal tongue. It indicates syndromes of deficiencies of qi, blood or yin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moist</td>
<td>Spleen and Kidney yang deficiency prevents the proper transformation of water and so creates dampness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dry</td>
<td>qi deficiency fails to distribute body fluids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no coat</td>
<td>Spleen and Stomach impairment with qi and blood deficiency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Red              | The red tongue is a deeper red than the normal pink tongue. It indicates various heat syndromes |
|                  | excess heat or yang qi excess |
|                  | Yin deficiency heat |

| Crimson          | The crimson tongue is a further exasperation of the red tongue. It indicates pathogenic heat invasion in the nutritive or blood level, latent heat in the Heart and Stomach, or heat transmission into the pericardium. |
|                  | yin deficiency leading to hyperactivity of fire |

| Purple           | The purple tongue indicates blood stagnation caused by a variety of pathogenic factors. |
|                  | stagnation due to yin exhaustion cloying the blood |
|                  | stagnation alone or due to an accumulation of excess cold |
|                  | stagnation with, or due to a deficiency of blood |

| Blue             | This blue looks like the blue in veins beneath the skin and indicates excessive cold accumulation or blood stagnation. |
|                  | excess cold accumulation |
|                  | Liver blood stagnation |
The tongue should be extended in a relaxed manner, and should not be held out for an extended duration.

- **Food and Drink**
  Food and drink, such as coffee, green tea, and candy may alter the color of the tongue coating.

- **Brushed Tongue**
  Some patients may brush their tongue to help freshen their breath or as an Ayurvedic practice. Ask the patient not to brush their tongue, at least the day of their TCM tongue diagnosis.

- **Seasons of the Year**
  In Summer, there may be more Dampness present in the tongue coating, leaving it slightly thicker and light yellow.
  In Fall or Autumn, the tongue may be thinner with a coating that is more dry.
  In Winter, there may also be more moist or damp presenting in the tongue.
  In Spring, the tongue should be normal.

- **Time of Day**
  The coating of the tongue usually becomes thinner as the day progresses, while the color of the tongue body becomes more red and shiny.

- **Patient's Age**
  In the elderly, Qi and Blood Deficiency is more common, so the tongue may present with dryness and cracks.
  Infants tend to have white thick coating that is easily removed, peeled tongues are also common.
  Overweight patients usually have more Damp and/or Phlegm and therefore their tongues may be larger and lighter in color.
  Thin patients tend towards redder tongues.

### Tongue Feature Indications

- **Tongue Body Color**
- **Tongue Body Shape**
- **Tongue Body Features**
- **Tongue Body Moisture**
- **Tongue Coating**
- **Tongue Coat Thickness**
- **Tongue Body Cracks**
- **Tongue Coat Root**

### Tongue Body Color

Indicates the state of Blood, Yin organs, and Ying (Nutritive) Qi.

**Normal Tongue Body**

- Pink or light red in color

**Bluish Purple or Reddish Purple Tongue Body**

- Purple can indicate both Heat and Cold conditions.
- A reddish purple tongue indicates Heat and Blood Stagnation.
- A dark reddish purple tongue that is dry usually indicates depleted fluids due to Excess Heat
- A light purple, bluish purple, or greenish purple tongue body indicates Cold + Blood Stagnation.

**Red Tongue Body**

- A red tongue body is darker than the normal red, which is pinkish in color. It indicates either Deficient or Excess Heat.
- A red tongue body with a thick yellow coat or swollen buds indicates Excess Heat
- A red tongue body with a bright shiny coat, little coat, or no coating indicates Deficient Heat.

**Red Tip**

- Heat in the Heart Zang

**Scarlet Tongue Body**

- A scarlet tongue that is also peeled or shiny indicates Yin Deficiency, usually of the Heart and/or Lung depending on the area of swelling.

**Dark Red Tongue Body**

- The red is darker and more crimson in color. This tongue body can indicate internal injury such as trauma (De Da), invasion of external evil in the Ying (Nutritive) and Xue (blood) levels, or it can indicate Blood Stagnation.
- If there are red spots with a thin coat, this usually indicates damage to the Ying or Xue level.
- If the tongue body also has cracks and there is little or no tongue coat, this usually indicates Deficient Heat due to internal injury.

**Pale Tongue Body**

- Indicates the quality of Blood, reflecting Blood and/or Qi Deficiency or Cold.
- If the tongue body is also moist, tender, and swollen, this can indicate Yang Cold.
- A pale thin tongue body usually indicates Qi and Blood Deficiency.

**Green Tongue Body**

- A green tongue body usually indicates Excess Yin Cold or the presence of a strong Excess evil with weak Zheng Qi. The Yang is not properly moving Blood and Fluids and there is Stagnation in the body.
- Internal Wind may also present with a green tongue body.

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**Tongue Body Shape**

The body shape reflects the state of Blood and Ying (Nutritive) Qi, and indicates Excess or Deficiency. Constitution can also affect the shape of the tongue body.

**Stiff**
- A stiff or rigid tongue is difficult to move (protrude, retract, side to side). This may cause speech abnormalities such as slurring or mumbled speech. A stiff tongue is an indication of Excess, and often one of Internal Wind.
- If a stiff tongue is accompanied by a bluish purple tongue body, this usually indicates potential or impending Wind-Stroke.
- If a stiff tongue is accompanied by a bright red tongue body, this usually indicates heat in the Heart and Pericardium disturbing the Shen (Spirit).
- If a stiff tongue is accompanied by a thick sticky tongue coating, this usually indicates "Phlegm Misting the Heart”.

**Flaccid**

- The flaccid tongue is the opposite of the stiff tongue. It is weak and lacks strength. It usually indicates Deficiency. When heat has consumed and damaged body fluids, they can not rise to nourish the tongue. This can indicate Yin Deficiency, Qi Deficiency and/or Blood Deficiency.
- A flaccid tongue that is also pale usually indicates Qi and Blood Deficiency.
- A flaccid tongue that is also dark red, dry, and has cracks usually indicates extreme heat injuring fluids.
- A flaccid tongue body with a scarlet tongue body usually indicates Exhaustion of Yin.

**Swollen**

- This is a very large tongue body and can indicate both Excess and Deficiency.
- A swollen tongue that is also pale can indicate Qi Deficiency
- A swollen tongue that is also bright red and painful can indicate Heart and Spleen Heat. This could also be due to excess alcohol consumption.

**Big or Enlarged Tongue**

- An enlarged tongue can indicate Phlegm, Damp, or Water Stagnation.
- An enlarged tongue with a pale body and a moist coat may indicate Spleen and Kidney Yang Deficiency
- An enlarged tongue with a red body and a greasy yellow coat may indicate Spleen and Stomach Damp-Heat.

**Half the Tongue Is Swollen**

- A half swollen tongue may indicate general weakness of the Channels.

**Hammer Shaped**

- This is where the front half or third of the tongue is enlarged at the sides.
- A hammer shaped tongue usually indicates Spleen, Stomach, and Kidney Deficiency
- This tongue is almost always indicative of a serious condition, and may indicate mental illness.

**Local Swelling on One Side**

- Localized swelling of tongue with a normal tongue body color indicates Qi Deficiency
- Localized swelling of tongue with a red tongue body color indicates Qi and/or Blood Stagnation
Swollen Sides

- A tongue with swelling in Liver and Gallbladder area usually indicates Rising Liver Yang or Liver Fire.

Swollen Between the Tip and the Central Surface

- This area corresponds to the Lung area and usually presents with a normal or pale tongue body.
- This tongue is usually found in patients with chronic Lung and Spleen Deficiency, which tends toward Damp and Phlegm accumulation.

Swollen Edges

- This tongue may indicate Spleen Qi or yang Deficiency.
- If Spleen Yang is Deficient, the edges will also be wet.

Swollen Tip

- When the very tip of the tongue is swollen, it usually indicates Heart problems.
- If the tongue is also deep red, this may indicate Heart Fire.
- If the tongue is normal in color or pale, this may indicate Heart Qi Deficiency.

Short and Contracted

- When the patient can not show the entire tongue, it usually indicates a more severe disease.
- If the tongue is also moist and pale, this indicates stagnation of Cold (bluish/purple) in the meridians or Spleen Yang Deficiency.
- If a contracted tongue also has a sticky tongue coating, this may indicate Turbid-Phlegm blocking the channels.
- If the tongue is also deep red and dry, excessive heat has consumed Body Fluids and stirred up internal Wind.
- A short, swollen, tender, and pale tongue usually indicates Qi and Blood Deficiency.
- A short or small frenum may be inherited and is normal.

Long

- There is difficulty in retracting the tongue.
- This indicates interior Excess Heat, Heart Fire, or Phlegm-Fire Misting the Heart.
- There may be numbness which is associated with

Front Swollen

- Swelling towards the front one-third of the tongue may indicate Phlegm retention in the Lungs.

Thin

- This can indicate that Qi and Blood are deficient and not able to properly nourish and moisturize the tongue. The tongue body will also usually be pale in color with Qi and Blood Deficiency.
- A thin tongue that is also dark red and dry may indicate Yin Deficient Fire
Tongue Body Features

Rough or Tender Texture

- A tender tongue that appears smooth, delicate, and is possibly swollen indicates deficiency.
- A rough tongue that appears wrinkled and rough indicates Excess.

Red Spots

- Red spots may indicate Heat Toxins in the Blood or Heat Toxins attacking the Heart.
- Red spots can indicate the presence of Damp-Heat in the Xue Level, where the internal organs are accumulating toxins.
- Red spots on the Tip (Lung/Heart area) is usually not severe and may present in the beginning stages of illness.
- Red spots on the entire tongue may indicate a more severe illness.
- Red spots on the sides of the tongue (Liver/Gallbladder area) may also indicate a more severe illness.
- Red spots on the back of the tongue (Kidney area) may indicate the advanced stage or chronic nature of an illness.

White Spots

- White spots are usually due to Spleen and Stomach Qi Deficiency together with excess heat accumulating in the body. In this case, the tongue may also have sores and pus.

Black Spots

- Black spots usually indicate Qi and Blood Stagnation or heat in the Blood.

Ulcerated Tongue Body

- Suspect acid alkaline imbalance, vitamin K deficiency, Iron excess,

Numb Tongue Body

- Manganese deficiency, Tardive Dyskinesia

Loose Tongue Body

- Manganese deficiency, Tardive Dyskinesia, loss of muscle tone, dystonia

Deviated Tongue Body

- This is where the tongue tends toward one side of the mouth
- This is due to Wind, either from exterior Pathogenic Wind or internal Wind-Damp patterns.

Moving, Lolling, Wagging, Playful Tongue Body

- This usually indicates heat in the Heart and Spleen channels stirring up internal Wind.
In children, this may indicate developmental problems.

Rolled Tongue Body

- Reaction to insecticides,

Teeth Marks on Tongue Body (Scalloped)

- If the tongue body has normal color, this usually indicates Spleen Qi Deficiency
- If there are teeth marks together with a swollen tongue, this may indicate Spleen Yang and/or Qi Deficiency.
- If the tongue is also pale and moist, it is more likely Spleen Yang Deficiency or a Cold-Damp pattern.

Quivering or Trembling Tongue Body

- Trembling of the tongue that can not be controlled may be due to external febrile disease or excess heat consuming Yin. The excess heat stirs up Internal Wind. The tongue body will be a deep red color and the pulse will be rapid.
- If the tongue body is pale and trembling, this usually indicates a chronic condition of Qi and Blood Deficiency, where the tongue is not being nourished.
- Side effects of some western medications (pharmaceuticals) may cause trembling of the tongue.

Sore Covered Tongue Body

Side effects of some western medications

Tongue Body Moisture

Reveals the state of Yin and Fluids in the body.

Dry Tongue Body

- Dehydration, lymphatic drainage disorder

Slightly Dry Tongue Body

- Same progressive

Tongue Coating

Indicates the state of the Yang organs, especially the Stomach.
White Tongue Coat

- A thin white tongue coating is normal.
- A thin white tongue coating can also indicate external Cold patterns when the appropriate clinical symptoms are present.
- With a moist and pale tongue, a thicker white coating can indicate Damp-Cold.
- A dry white coating can indicate Cold turning to Heat and starting to dry body fluids.

White Like Powder Tongue Coat

- A white and thick tongue coating like powder indicates turbidity and external pathogenic heat. This coating will usually change to yellow after a short time if the patient is not treated.
- If the tongue body is dark red, interior toxins may be present.

White Like Snow Tongue Coat

- This may indicate exhaustion of Spleen yang with Damp-Cold in the Middle Jiao

Yellow Tongue Coat

- A slightly yellow coating indicates Wind-Heat or Wind-Cold turning to Wind-Heat
- A yellow tongue coat indicates an interior heat pattern. The deeper the color of yellow, the more severe heat. A burnt yellow indicates further accumulation of heat in the body.
- If the coating is yellow and moist and the tongue body is swollen and tender, this indicates interior Damp-Heat or Yang Deficiency. In the case of Yang Deficiency, the tongue is showing false heat signs, as the Yin has forced the Yang to the surface of the body.

Dirty Yellow Tongue Coat

- This tongue coating may indicate Stomach and Intestinal Damp-Heat

Simultaneous White and Yellow Tongue Coating

- Can indicate a Shaoyang pattern
- Can indicate a simultaneous Heat and Cold pattern, or a Cold pattern turning to Heat
- Can indicate a simultaneous Interior and Exterior pattern

Gray Tongue Coat

- This tongue coating usually indicates an internal pattern of either Heat or Damp-Cold.
- A dry gray coating can indicate internal Excess Heat scorching Body Fluids or Yin Deficient Fire.
- A wet or moist gray coating usually indicates Cold-Damp Stagnation or Damp-Phlegm retention.

Black Tongue Coat

- Similar to the Gray coating above, but more severe.
- The black coating usually develops from gray or a burnt yellow coating.
- A dry black coating (usually with cracks) may indicate excessive Heat burning body fluids.
- A moist black coating and a pale tongue body may indicate Yang Deficiency, Internal Excess Cold, with or without the presence of Dampness.
Both Gray and Black tongue coating can indicate extreme Cold (wet tongue) or extreme Heat (dry tongue).
Western drugs such as antibiotics can also cause a black tongue coating.

**Half Yellow, Half White (Longitudinally)**
- This coating may indicate Heat in the Liver and Gallbladder

**Yellow Root With A White Tip**
- This may indicate that exterior Pathogenic Heat is penetrating more deeply into the interior of the body.

**Black in the Center, White and Slippery on the Sides**
- This may indicate Spleen Yang Deficiency with interior Damp-Cold

**Tongue Coat Thickness**

**Thin Coating**
- Normal
- In disease, it indicates the disease is either external or an internal disease that is not severe.
- If the tongue coating changes from thick to thin, this indicates pathogens are moving to the exterior of the body and the disease is waning.

**Thick Coating**
- A thick coating usually indicates more of an internal disease that is more severe.
- It may also indicate that exterior pathogenic factors have penetrated more deeply into the body.
- A thick tongue coating may also indicate retention of food.
- If the tongue coating changes from thin to thick, this indicates pathogens are penetrating deeper into the interior of the body.

**Peeled, Mirrored, Shiny, No Coating**
- With a mirrored tongue, there is no coating on the tongue. In less severe cases, there may be a partial coating on the tongue.
- If the body of the tongue is also red, it usually indicates that Stomach Qi and Yin is severely damaged.
- If the tongue body is also light in color, this may indicate that Qi and Blood of the Spleen and Stomach are damaged and Deficient.
- If the tongue body is also red or dark, Stomach and Kidney Yin is damaged (body fluids dried up) due to heat.
Tongue Body Cracks

Short Horizontal Cracks
- Vitamin B6 Deficiency

Long Horizontal Cracks
- Vitamin B6, B12, B2 Deficiency.

Transverse Cracks On the Sides of the Tongue
- Vitamin B6, B12, B3 Deficiency.

Transverse Cracks Behind Tip
- Vitamin B6, B12, B2, B3 Deficiency.

Very Deep Ventral Cracks With Other Smaller Cracks
- Vitamin B6, B12, B2, B3, B5 Deficiency.

Tongue Coat Root

Tongue Coat Has Root
- The normal tongue coating has Root, which means that is "rooted" or attached to the surface of the tongue body. It cannot be easily scraped off or removed.

Tongue Coat Has No Root
- A coating without root rests on the surface of the tongue, but can easily be removed or scraped off.
- A coating without root usually indicates impairment of Spleen, Stomach, and Kidneys.
Tongue Diagnosis

by Cathy Wong

Chinese medicine practitioners believe the appearance of your tongue can reveal a lot about your health.

Tongue diagnosis is an important part of the Chinese medical assessment. During an examination, the practitioner usually looks at the overall tongue coating, shape, and color. Then he or she looks at specific areas on the tongue.

Different areas of the tongue are believed to reflect the health of the different organ systems. If
there is an unusual color, coating, and/or shape in a certain area, special attention is paid to the corresponding organ system.

As with any assessment method, the doctor doesn't rely on tongue diagnosis alone, but uses it to provide a complete picture of a person's health.

Below are some of the guidelines Chinese medical practitioners use to assess the tongue. This is only a selection of many different types of patterns.

**Tongue body color  May be a sign of**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pale</td>
<td>Excess cold, especially if thick white coating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spleen qi deficiency, especially if thick white coating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Excess heat, especially if thick yellow tongue coating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yin deficiency, especially if tongue body is thin and coating is thin, absent or peeled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>Stagnant qi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stagnant blood if dark purple</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What is the Tongue Shape?**

Normal tongue shape is not too thick or thin, and the tongue body is smooth with no cracks. Changes in the tongue shape usually reflect chronic illness involving blood, qi, or body fluids.

**Tongue shape  May be a sign of**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shape</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swollen or puffy</td>
<td>Spleen qi deficiency, especially if Damp heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin</td>
<td>Blood deficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fluid deficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trembling</td>
<td>Spleen qi deficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elongated</td>
<td>Heart heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sides curled up</td>
<td>Liver qi stagnation, If the sides are swollen and red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cracks</td>
<td>Excess heat or yin deficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heart imbalance, especially if tongue tip</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What does the Tongue Coating Look Like?

Normal tongue coating is thin and white. A pale yellow and slightly thicker coating at the back of the tongue may also be normal. The tongue coating often indicates the health of the spleen and stomach. It also provides a good indication of acute illness, such as colds and digestive problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tongue coating</th>
<th>May be a sign of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thick</td>
<td>Excess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow, thick, glossy</td>
<td>Damp Heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dry, yellow</td>
<td>Excess heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peeled or absent</td>
<td>Deficient yin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heart yin deficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kidney yin deficiency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Are there any Specific Problem Areas?

Each area of the tongue is connected to specific internal organs.

- sides of the tongue - liver
- tip of the tongue - heart
- center of the tongue - spleen
- back of the tongue - kidney

Other Tongue Tips

Some disorders don't show up on the tongue. Tongue is usually examined for no longer than 15 seconds at a time. If it's extended for longer, the tension may alter the shape or color.

The tongue should be examined under natural light.

Before examination, don't eat foods that may discolor the tongue, such as coffee, beets, vitamin C, and foods made with artificial food coloring.
Tongue self diagnosis

**Question:** Which aperture of the body reflects the internal organs related to excretion and assimilation? Anus, urinary tract, ears, nose, or mouth?

**Answer:** Mouth.

Your tongue accurately reflects the state of your digestive system—from rectum to esophagus, including the stomach, small intestines, colon (large intestine), pancreas, spleen, liver and gall bladder.

Imagine, you don’t need a battery of tests to find out what part of your digestive tract is in stress. You can diagnosis the whole GI tract and corresponding organ integrity all in one easy view—*just stick your tongue out and take a good look at it.*

As a whole, the tongue reflects the condition of the digestive system and the organs associated with blood, nutrient assimilation, and excretion. You can also see how ‘hot’ or how ‘cold’ your internal organs are. Therefore it has a high value as a diagnostic tool.

Specific sections of the tongue mirror the condition of particular parts of the digestive system and the digestion related internal organs.

**The following correspondences exist in this relationship:**

- **A:** the tip area reflects the rectum and the descending colon.
- **B:** the peripheral area reflects the large intestine.
- **C:** the middle region corresponds to the small intestine.
- **D:** the back edge region relates to the liver, gallbladder, duodenum, and pancreas.
- **E:** the near back region corresponds to the stomach.
- **F:** the back region ('the root of the tongue') reflects the esophagus.
- **G:** the underside of the tongue reflects the quality of blood and lymph circulation in each corresponding
Structural characteristics

Like each particular area of the body, the tongue can be used to evaluate one's overall condition.

Zetsu Shin, as it is called in Japanese, is one of the most important forms of diagnosis used in Chinese medicine. Two main aspects are considered in tongue diagnosis.

First is the structure of the tongue. Is it wide or narrow, thick or thin, pointed or rounded? Such qualities convey information concerning the individual's basic constitution and overall strengths and weaknesses of body and mind.

Width:

- a wide tongue reflects an overall balanced physical and psychological disposition.
- a narrow tongue reflects a lack of physical adaptability with pronounced strengths and weaknesses. Mentally, thinking may be sharp but tend toward seeing a narrow view.
- a very wide tongue reflects a generally loose and expanded physical condition and a tendency toward more psychological concerns.

Tip:

- a rounded tip reflects a flexible yet firm physical and mental condition.
- a pointed tip reflects a tight, perhaps even rigid physical condition and an aggressive or even offensive mentality.
- a very wide tip reflects an overall weakness of the physical body and a flaccid or even "spaced out" mental condition.
- a divided tip reflects a tendency toward physical and mental imbalances with the possibility of sharp fluctuations in thinking and mood.

Thickness:

- a flat tongue reflects a balanced condition and the ability to flexibly adapt to circumstances.
- a thin tongue reflects a more mental orientation, with a tendency to be more gentle and easy going.
- a thick tongue reflects a more physical orientation, with the tendency to be assertive or even aggressive.

In comparison to structure, the condition of the tongue is influenced more by daily lifestyle and provides information about an individual's current state of health. Qualities to look for include:

Color:

- Dark red: indicates inflammation; lesions or ulceration; and sometimes a degeneration of the related organ.
- White: indicates stagnation of blood; fat and mucus deposits; or a weakness in the blood leading to such conditions as anemia.
- Yellow: indicates a disorder of the liver and gallbladder, resulting in an excess secretion of bile; deposits of animal fats, especially in the middle organs of the body; and possible inflammation.
- Blue or Purple: indicates stagnation of blood circulation and a serious weakening of the part of the digestive system that corresponds to the area of the tongue where the color appears.

The color on the underside of the tongue can also be used to determine the internal condition. In general, the colors and their indications listed above are the same, with the following exceptions:
- Blue or Green: In excess, either of these color reflect disorders in the blood vessels and in blood quality and circulation.
- Purple: In excess, this color reflects disorders of the lymphatic and circulatory system. It indicates a weakening of the immune ability and of the blood vessels.

Texture:

- a swollen or enlarged tongue: indicates a Jitsu, or full state.
- a shriveled or withered-looking tongue: indicates a Kyo, or empty state.

Movement:

- the flexibility of the tongue also reflects the condition of the digestive system. Characteristics to look for include:
  - a flexible, supple, smoothly moving tongue.
  - a stiff, tense, or inflexible tongue.
  - a loose or lolling tongue.
  - a tongue with a pronounced slant to the left or right when it is extended.

Pimples or projections of the tongue's surface indicate the discharge of fat, protein, and sugar. Where in the body this discharge is coming from can be determined by the specific area of the tongue on which it appears. You can find the correlation between the areas of the tongue and the digestive tract.

**The second major aspect considered in tongue diagnosis is the coating**, or moss, as it is called in Chinese medicine, on the tongue's surface.

Qualities are again divided into antagonistic pairs, and include moist and dry, excessive and deficient, thick or thin. The color of the coating reveals a precise information concerning specific internal conditions.

The guidelines explained above, particularly concerning the aspects of location and color, can be used for a general understanding of the different qualities of coating found on the tongue.

They are especially extremely useful when fasting, cleansing or when one is ill. A precise understanding of the nature of the problems can be achieved in seconds.
One of the most common questions that people ask about acupuncture is: “Why does my acupuncturist look at my tongue?”

Tongue and pulse diagnosis are two of the more important diagnostic tools in Chinese medicine. They are both used to derive a TCM diagnosis for your condition which is used to plan your treatment. Generally the tongue, is much easier to learn and less subjective than pulse diagnosis. It is less meridian specific than the pulse, however, the tongue will show the depth and nature (hot, cold, etc.) of an imbalance and it is less effected by short-term influences such as nervousness. The tongue is also useful as a measurement tool to gauge the progress of a disorder.

Below you will find detailed information about tongue diagnosis and the clinical significance of the examination:

**Common Tongue Geography and Meridian Correlations**
Common Tongue Geography and Meridian Correlations

- **Lower Jiao**
The Base of the tongue corresponds to the Kidney, Urinary Bladder, Large Intestine and Small Intestine Meridians.

- **Middle Jiao**
The sides of the tongue correspond to the Liver and Gall Bladder meridians. Some theories place the Gall Bladder on the patient's left side and the Liver on the patient's right side.

  The Middle of the tongue corresponds to the Stomach and Spleen Meridians.

- **Upper Jiao**
The Tip of the tongue corresponds to the Lung and the Heart Meridians.

### Tongue Body Colors and Clinical Indications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Color</th>
<th>Indications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pink</strong></td>
<td>normal or mild disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Pale**   | yang, blood a/or qi def
Deficiency Cold
+ thin & dry = blood def
+ wet = qi def
+ swollen = qi def
+ swollen & wet = yang def |
|            |             |
Red

**heat**
+ no coating = yin def empty heat
+ yellow coat = excess heat
+ *wet* = damp heat
+ *dry* = injured fluids

Dark Red (Scarlet, Cardinal)

**extreme heat**
more severe conditions than red

Purple

**stagnation**
iv qi stagnation is likely
+ *pale* = cold

Blue

**severe internal cold**
stagnant blood

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**Tongue Body Shapes and Clinical Indications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Shape</th>
<th>Indications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cracked</td>
<td>If develops during illness indicates chronic and severe, otherwise normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>location of cracks relates to organ pathology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ <em>red</em> = empty heat consuming fluids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ <em>pale</em> = blood &amp; qi def</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>crack runs from center to the tip = ht disorder or congenital ht problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>horizontal cracks = yin def</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deviated (crooked)</td>
<td>wind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flaccid</td>
<td>deficiency heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ <em>pale</em> = blood &amp; qi def</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ <em>dark red</em> = yin collapse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>long</td>
<td>heat in the ht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rigid</td>
<td>stroke or early signs of stroke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short (contracted)</td>
<td>Serious conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>blood deficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ht deficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ pale or purple</td>
<td>= cold or yang def</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ swollen</td>
<td>= damp or phlegm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ red</td>
<td>= heat consuming the fluids</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stiff</th>
<th>Heat in the ht</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ht/sp heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>phlegm obstructing the ht qi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ normal &amp; pale</td>
<td>= wind, stroke</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Swollen</th>
<th>Deficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ pale &amp; wet = yang def</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ teethmarks &amp; pale = qi def or excess fluids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ dark red = excess heat usually ht/sp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thin</th>
<th>Blood or fluid def</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>empty heat consuming fluids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ pale = blood &amp; qi def</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ red = yin def</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thorny (strawberry, granular)</th>
<th>Heat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>congealed blood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ on tip = ht fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ on edges = lv/gb fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ on center = st a/or intestines heat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trembling (quivering)</th>
<th>Wind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ pale = qi def</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ red = heat producing internal wind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tongue Coatings and Clinical Indications**

The tongue coat is a good indicator of the state of the Stomach and Spleen. It also shows the strength, depth and temperature of pathogenic factors.

A normal tongue coat is thinnest at the edges, thicker in the center and thickest at the root. It is thin and white, slightly moist and has a root.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tongue Coat</th>
<th>Indications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>thin</td>
<td>normal&lt;br&gt;exterior condition, wind-cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thick</td>
<td>excess damp/phlegm&lt;br&gt;food stagnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dry</td>
<td>heat consuming yin&lt;br&gt;excess yang or fire&lt;br&gt;deficiency fluids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moist</td>
<td>normal or mild imbalance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wet</td>
<td>excess fluids from yang def&lt;br&gt;dampness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sticky (greasy, creamy)</td>
<td>dampness or phlegm&lt;br&gt;retention of food</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coat Coloration</th>
<th>Indications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
<td>internal or external cold&lt;br&gt;if coat looks like cottage cheese = ST heat&lt;br&gt; + thin coat &amp; body aches = exterior wind-cold&lt;br&gt; + thin coat &amp; thorny = wind-heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yellow</td>
<td>internal or external heat&lt;br&gt;effected by coffee, tea a/or smoke intake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gray</td>
<td>hot or cold internal condition&lt;br&gt;retention of phlegm heat&lt;br&gt; + dry = heat consuming body fluids&lt;br&gt; + moist = damp cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coat Rooting</td>
<td>Indications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rooted moss appears firmly implanted</td>
<td>strong st/sp qi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rootless moss appears to float on the surface</td>
<td>st/sp qi def</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peeled</td>
<td>sp qi def deficient yin or fluids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black</td>
<td>severe condition involving hot or cold + pale = excessive cold from yang def + dry &amp; possible thorny = consumption of body fluids</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning Examples

Body colour: Reddish-Purple.

Body shape: Swollen and cracked.

Coating: peeled.

A Reddish-Purple tongue body colour usually indicates Blood stasis deriving from or associated with Heat (whereas a Bluish-Purple colour generally indicates Blood stasis deriving from Cold). In this case, the tongue colour is consistent over the whole tongue so we cannot determine from the tongue alone where the Blood stasis is located. The pulse and the symptoms can tell us this. However, the most likely pattern is that of Liver-Blood stasis.

The tongue body is also Swollen which indicates the presence of Phlegm. The Lung and Heart areas of the tongue are especially swollen which points towards the fact that the Phlegm is predominantly in the Upper Burner. Phlegm and Blood stasis are often seen existing side by side, especially in older patients, as they interact with and "promote" each other. Blood stasis stops fluids from being transported around the body smoothly therefore encouraging the production of Phlegm, while Phlegm blocks the smooth flow of Qi and Blood leading to stasis.

The tongue is totally peeled (without coating) and with many cracks, both signs of chronic Yin deficiency. It is likely that the Yin deficiency preceded the Blood stasis. Chronic Yin deficiency leads to Empty-Heat and we know in this case that the Blood stasis derives from Heat as the tongue is a Reddish-Purple colour. Although we cannot tell conclusively from the tongue only, the Yin deficiency is most likely of the Stomach and Kidneys.

Therefore, in conclusion, we can say that this many suffers from Yin deficiency with Empty-Heat, Blood stasis and Phlegm in the Upper Burner.
**Example 2 - NEW**

![Image of tongue]

**Body colour:** Reddish-Purple, Bluish-Purple in the chest area on the right.

**Body shape:** Stiff, slightly Swollen.

**Coating:** sticky coating without root.

The overall body colour of this tongue is Purple, indicating Blood stasis. It is predominantly Reddish-Purple, which indicates Blood stasis deriving from or associated with Heat but the chest area on the right of the tongue is Bluish-Purple which indicates that there is also some Cold which has lead to Blood stasis in the chest.

The tongue is also Stiff. A Stiff tongue indicates either severe Blood stasis or internal Wind. As the tongue is also Purple, in this case it is most likely that it indicates Blood stasis.

The sticky consistency of the coating simply indicates that there is Dampness (or together with the Swollen tongue body Damp-Phlegm), but the fact that it is rootless reflects a deficiency of Stomach-Yin. A rootless coating reflects the beginning stages of Stomach-Yin deficiency.

**Example 3 - NEW**

![Image of tongue]
Body colour: Slightly Red but Pale on the sides.

Body shape: Swelling in the Spleen area on the sides, Stomach cracks.

Coating: Peeled.

This tongue shows clearly a relatively common condition of Stomach-Yin deficiency (leading to some Heat) and Spleen-Yang deficiency. The cracks in the Stomach area indicate Stomach-Yin deficiency and the overall colour of the tongue is slightly Red showing that this Yin deficiency has lead to some Heat, but the sides of the tongue in the Spleen area are Swollen and Pale. This reflects Spleen-Qi and Yang deficiency leading to Dampness.

It is important to distinguish between the Liver and the Spleen areas on the sides of the tongue. The Liver area is a longer and thinner strip, covering nearly the whole side of the tongue, whereas the Spleen area is shorter and fatter and in the middle of the side of the tongue.

In the case of this patient, it would therefore be necessary to treat both Yin deficiency (of the Stomach) and Yang deficiency (of the Spleen). Even though the Yin deficiency (and Empty-Heat) seem predominant because the main area of the tongue body is Red and it is peeled, it is likely that the Spleen deficiency came first. As the Spleen and Stomach are so closely connected, a long-standing case of Spleen-Qi and/or Yang deficiency may lead to a deficiency of the Stomach (which has a tendency to become Yin deficient). A suitable remedy for this condition might be Shen Ling Bai Zhu San (Central Mansion in the Three Treasures remedies).

Example 4 - NEW

Body colour: slightly Red.

Body shape: Swollen, especially in the chest area with a Heart crack.

Coating: sticky coating.

This tongue is slightly unusual in that it clearly shows us the exact location of a pathogenic factor. The chest area is clearly more Swollen than the rest of the tongue indicating the presence of Phlegm in the Upper Burner.
As a general rule, the tongue body shows more the presence of Phlegm and the coating reflects the presence of Dampness. When the tongue body is Swollen and the coating is sticky, as in this case, it normally indicates the presence of Damp-Phlegm, in this case clearly in the Lungs.

**Example 5 - NEW**

![Tongue Image]

**Body colour:** slightly Red.

**Body shape:** Swollen, especially in the chest area with a Heart crack.

**Coating:** sticky coating.

The Reddish-Purple coating is more distinct on the sides in the Liver area which points specifically towards Liver-Blood stasis. The Liver area on the sides is also Swollen which usually indicates severe or chronic Liver-Heat. The Liver area being Red and Swollen simply indicates a more severe degree of Liver-Heat than if the Liver area is just Red.

The strips of a slightly thicker, white coating on either side of the tongue indicate a Gall-Bladder pathology, most usually Dampness in the Gall-Bladder.

Although the tongue points towards the Blood stasis being especially in the Liver, treatment of this patient should focus equally on moving Blood in the Heart. The presence of a Heart crack indicates a constitutional tendency to Heart patterns.
Example 6

Body colour: pale.

Body shape: swollen, central Heart crack, transverse Spleen cracks on the sides.

Coating: thin-white (normal), slightly yellow in the centre.

The pale tongue-bocolour indicates Yang deficiency (it may also indicate Blood deficiency, but in a man, it is more likely to be Yang deficiency). It is not possible from the tongue only to establish which organ is mostly affected in this case by the Yang deficiency: however, since the tongue body is also swollen, which usually indicates Phlegm, it is more likely to be Spleen-Yang deficiency. The central crack in this case correlates with the Heart.

A "Heart crack" is rather thin and long, extending from near the root of the tongue to near the tip; a "Stomach crack" is rather wide and is situated only in the middle section of the tongue, in the Stomach area. What does a Heart crack indicate? It depends on its depth and on the colour of the tongue tip. Generally speaking, a Heart crack indicates a constitutional propensity to Heart patterns and to emotional problems: the deeper the crack, the stronger this propensity. If, in the presence of a Heart crack, the tongue tip is red, it indicates that there already is a Heart pattern usually from emotional problems. In other words, a change in colour of the tongue body indicates that that particular constitutional tendency to Heart patterns has manifested itself and generated an actual Heart pattern. If we compare two people both with a red tip of the tongue, one with a Heart crack and the other without, the presence of a Heart crack indicates that that person has a constitutional tendency to Heart patterns and that his or her condition is deeper and more difficult to treat than that of the person without a Heart crack.

The small, transverse cracks on the sides usually indicate severe, chronic Spleen deficiency. Thus, we can conclude that this man suffers from a chronic Spleen-Yang deficiency and Phlegm.
**Example 7**

**Body colour:** dark red, redder on the sides.

**Body shape:** swollen on the sides, Stomach crack.

**Coating:** white, rootless.

The dark red body colour clearly indicates intense Heat and the redder colour and swelling on the sides shows that the Heat is in the Liver. Thus, this patient has suffered from Liver-Fire for a long time (we can deduce it is a long time from the dark-red colour) and the intense Fire has begun to injure Yin. We know this from the fact that the coating is rootless: this indicates the beginning of Yin deficiency and, since the tongue is dark-red and there is a coating, we can deduce that it is the Fire that is injuring Yin rather than deficient Yin giving rise to Empty Heat.

**Example 8**

**Body colour:** red slightly tending to purple, redder tip.

**Body shape:** swollen tip, tip curling up, Heart crack.
Coating: normal but there is a slightly peeled patch without coating on the left side towards the root.

The red body colour indicates Heat and the slight purple colour indicates that there is some Blood stasis. The red tip indicates Heart-Fire and the swelling of the tip and its curling up confirm and reinforce this diagnosis. The presence of the Heart crack indicates that this patient had a constitutional tendency to Heart patterns and to emotional problems. The small patch without coating indicates the beginning of Stomach-Yin deficiency.

**Example 9**

![Tongue Image]

**Body colour**: red, tending to purple

**Body shape**: very swollen, Stomach crack.

**Coating**: yellow, rootless, dry.

The red body colour indicates Heat while its slightly purple hue indicates that there is some Blood stasis. The very swollen body shape indicates the presence of Phlegm. The red colour, together with the Stomach crack and the yellow coating, indicates that the Heat is located in the Stomach. This is confirmed by the rootless coating which indicates the beginning of Stomach-Yin deficiency, presumably from the Heat injuring Yin. The dryness of the coating confirms both the Heat and the Yin deficiency (it could be due to either).

This tongue has a rootless but relatively thick coating: this is doubly bad. Why? The rootlessness of the coating indicates that there is the beginning of Yin deficiency but the relative thickness of it indicates that there is a pathogenic factor, in this case, Stomach-Heat: thus, this patient suffers from a Full condition occurring against a background of Stomach deficiency. In other words, it would have been better if the coating had been either rootless but thin (indicating Yin deficiency but no pathogenic factor) or thick with root (indicating the presence of a pathogenic factor but also a good state of the Stomach).
Example 10

**Body colour:** reddish-purple, red sides

**Body shape:** very swollen, swollen sides, Stomach crack

**Tongue coating:** sticky-yellow, sticky-dry-rough-yellow inside the Stomach crack.

The reddish-purple colour of the tongue body indicates Blood stasis deriving from or associated with Heat. The redness on the sides indicates Heat in the Spleen and/or Stomach; in this case, the redness on the sides is not related to the Liver because it occupies a wider area than the Liver area and also because it is associated with a Spleen-type of swelling on the sides. The general swelling of the tongue body indicates the presence of Phlegm, while the swelling on the sides is related to the Spleen and it indicates Dampness occurring against a background of chronic Spleen deficiency.

The sticky-yellow coating confirms the presence of Dampness while the Stomach crack, together with the sticky-dry-rough-yellow coating inside it indicates Phlegm-Heat in the Stomach.

In conclusion, the main location of the disharmony in this case is in the Middle Burner with Stomach and Spleen Heat, Damp-Heat and Phlegm-Heat in the Stomach. The Blood stasis probably derives partly from the Heat and partly from the chronic retention of Phlegm.
Example 11

Body colour: slightly pale, almost normal

Body shape: very swollen, more so on the (patient’s) left side

Tongue coating: thick-white-rootless coating.

The swelling of the tongue body indicates Phlegm while the partial swelling on the left side often indicates a weakness of the channels on that side. Such weakness may derive either from a febrile disease with high temperature or from an accident to that side of the body.

The rootless coating indicates Stomach-Qi or Stomach-Yin deficiency, but its thickness indicates the presence of a pathogenic factor, probably Dampness. A thick-rootless coating is doubly bad because, on the one hand Stomach-Yin is deficient, but, on the other, there is a pathogenic factor. It is better for a rootless coating to be thin (indicating Stomach-Qi deficiency but no pathogenic factor) or for a thick coating to have a root (indicating the presence of a pathogenic factor but also intact Stomach-Qi).

Example 12

Body colour: reddish-purple
**Body shape:** swollen sides

**Tongue coating:** thin-white-rootless coating, peeled in patches.

The reddish-purple colour indicates Blood stasis with Heat. The swelling on the sides indicates chronic Spleen deficiency and the rootless coating missing in patches indicates Stomach-Yin deficiency.

This patient too suffers primarily from a disharmony in the Middle Burner with chronic Spleen-Qi deficiency and Stomach-Yin deficiency. Both the swelling on the sides (related to the Spleen) and the rootless coating missing in patches (related to Stomach-Yin) indicate a chronic condition because this type of swelling and the lack of coating develop over a long period of time.

It is not possible to tell from the tongue only which other organ (apart from the Stomach), if any, is affected by the Blood stasis and the Heat.

**Example 13**

![](image)

**Body colour:** red, red tip

**Body shape:** short.

**Tongue coating:** thin-white.

This slide is presented here mainly as an example of a short tongue body. The patient could not stick the tongue out more than that. The red tip indicates Heart Heat.
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