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Tonifying Method in Shang Han Lun

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Tonifying method is one of the eight therapeutic methods introduced in Shang Han Lun (Treatise on Cold Damage 伤寒论) written by Zhang Ji (Zhang Zhongjing) in the Eastern Han Dynasty (3rd century). This method functions in invigorating qi, blood, yin and yang, and it is used for various deficiency syndromes. In this article, two representative formulae will be introduced: Xiao Jian Zhong Tang (Minor Centre-Fortifying Decoction 小建中汤) and Zhigancao Tang (Prepared Licorice Decoction 炙甘草汤).

1. Xiao Jian Zhong Tang (Minor Centre-Fortifying Decoction 小建中汤)

In Shang Han Lun, there are 2 clauses (Clauses 100, 102) on Xiao Jian Zhong Tang.

Clause 100 states that “febrile disease caused by cold: if the yang pulse is hesitant and yin pulse is tight, this will indicate an acute pain in the abdomen. Use Xiao Jian Zhong Tang first”; Clause 102 states that “febrile disease caused by cold for 2 or 3 days, if the patient suffers agitation and palpitation, use Xiao Jian Zhong Tang”.

Additionally, there are other 2 clauses on this formula in Chapters 6 and 15 of Jin Kui Yao Lue (Synopsis of the Golden Chamber 金匱要略), which is the sister work of Shan Han Lun (Treatise on Cold Damage 伤寒论)

The formula consists of the following ingredients:

Shaoyao (Radix Paeoniae) 6 Liang /18g (should be Bai Shaoyao)

Guizhi (Ramulus Cinnamomi) 3 Liang /9g (without bark)

Zhigancao (Radix Glycyrrhizae Praeparatae) 2 Liang /6g

Shengjiang (Rhizoma Zingiberis Recens) 3 Liang /9 g

Dazao (Fructus Ziziphi Jujubae) 12 pcs

Jiaoyi (Saccharum Granorum) 1 Sheng /30g

The original preparation and administration of this formula in Shang Han Lun is this: boil the above 5 herbs in 7 Sheng (140ml) of water till 3 Sheng (600ml) is left. Put Jiaoyi into the decoction and simmer it till it melts. Take 1 Sheng (200 ml) orally each time when it is warm, 3 times a day. The patients with nausea should not take this decoction because it is too sweet.

The action of this formula is to tonify and warm the middle-jiao (the spleen and stomach) and relieve spasm and pain.

Jiaoyi is the principal ingredient in this formula. The dosage of Jiaoyi is big. Its sweet taste and warm nature will facilitate its effect on the spleen, and help to replenish the spleen-qi and nourish the spleen-yin. It will not only warm the middle-jiao and restoring qi, but also regulate the internal

organs to relieve spasm. Bai Shaoyao and Guizhi are the assistants in this formula. Bai Shaoyao, sour in flavour and slightly cold in nature, has the function in replenishing yin and blood to relieve spasm and pain. Guizhi, pungent in flavour and warm in nature, is effective for supporting yang-qi. The combined administration of these 2 herbs – one warm in nature and beneficial to yang, and another cold and beneficial to yin – helps regulating the relationship between wei qi and ying qi (yin and yang). Shengjiang is used to replenish the wei qi (yang) while Dazao is used to tonify ying qi (yin) and strengthen the spleen and stomach. Zhigancao regulates the middle-jiao and tonifies qi.

In Shan Han Lun Clause 100, the indication of Xiao Jian Zhong Tang is for a patient who has middle qi deficiency, and then attacked by external cold. In this situation, the patient should have mild fever and aversion to cold, but the main symptom is acute abdominal pain which should be treated first. Therefore, Xiao Jian Zhong Tang is used first, as it can warm the middle, replete the deficiency, modify the acuteness and stop pain.

In Shan Han Lun Clause 102, the indication of Xiao Jian Zhong Tang is for a patient who has cold attack for 2 or 3 days. At that time, due to the deficiency of the middle qi, the cold pathogen has invaded inwards, causing middle yang qi and yin blood deficiencies. In this situation, the patient develops palpitation in the heart and agitation. The treatment should then be to tonify the middle qi and the spleen.

Clinically, Xiao Jian Zhong Tang can be used for treatment of deficiency-cold syndromes, such as chronic gastritis, duodenal ulcer, vomiting of pregnancy, migraine, and Meniere's disease.

Cai (1984) reported that using this formula for 11 cases of habitual constipation and claim that all the patients got satisfied results.

Studies in recent years (Zhang 1990) have indicated that this formula possesses the efficacies in relieving spasm, alleviating pain, promoting blood circulation, strengthening digestion and absorption, accelerating the healing of ulcers and nourishing the body.

Li (2005) use this formula for treatments of syringomyelia and aplastic anaemia, with good effects.

2. Zhigancao Tang (Prepared Licorice Decoction 炙甘草汤)

In Shang Han Lun, there is only 1 clause on this formula, Clause 177. It states that “a patient with febrile disease caused by cold manifests as severe palpitation with irregular pulse, Zhigancao Tang should be used.”

The formula is composed of following ingredients:

Zhigancao (Radix Glycyrrhizae Praeparata) 4 Liang/12g

Shengjiang (Rhizoma Zingiberis Recens) 3 Liang /9g

Renshen (Radix Ginseng) 2 Liang /6g

Shengdihuang (Radix Rehmanniae) 1 Jin/30g

Guizhi (Ramulus Cinnamomi) 3 Liang /9g (without bark)

Ejiao (Colla Corri Asini) 2 Liang /6g

Maimendong (Radix Ophiopogonis) 0.5 Sheng/10g

Maren (Fructus Cannabis) 0.5 Sheng/10g

Dazao (Fructus Ziziphi Jujubae) 30 pieces

The original preparation and administration of this formula in Shang Han Lun is this: boil the above herbs in 7 Sheng (1,400 ml) of rice wine and 8 Sheng (160 ml) of water till 3 Sheng (600 ml) is left. Filter the decoction and put Ejiao in it and continue stir till it melts. 1 Sheng (200 ml) each dose, 3 times a day, orally.

The function of this formula is replenishing qi, enriching blood and nourishing yin to restore normal pulse. This is why the formula has another name Fu Mai Tang “Pulse-restoring Decoction”.

Acting as a principle herb, Zhigancao has the effects of enriching qi and replenishing the stomach to restore the pulse. Renshen and Dazao nourish the heart and spleen by the way of replenishing qi. Shengdihuang, Maidong, Ejiao and Maren, all sweet in taste and moist in nature for nourishing yin and the heart, supplement the blood, moisten the lung and promote the production of body fluid. Shengjiang, Guizhi and rice wine, acrid in taste and warm in nature, are used for activating yang and restoring the pulse.

Clinically, this formula is often used for treatment of ventricular premature beat, primary stage of atrioventricular block, functional arrhythmia, auricular fibrillation and cardiovascular neurosis.

It is important to note that rice wine is used in the preparation of the decoction. Some active ingredients are soluble in alcohol but not in water. If wine is not used in the preparation, this formula may not give the desired effects.

Lin et al (1984) applied this formula to 40 cases of ventricular premature contraction. After taking 20 doses, 31 patients’ pulse became normal, 7 patients’ pulse improved and 2 patients had no effective.

Zhao (1982) used this formula to treat a 30 year old man with central choroido-retinitis. After taking it for 20 days, the patient’s condition improved; continued to take it for a month, the patient was cured.

Recent studies (Zhang 1990) have indicated that this formula has the efficacies of increasing cerebral excitement, strengthening the function of the heart, and dilating the coronary artery.

Summary

Tonifying method was one of the 8 therapeutic methods in Shang Han Lun. It was chiefly applied to deficiency syndromes during febrile disease. Two representative formulae of this category have been discussed in this paper, namely: Xiao Jian Zhong Tang (Minor Centre-Fortifying Decoction 小建中汤) and Zhigancao Tang (Prepared Licorice Decoction 炙甘草汤).

Tonics are a rich subject in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). In the history of TCM development, many tonifying formulae were formulated after Zhang Zhongjing. There are four main categories: yin

tonics, yang tonics, xue tonics and qi tonic. They then sub-divide into the tonics of all major organs, for example heart-yang tonic, heart-yin tonic, heart xue tonic and heart qi tonics. There are also tonics for more than one organ. All these were, however, derived from the same principle which was first applied by Zhang Zhongjing.

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