

The Treatment of Constipation with Chinese Herbal Medicine: A Case History

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Abstract

This article presents a severe case of constipation that was successfully treated with Chinese herbal medicine. Dr. Yu Guo-Jun is a prominent physician-scholar of traditional Chinese medicine in the city of Leshan, Si-chuan province. The format of the case is a dialogue between Dr. Yu and other experienced physicians. The case appears in the book *A Walk Along the River: Transmitting a Medical Lineage through Case Records and Discussions* by Yu Guo-jun, published by Eastland Press.

“With a well-conceived strategy, what need is there for conforming to convention?”

胸有成竹，何須從俗

Case History

Patient: 38-year-old woman

Intake Examination

Date: December 5, 1987

For three years, the patient had suffered from constipation, only having a bowel movement once every six-to-seven days. The stool was hard, and when the patient passed stools, her anus was extremely painful. She had frequently used enemas and oral medicines, such as phenolphthalein tablets, Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*), and Sennae Folium (*fān xiè yè*), but the effects had been minimal. Her tongue lacked moisture and the sides were red. It had a thin, yellow coating with scant fluids. The patient's pulse was wiry and rough.

Differentiation of Patterns and Discussion of Treatment

Physician A This pattern of long-term constipation seems to be due to deficiency. In the Chinese medicine textbooks, there are only two patterns for deficiency constipation: qi deficiency and blood deficiency.

In cases of qi deficiency, there are symptoms such as shortness of breath, lack of strength, defecation that does not move smoothly, and stools that are neither dry nor hard. The tongue is pale and tender and the pulse is deficient and weak. Appropriate treatment consists of augmenting the qi and moistening the Intestines with a formula such as Astragalus Decoction (*huáng qí tāng*) from the late 18th-century work *Appendices to the Golden Cabinet* (*Jīn guì yì*), which consists of Astragali

Radix (*huáng qí*), Citri reticulatae Pericarpium (*chén pí*), Cannabis Semen (*huǒ má rén*), and honey.

In cases of blood deficiency, there are symptoms such as lusterless complexion, dizziness, and palpitations. The tongue is very pale and the pulse is fine and rough. Appropriate treatment consists of nourishing blood and moistening dryness with a formula such as Master Shen's Moisten the Intestines Pill (*rùn cháng wán*), which consists of Angelicae sinensis Radix (*dāng guī*), Rehmanniae Radix (*shēng dì huáng*), Cannabis Semen (*huǒ má rén*), Persicae Semen (*táo rén*), and Aurantii Fructus (*zhī ké*).

Does this case fit into one of these patterns?

Dr. Yu The blood-deficiency constipation pattern described in the textbooks is not seen very commonly in the clinic. Furthermore, blood-deficiency patients don't usually list constipation as their chief complaint. Put another way, in terms of the symptoms described for this pattern, constipation is rarely the patient's main issue. It is only in books that it appears this way.

Qi-deficiency constipation, however, is worth discussing. What is qi-deficiency constipation? It seems to be a pattern in which the patient strains in the bathroom, sweats, has shortness of breath, and has difficulty passing stool, even though the stool itself is neither dry nor hard. This clearly describes a middle burner qi deficiency with a lack of sufficient force to push out the stool. Not only are purgatives contraindicated in these cases, but even intestine-moistening substances such as Cannabis Semen (*huǒ má rén*) and honey, which are used in Astragalus Decoction (*huáng qí tāng*), should be used with extreme caution, because enriching-moistening herbs can harm the yang qi of the middle burner.

For this type of constipation I generally use a large packet of Tonify the Middle to Augment the Qi Decoction

(*bǔ zhōng yì qì tāng*) to tonify the Spleen and cause the clear to ascend. I combine that with Calm the Stomach Powder (*píng wèi sǎn*) to harmonize the Stomach and to cause turbidity to descend. I add Armeniacae Semen (*xìng rén*) and Eriobotryae Folium (*pí pá yè*) to disseminate and to clarify the Lung qi. When Spleen qi rises, Stomach qi descends, and Lung qi disseminates, the pivot mechanism then functions properly and this leads to smooth bowel movements.

Finally, when I write about these cases, I usually avoid the use of the term ‘constipation,’ but instead use terms such as ‘stools that fail to move smoothly,’ ‘impeded defecation,’ or ‘difficult defecation.’ Furthermore, I will add a note to specify that the stool is not dry. Although using this language is long-winded, it helps me to avoid falling into a fixed pattern and reminds me about the importance of correctly identifying the cause of the symptoms before determining the appropriate treatment.

Physician B The symptom of constipation has too many different names. Modern books on the subject usually divide constipation into four distinct types: heat, excess, qi, and deficiency. The influential Ming-dynasty physician Zhang Jing-Yue wanted to avoid this annoyance and so simply divided constipation into two types: yin knotting and yang knotting. In your experience, which type of constipation is most commonly seen in the clinic?

Dr. Yu Deficiency constipation is the most common type that I have treated. The most important pathodynamic is insufficiency of Spleen yin with Intestinal dryness. This type is referred to as ‘habitual’ constipation in biomedicine.

Physician A How is it that the type of constipation you say you treat most frequently is not even mentioned in standard textbooks?

Dr. Yu The Spleen is the ultimate yin (至陰 *zhì yīn*) of yin. ‘Ultimate’ means ‘large’ and we can say that its fluid permeates the entire body. However, the character 至 *zhì* also means far-reaching, and so we can also say that the Spleen distributes essence throughout the body. When Spleen yin is insufficient, the fluids of the whole body become depleted and the Stomach and Intestines are the first to be affected by this. Why? Because, as it says in Chapter 45 of *Basic Questions* (*Sū wèn*), “the Spleen manages the proper movement of fluids on behalf of the Stomach.”

Patients with constipation from insufficiency of Spleen yin are commonly seen with symptoms such as hunger without a desire to eat, thirst without a desire to drink, dry lips, emaciation, fatigue, lack of strength, a pale tongue that lacks moisture, and a thin, dry tongue coating. The patient above fits this pattern.

In terms of well-known classical formulas that are used to enrich Spleen yin, one of the first to know is Peony and Licorice Decoction (*sháo yào gān cǎo tāng*). The early

When Spleen yin is insufficient, the fluids of the whole body become depleted and the Stomach and Intestines are the first to be affected by this.

modern physician Zhang Xi-Chun praised this formula for its ability to transform yin with sour and sweet flavors, and he would add Ginseng Radix (*rén shēn*) for its strong ability to nourish Spleen yin. When I treat habitual constipation caused by insufficiency of Spleen yin and Intestinal dryness, I generally use Peony and Licorice Decoction (*sháo yào gān cǎo tāng*) as follows:

Paeoniae Radix alba (<i>bái sháo</i>)	30-50g
Glycyrrhizae Radix (<i>gān cǎo</i>)	5-10g
Glycyrrhizae Radix preparata (<i>zhì gān cǎo</i>)	5-10g

These herbs greatly enrich Spleen yin. To this I add Cassiae Semen (*jué míng zǐ*) 30g and wine-prepared Cistanthes Herba (*jiǔ ròu cōng róng*) 30g for their ability to moisten the Intestines and to unblock the bowels. Generally, the treatment is quite effective.

However, there are some stubborn cases in which there is distinct abdominal distention. For these cases, I add dry-fried Raphani Semen (*chǎo lái fú zǐ*) 30-50g to unblock the bowels and to cause the qi to descend, which accelerates the effect of the formula. The case above is an example of this usage. The rationale for using Raphani Semen (*lái fú zǐ*) in these cases is that its ability to eliminate distention and to cause the qi to descend is similar to Aurantii Fructus immaturus (*zhǐ shí*) and Magnoliae officinalis Cortex (*hòu pò*), but its effect in unblocking the bowels is even stronger. Thus, the use of Raphani Semen (*lái fú zǐ*) can be expanded into cases of excess, heat, and wind constipation. Furthermore, because its nature is moistening, it causes qi to descend and also unblocks the bowels without injuring the yin. Thus, it is suitable for deficiency constipation due to Intestinal dryness. If abdominal distention is absent, replace Raphani Semen (*lái fú zǐ*) with Armeniacae Semen (*xìng rén*) 15g and Eriobotryae Folium (*pí pá yè*) 30g, as noted above, to disseminate and to clarify the Lung qi, thereby “removing the lid in order to open the teapot.” These strategies will yield quick results.

Physician A According to Chinese medical literature, substances that enrich Spleen yin should be sweet, bland, and neutral, or sweet, cool, and moistening. Why do you use Cistanthes Herba (*ròu cōng róng*), which is a warm substance that supplements Kidney yang?

Dr. Yu There is no question that when the Spleen yin is insufficient, one should nourish the Spleen. Nonetheless, according to Chapter 1 of *Basic Questions*, “The Kidneys govern water. It receives the essence of the five yin

organs and six yang organs and then stores it.” Once the Kidney yin is ample, it will be easier to enrich the Spleen yin. To enrich the Spleen yin without supplementing the Kidney is incorrect. Unfortunately, most substances that enrich Kidney yin are gentle, yin-type substances that are lacking in the power to create movement. This has led to difficulties for later generations of physicians who enthusiastically invoke the principle of “increasing water to move the boat.”

Cistanches Herba (*ròu cōng róng*) enters the Kidney and Bladder channels. It is traditionally used to warm and tonify the Kidney yang. However, as noted in the *Treasury of Words on the Materia Medica* (*Běn cǎo huì yán*), this warming tonification is special in that it is “warm, but not hot; tonifying, but not overpowering; warming, but not drying; slippery, but not draining; thus, it is referred to as *cōng róng*, which means ‘unhurried’ and ‘leisurely.’” Although it is a yang herb, its nature is moistening, fluid, and gentle. It enriches the Kidney and replenishes essence. In a larger dosage, it also creates movement; thus, Cistanches Herba (*ròu cōng róng*) moistens the Intestines and unblocks the bowels. Within this one naturally-occurring substance is the ability to tonify yang, replenish essence, moisten the Intestines, and unblock the bowels. This is truly rare.

If you consider the formula that I generally use, there is a large dose of gentle, yin-natured herbs such as Paeoniae Radix alba (*bái sháo*), Glycyrrhizae Radix (*gān cǎo*), and Cassiae Semen (*jué míng zǐ*). These substances must be accompanied by something like Cistanches Herba (*ròu cōng róng*), which has the ability to generate yang qi. Only then will the formula be able to stimulate peristalsis and to achieve the effect of moistening the Intestines and unblocking the bowels. In fact, Cistanches Herba (*ròu cōng róng*) is the only herb in the formula for which there is no substitute.

The diagnosis in this case was insufficiency of Spleen yin with Intestinal dryness. I used Peony and Licorice Decoction (*sháo yào gān cǎo tāng*) with a large dosage of Paeoniae Radix alba (*bái sháo*) and additional herbs.

Treatment and Outcome

Paeoniae Radix alba (<i>bái sháo</i>)	30g
Glycyrrhizae Radix (<i>gān cǎo</i>)	5g
Glycyrrhizae Radix preparata (<i>zhì gān cǎo</i>)	5g
Cassiae Semen (<i>jué míng zǐ</i>)	30g
wine-prepared Cistanches Herba (<i>jiǔ ròu cōng róng</i>)	30g

After three packets, the patient was still unable to pass stool and her abdominal distention was unbearable. I therefore

added 50g of dry-fried Raphani Semen (*chǎo lái fú zǐ*).

After one packet, the patient’s bowels had opened and her abdominal distention had decreased markedly. In order to secure the treatment effect, I removed the Raphani Semen (*lái fú zǐ*) and gave her 12 more packets of the original prescription. Three months later the symptoms had not recurred.

Follow-up Intake Examination

One year later, however, the patient returned. After a period of fatigue and stress during which she neither ate nor slept well, her constipation had returned. Although she tried taking the same formula again, it did not work this time. Furthermore, taking it seemed to intensify feelings of drooping distention in her lower abdomen.

The results of the second intake examination were as follows: a bowel movement every 2-3 days, unformed stool, straining to pass stool, spontaneous sweating, shortness of breath, and mild abdominal distention with a sinking sensation. Shortly after having a bowel movement, she would again have the sensation of needing to defecate and would then return to the bathroom. It was quite upsetting. Her tongue was tender and red with a thin, white coating. Her pulse was wiry and weak.

I considered this to be sinking of the middle qi and weakness of the transportive functions of the Spleen; thus, I chose a modification of Tonify the Middle to Augment the Qi Decoction (*bǔ zhōng yì qì tāng*):

Astragali Radix (<i>huáng qí</i>)	30g
Codonopsis Radix (<i>dǎng shēn</i>)	30g
Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma (<i>bái zhú</i>)	60g
Cimicifugae Rhizoma (<i>shēng má</i>)	6g
Bupleuri Radix (<i>chái hú</i>)	6g
Platycodi Radix (<i>jié gěng</i>)	6g
Zingiberis Rhizoma (<i>gān jiāng</i>)	10g
Angelicae dahuricae Radix (<i>bái zhī</i>)	10g
Glycyrrhizae Radix preparata (<i>zhì gān cǎo</i>)	6g

After eight packets, the patient’s bowel movements were much smoother and the stool was well formed. Her sweating and shortness of breath had also decreased. Her tongue and pulse were unchanged. Because of the fact that she was busy with work, she was unable to continue taking the herbs in decoction form. I advised her to frequently take both Tonify the Middle to Augment the Qi Decoction (*bǔ zhōng yì qì tāng*) and Restore the Spleen Decoction (*guī pí tāng*) in pill form.

Disease	Main Symptoms	Pattern Identification	Treatment Method	Formula
HABITUAL CONSTIPATION	Stubborn constipation and abdominal distention	Spleen yin deficiency and Intestinal dryness	Enrich the Spleen and moisten the Intestines	Peony and Licorice Decoction (<i>sháo yào gān cǎo tāng</i>)
HABITUAL CONSTIPATION	Unformed stool and straining	Sinking of middle qi and weakness of Splenic movement	Augment the Spleen qi	Tonify the Middle to Augment the Qi Decoction (<i>bǔ zhōng yì qì tāng</i>)

Reflections and Clarifications

Physician A The famous formula for treating insufficiency of Spleen yin with Intestinal dryness is Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*), and yet, it seems as though you never use this formula. Why not?

Dr. Yu The ability of Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*) to enrich Spleen yin is quite limited. In fact, although the use of the formula has been expanded to include habitual constipation from Spleen yin deficiency, the formula does not match this pattern.

Today, constipation that occurs after surgery is often treated with Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*), and although it unblocks the bowels at the beginning, typically, after a while, the constipation recurs. The longer the patient takes the formula, the less effective it becomes. Eventually, when the formula ceases to work at all, many of these patients will resort to harsh draining substances such as Sennae Folium (*fān xiè yè*) in order to temporarily unblock the bowels. Given this situation, my feeling is that physicians do not truly understand when to use Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*).

Line 247 of the *yáng míng* section in the *Discussion of Cold Damage* (*Shāng hán lùn*) states: “When the dorsal pedis pulse is floating and rough, floating means that the Stomach qi is strong [from a pathogen] and rough means that urination is frequent. As the floating and the rough grapple with each other, bowel movements will be hard and the Spleen will be bound. Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*) governs.”

The essential pathodynamic of this pattern is Stomach heat damaging the Spleen. The Spleen is restrained by the Stomach heat and is thereby unable to move the fluids of the Stomach. The fluids thus do not moisten the Intestines properly, leading to hard stool. Zhang Zhong-Jing composed Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*) by starting with Minor Order the Qi Decoction (*xiǎo chéng qì tāng*), which drains heat, unblocks the bowels, and eliminates distention, and Rhei Radix et Rhizoma (*dà huáng*), Magnoliae officinalis Cortex (*hòu pò*), and Aurantii Fructus immaturus (*zhī shí*). To this base, he added Cannabis Semen (*huǒ má rén*), Armeniacae Semen (*xìng rén*), and Paeoniae Radix alba (*bái sháo*).

Given that he started with Minor Order the Qi Decoction (*xiǎo chéng qì tāng*), we can conclude that this pattern belongs within the classification of *yáng míng* bowel excess. Because the bound heat damages the fluids, leading to dryness, he added Cannabis Semen (*huǒ má rén*), Armeniacae Semen (*xìng rén*), and Paeoniae Radix alba (*bái sháo*) to moisten Intestinal dryness. Later physicians have used this formula to treat heat-type constipation, which manifests with symptoms such as constipation, scanty yellow urine, fever, abdominal distention, abdominal pain, dry mouth, thirst, a red tongue with a yellow coating, and a rapid pulse; these are all signs of heat. In this case, the

formula matches the pattern and good results are reliable.

However, when considering habitual constipation from Spleen yin insufficiency with Intestinal dryness, the fact that it is called ‘habitual’ indicates that it usually develops slowly and lasts over a long period of time. Further, it is not generally accompanied by a whole set of heat symptoms. Why then would someone recommend using Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*) over a long period of time?

Physician C Although Minor Order the Qi Decoction (*xiǎo chéng qì tāng*) is the base of the formula, historical commentators have noted that the formula is named after Cannabis Semen (*huǒ má rén*) and that it should be considered the chief ingredient, given its ability to moisten Intestinal dryness and to unblock the bowels. Further, Armeniacae Semen (*xìng rén*) also moistens the Intestines and unblocks the bowels. Finally, Paeoniae Radix alba (*bái sháo*) harmonizes the nutritive aspect and relaxes tension. The combination of Rhei Radix et Rhizoma (*dà huáng*), Aurantii Fructus immaturus (*zhī shí*), and Magnoliae officinalis Cortex (*hòu pò*) drains heat, discharges excess, moves qi, and guides out stagnation. In the notes following the formula in the source text, it states, “Take the above six ingredients and make into pills. ... Take three times a day. Increase the dosage until the desired affect is achieved.” The fact that the formula is made into pills highlights that the formula is a moderate, moistening formula that directs downward. Would it not be fair to say that it is from this suggestion that the origin of the use of Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*) for habitual constipation arises?

Dr. Yu It is not as simple as that. Just because the name of the formula is Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*), the chief ingredient is Cannabis Semen (*huǒ má rén*)? According to the traditional dosages of the pill version of the formula, Rhei Radix et Rhizoma (*dà huáng*) is 500g, whereas Cannabis Semen (*huǒ má rén*) is just 2 *shēng*, which is around 30-60g. From that perspective, Rhei Radix et Rhizoma (*dà huáng*) in a large dosage is given primacy to emphasize its ability to drain heat and to unblock the bowels.

In this pattern, the knotted heat is relatively mild compared to the pattern for which Minor Order the Qi Decoction (*xiǎo chéng qì tāng*) is intended, and the damage to fluids is relatively severe. Thus, we can say that Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*) is built on the functional foundation of Minor Order the Qi Decoction (*xiǎo chéng qì tāng*) to drain heat, unblock the bowels, and eliminate fullness. The addition of Cannabis Semen (*huǒ má rén*), Armeniacae Semen (*xìng rén*), and Paeoniae Radix alba (*bái sháo*) works to moisten Intestinal dryness. The change from decoction to pill creates a moderate downward-draining formula, but even so, once the stool moves, the formula should no longer be taken. The formula is not named after the primary ingredient, Rhei Radix et Rhizoma (*dà huáng*), but is instead named after the assistant, Cannabis Semen

(*huǒ má rén*), as a way of highlighting the secondary pathodynamic of fluid damage and Intestinal dryness. In this way, Zhang Zhong-Jing was calling attention to the fact that this pattern is fundamentally different than the basic Order the Qi Decoction (*chéng qì tāng*) patterns.

To return to the original point, this formula treats the basic pathodynamic of knotted heat. There is no avoiding this point, regardless of what the name of the formula might highlight with regards to fluid damage or Intestinal dryness. Modern textbooks classify this formula as one of the primary formulas for heat constipation and this classification makes a great deal of sense.

If the formula is instead used for deficiency constipation, or for a long period of time, it is difficult to avoid damaging yin because of the bitter, drying natures of Rhei Radix et Rhizoma (*dà huáng*), Aurantii Fructus immaturus (*zhǐ shí*), and Magnoliae officinalis Cortex (*hòu pò*). The common notion that Hemp Seed Pill (*má zǐ rén wán*) nourishes Spleen yin and that it can be used for a long period of time without ill effects is actually quite far from the truth.

Physician A Presently, many physicians consider treating habitual constipation with a large dose of Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma (*bái zhú*). Why did you not consider this approach?

Dr. Yu Actually, I was one of the first physicians to use that approach, as you can readily find in the case records. Everyone knows that using a large dose (~60g) of Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma (*bái zhú*) to unblock the bowels was first introduced by the famous physician from Beijing, Wei Long-Ji, in the 1970s. This idea caused quite a stir in Chinese medicine circles at the time and my colleagues and I began to use it in the clinic and to develop this application. Why is it that Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma (*bái zhú*), which is traditionally used to strengthen the Spleen and to stop diarrhea, can also be used to unblock the bowels? In a publication¹ on this topic, we stated that in moderate dosages, Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma (*bái zhú*) strengthens the Spleen and stops diarrhea,

yet in large dosages, it improves the transportive function of the Spleen and unblocks the bowels, thus revealing its regulatory action on bowel function.

In recent years, I have only used this method very rarely. For one thing, I have seldom encountered a case of chronic constipation that did not respond to the other formulas that I normally use, and for another, it is necessary to use unprocessed Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma (*shēng bái zhú*). In my local herb markets, this is difficult to procure. In any case, large dosages of Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma (*bái zhú*) are used to treat stool that is not clearly formed, but is still difficult to pass. It is not to be used for constipation when the stool is dry.

Physician D You have said that most of the constipation patients that you treat exhibit a deficiency cold pattern. Why do you think that is the case?

Dr. Yu I would speculate that the pressures of modern life have contributed to this. Nowadays, the common lifestyle involves overeating, poor sleeping habits, bad dietary choices, insufficient exercise, and mental stress. How could this not deplete the body's qi and fluids? Add to this the frequent use of antibiotics, air conditioning, and pollution and one can see how modern life is deleterious to the qi and fluids and can give rise to deficiency cold patterns.

Dr. Yu Guo-Jun practises traditional Chinese medicine in the city of Leshan, Sichuan province. He learned Chinese medicine directly from senior practitioners during the Cul-tural Revolution and was one of the main students of Jiang Er-Xun, a physician who is renowned for his work with classical formulas. Dr. Yu assisted Dr. Jiang for many years in teaching his advanced classes for physicians, and then took over those classes after Dr. Jiang retired. Dr. Yu is the author of several books, has lectured in China and the United States, and continues to practice at the Leshan People's Hospital. A Walk Along the River: Transmitting a Medical Lineage through Case Records and Discussions is translated by Andrew Ellis, Craig Mitchell and Michael Fitzgerald and is published by Eastland Press.

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