

The Importance of Releasing the Exterior While Harmonising the Spleen and Stomach in the Treatment of Gastrointestinal Disorders

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Abstract

This article documents the clinical importance of simultaneously releasing the exterior whilst harmonising the Spleen and Stomach during the Chinese herbal treatment of gastrointestinal disorders. The explanation is based on three classical herbal prescriptions and Liu Wansu's theory of the 'xuanfu' (pores). The author concludes that to obtain superior therapeutic effects in the treatment of gastrointestinal diseases it is necessary to treat yin and yang - interior and exterior - together by including exterior-releasing herbs that open the 'xuanfu' to harmonise the Spleen and Stomach, clear dampness and return the Spleen to its proper function.

Background

The famous doctor Liu Wansu in the Jin dynasty (1115-1234 C.E.) stated:

'Everything has xuanfu (pores), referring to all the orifices in the organs, skin, muscles, tendons, bone marrow, nails and teeth, [xuanfu] constitute the pathways and gates for qi to ascend, descend, exit and enter.'

玄府者，无物不有，人之脏腑、皮毛、肌肉、筋膜、骨髓、爪牙，至于世之万物，尽皆有之，乃气出入升降之道路门户也。¹

Each of the organs have pores and thus their own 'exterior'. As long as these xuanfu are unobstructed then ying (nutritive) qi, wei (defensive) qi, blood, body fluids and other nutrients can circulate without resistance, and the organs, channels, limbs, orifices, skin, bone and hair will be sufficiently nourished and able to perform their functions. Liu called this physiological phenomenon 'xuanfu, qi and body fluids diffusing fluently' (玄府气液宣通), and emphasised that only if the xuanfu function properly can qi and body fluids move freely and can the organs perform their physiological functions. Including exterior-releasing herbs in formulas that treat diseases of the viscera helps the xuanfu to function properly so that pathogenic qi is not become trapped inside. In this way, combining the treatment principles of releasing the exterior when harmonising the Spleen and Stomach significantly improves clinical results

in the Chinese herbal treatment of gastrointestinal diseases. In fact, many classical prescriptions were created in line with this principle, as discussed below:

1. *Tong Xie Yao Fang* (痛泻药方, Important Formula for Painful Diarrhoea)

Tong Xie Yao Fang is a well-known formula that treats diarrhoea due to disharmony of the Liver and Spleen. In this formula Bai Zhu (*Atractylodes macrocephala* Rhizoma) replenishes qi and invigorates the Spleen; Bai Shao (*Paeoniae Radix alba*) astringes and strengthens the Liver, relieves spasms and stops pain; Chen Pi (*Citri reticulatae Pericarpium*) promotes the movement of qi, dries dampness and harmonises the Stomach; and Fang Feng (*Saposhnikovia Radix*) releases the exterior and guides the herbs to the Liver and the Spleen. An ancient doctor of Chinese medicine from the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 C.E.), Wang Haogu, stated that this formula can 'gather Liver qi' (搜肝气). The Liver corresponds to the wood phase and wind. By dispersing exterior wind, Fang Feng soothes the Liver, which helps to harmonise Spleen qi. In modern times this formula is commonly used for colitis and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). In addition, modern pharmacological research has shown that it can significantly inhibit rabbit bowel movements both *in vitro* and *in vivo*, has a strong anti-histamine effect and can inhibit small intestine movement.²

2. *Xiang Ru San* (香薷散, Mosla Powder)

Xiang Ru San is a recipe that treats abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea caused by invasion of summer-heat and cold. In the summer, high temperature speeds up the body's metabolism, leading to opening of the pores. Furthermore, at this time people often eat cold food and prefer sleeping in a cool environment, both of which can contribute to invasion of pathogenic cold or summer-heat. Summer-heat is usually accompanied with dampness, which encumbers the Spleen. When the Spleen becomes encumbered by summer-heat, dampness and cold mingled together, the middle jiao fails to transform water and food, giving rise to gastrointestinal symptoms. The *Ben Cao Jing Shu* (Chinese Materia Medica Sutra) stated, 'Xiang Ru (Moslae Herba), which is pungent and warm in nature and has adjunctive functions of releasing the exterior and dissipating cold ... can resolve dampness and drain water.' (香薷, 辛散温通, 故能解寒郁之暑气 ... 除湿利水之功也。). Xiang Ru is pungent and warm and can move qi, so it can promote the function of Spleen, harmonise the middle jiao and resolve dampness. Xiang Ru has been called a 'summer form' of Ma Huang (Ephedrae Herba); the sweat-promoting effects of Ma Huang are so fierce that many doctors do not use it in summer for fear of damaging the patient's zheng qi, whereas Xiang Ru works gently to open the xuanfu and resolve summer-dampness, making it more appropriate to disperse exterior pathogens in summer. In this formula, Hou Po (Magnoliae officinalis Cortex) is the minister herb; it is bitter and warm and has the function of promoting the movement of qi, relieving distention and removing internal dampness. The assistant herb Bai Bian Dou (Lablab Semen) is sweet and neutral, it invigorates the Spleen and harmonises the middle jiao, expels summer-heat and resolves dampness. A little white wine is added when preparing the decoction to strengthen its function of dissipating cold and activating yang qi, thus enhancing the gentle power of Xiang Ru to expel pathogenic qi. This formula is commonly used for acute gastroenteritis and other gastrointestinal diseases due to invasion of wind-cold and summer-heat. The result of this formula's effect of resolving dampness by releasing exterior are that - in the words of Liu Wansu -, 'Xuanfu, qi and body fluids dredge fluently' so that the middle jiao function returns to normal.

3. *Huo Xiang Zheng Qi San* (藿香正气散, Agastache Powder to Rectify the Qi)

Huo Xiang Zheng Qi San is often used to treat malaria, gastric flu, acute gastroenteritis and dyspepsia - in fact any condition that manifests as a pattern of the Spleen and Stomach congested by dampness with exterior wind-cold. Huo Xiang (Pogostemonis/Agastaches Herba) is pungent, warm and aromatic in nature. It resolves

dampness, harmonises the Stomach, mildly releases the exterior to disperse cold, ascends the clear and descends the turbid, all of which make it specific for treating vomiting and diarrhoea. The *Ben Cao Zheng Yi* (本草正义) stated, 'Huo Xiang, delicate fragrance and slightly warm, good at rectifying damp turbidity and phlegm-drool in the central region, is an excellent substance to arouse the Spleen, disinhibit the Stomach and vitalise clear yang. (藿香, 清分微温, 善理中州湿浊痰涎, 为醒脾快胃, 振动消阳妙品。)'³ When it is combined with Su Ye (Folium Perillae Frutescentis) and Bai Zhi (Angelicae dahuricae Radix), both of which are pungent and aromatic, the function of releasing the exterior and resolving dampness are magnified. Ban Xia (Pinelliae ternatae Rhizoma), Chen Pi (Citri reticulatae Pericarpium) and Sheng Jiang (Zingiberis Rhizoma recens) are added to dry dampness, harmonise the Stomach, descend rebellious qi and stop vomiting. Bai Zhu (Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma) and Fu Ling (Poria) are included to invigorate the Spleen and drain dampness, harmonise the middle jiao and stop diarrhoea. Hou Po (Magnoliae officinalis Cortex) and Da Fu Pi (Arecae Pericarpium) promote the movement of qi, resolve dampness, regulate the middle jiao and relieve distention. Jie Geng (Platycodi Radix) not only diffuses Lung qi and benefits diaphragmatic function, but also releases the exterior and resolves dampness. Sheng Jiang (Zingiberis Rhizoma recens) and Gan Cao (Glycyrrhizae Radix) are used to invigorate the Spleen and Stomach and harmonise the effects of the other herbs. In sum, this decoction is effective for the pattern of Spleen and Stomach being congested by dampness with the exterior blocked by wind-cold. The treatment principle of dispersing exterior wind-cold helps to resolve interior dampness, descend turbid qi and support ascent of clear qi.

Conclusion

Although the herbal formulas *Xiang Ru San* and *Huo Xiang Zheng Qi San* treat exterior patterns, they can also be used to treat gastrointestinal diseases without an exterior aspect, in which case the exterior herbs open the xuanfu in the interior to assist the Spleen to achieve its best function. This is consistent with Liu Wansu's theory of the xuanfu. All of the zangfu are in an interior-exterior relationship, for instance, the Lung is exteriorly paired with the Large Intestine. The Lung is associated with the skin and body hair, and its associated fu, the Large Intestine, has a connection with the skin. Such relationships show that the exterior is connected to the interior, and partly explains why simultaneously releasing the exterior whilst harmonising the Spleen and Stomach can achieve better therapeutic results than just harmonising the Spleen and Stomach alone.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no potential conflict of interest.

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