

THE SCHOOL OF REPLENISHING THE SPLEEN AND STOMACH

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In the development of the system of correspondences in Chinese Medicine there were certain individuals who put a great importance in the function of the Spleen and the Stomach. This paper explores the theories of Li Kao, originator of the “Spleen School” who was very influential in the development of Chinese Medicine.

Many of the conditions, which we see as practitioners, relate to the concepts and theories discussed here. These theories are very important in treating conditions such as arthritis, immune system weakness, allergies, fatigue, digestive disorders, infertility and other especially chronic problems as well as problems arising from lifestyle imbalances.

Li Kao (1180-1251) is one of the few medical practitioners of the Sung-Chin-Yuan epoch whose biography can be found in official histories. He was a Confucian scholar of the Yuan dynasty. There are two medical texts that are attributed to him. One is *Chen-chu nang pu-i yao hsing fu* (*Correction of Deficiencies in the Pearl Purse and Poem of Drug Qualities*) and *Yung-yao fa nang* (*Regularities and Cosmological Correspondences in the Use of Drugs*). Li Kao is considered to be the originator of the “Spleen School”. His best-known work is *P'i Wei Lun* (*On the Spleen and Stomach*). The *Huang Ti Nei Ching* inspired his thoughts. He stated, “When the digestive system and the stomach in the body sustain damage, all kinds of illness can occur!”¹ Li Kao offered four postulates to back up this idea:

1. Human life is made possible by the yang influence of heaven absorbed by the body. These yang influences must accumulate in the stomach and the digestive region.
2. The development of man is made possible by the yin influences of the earth that flow to the body. These yin influences must undergo a transformation in the stomach and digestive region that renders them useful to the organism.
3. For nourishment the human body absorbs yang influences, which collect in the stomach and digestive region.
4. Through yin finest matter (*jing*) the human body achieves longevity. Yin finest matter has its origin in the stomach and digestive region, where it is formed from influences absorbed from external sources.²

Illness in the stomach or digestive region impairs the normal ability to assimilate, accumulate, transform, and distribute. Li Kao stressed three factors that can lead to these conditions:

- Irregular consumption of food and drink damages the

stomach first. If the stomach is affected, it is unable to supply the digestive system with the requisite substances. Finest influences and finest matter, which arise from water and grain in the organism, no longer flow through the body resulting in depletions.

- Excessive exhaustion of the body prevents the yang influences, normally radiated by the digestive region, from reaching the four extremities. The results are drowsiness and the need to sleep.
- Excessive emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, and fear cause the fire associated with the heart depot to flare up. In accordance with the doctrine of self-genesis among the five phases, fire is succeeded by soil, which is associated with the stomach and the digestive region. Bubbling up in the fire phase will spread to the soil phase and produce harmful effects there also.³

Li Kao focused treatment on methods that replenish (*pu*) the stomach and digestive region. His doctrine was called *Pu t'i p'ai* (“the school of replenishing the soil phase”) and also *Pu p'i wei p'ai* (“the school of replenishing spleen and stomach”)⁴

We can see how much the Spleen and Stomach, and hence the general vitality, is affected by lifestyle. Because diet plays such an important role in health, we must, as practitioners, counsel our patients to cultivate healthier eating habits. Recommending dietary changes can have very positive effects, but are often difficult to bring about because what and how we eat is tied into many factors, including emotional ones. In modern Western society there is often no problem with the availability of food; many people do develop irregular eating habits due to work schedule, emotional habits, and in some instances, poverty. Some people have embraced certain fad diets that foster unhealthy eating habits. For example, some people with chronic Spleen Deficiency may be under the impression that eating raw foods are healthy for them. In many modern industrial countries people eat modern industrial diets consisting of excessive amounts of sugar, fats, refined foods with little or no nutritional value, and foods with chemical additives.

Dietary recommendations can take three forms:

1. How we eat.
2. What foods need to be avoided for certain conditions.
3. Which foods support healing of the particular condition.

Very simple things can bring about positive health changes for our patients. For example, the practice of just eating when one eats. Reading or watching TV can have a less than

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positive effect on digestion no matter how good the quality of food, as can eating when angry or upset. Instructing patients to practice eating slowly and mindfully, chewing their food thoroughly, can be of great help to them. Slow, mindful eating makes us aware of the food we are taking in, its affect on our body, how much we need to feel satisfied. This practice is especially helpful for people who have difficulty with eating too fast or too much. It can also help patients become more sensitive to what they are putting into their bodies.

Often what one does not eat is as important than what one does eat. I routinely instruct my patients to avoid white sugar, white flour, and foods with chemicals in them. I consider this a first step toward healthier eating. After that we can talk about fats, meat, dairy products and what is best suited for that particular individual. There are specific recommendations as to which foods would best be avoided for problems with the Spleen and Stomach. These include: salad, citrus fruit and juice, too much salt, tofu, undercooked grain, millet, buckwheat, milk, cheese, seaweed, agar, too much liquid with meals, and too many sweet foods. It is specifically advised to avoid raw and cold-natured foods.

For patients with Stomach/Spleen issues a healthy diet is centered on whole grains and cooked vegetables. Foods that are naturally sweet and yellow in color such as squash, pumpkin, sweet potato, yam, and carrot benefit the Spleen. Other beneficial foods include: turnip, leek, rice, oats, small amounts of chicken, turkey, mutton; cooked peach, cherry, and strawberry, dried litchi and fig, cardamom, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, black pepper, tapioca and other custards, kudzu root, arrowroot, and moderate amounts of sweeteners, especially barley malt and rice bran syrup.⁶ Beef has traditionally been considered beneficial to the Spleen. Of course, in China especially in the past people did not eat meat in the enormous quantities that are consumed in modern industrial society. The hormones, antibiotics and chemicals that livestock are forced to ingest add a new dimension to consuming meat. Foods should be well cooked and well chewed. Congees and rice porridges are very easy to digest and beneficial to the Middle Burner.

For a practical, non-dogmatic diet as medicine guide, that includes explanations of Chinese energetic principles that is an engaging read, I recommend the books titled *Welcoming Food*⁶ written by Andrew Serman. *Welcoming Food Book 1: Energetics of Food and Healing* really dives into the energetics of food in an extraordinarily clear way. *Welcoming Food Book 2: Recipes and Kitchen Practice* goes deeper into recipes and food preparation. It goes into energetics at each section. Just scanning this book will stimulate your appetite for delicious easily accessible food.

Many of the patients that come to see me have cultivated the

“excessive exhaustion” that Li Kao speaks of. In this modern lifestyle we have collectively created a pace that consumes us as human beings. Instant telecommunications, rapid travel and non-stop media have created an astonishingly rapid way of life. Excessive emotional stress is something that challenges us as human beings. Our lifestyles have not assisted us in coping with the normal challenges of our emotional lives. Sometimes working with balancing emotional stress will help the patient retain the energy you may be cultivating with acupuncture and herbal treatment. Many patients are consumed with worry and think too much. Often I will use an acupuncture treatment to balance the “ko cycle” relationship between the Liver and the Spleen to work with a pattern of excessive mental activity. Asking patients to make a plan to overcome the worry is a useful practice. With patients who are consumed with too much mental activity, I recommend activities that are more physical in nature such as Tai Chi, Qi Gong or breathing exercises.

Some people will use an over-busy lifestyle to hide from their emotions. Sometimes during an acupuncture treatment they will get in touch with feelings they are trying to avoid. Our psycho-spiritual relationship to nourishment is also a factor that will affect the Spleen. It can sometimes be productive to look at the “5 Virtues” of the Zang organs to give focus or insight to the treatment. Patients with imbalances in a particular organ will usually have issues around the aspect of the virtue of that organ. The virtue of the Spleen is “faith.”⁷ Assisting patients to be in contact with and cultivating their virtue will help bring balance to the system.

Acu-moxa Treatments for Building the Stomach/Spleen⁸

Moxa to supplement Yang and needle *Shu* and *Mu* points

Bl20 and 21, CV12, Lv13

St36 strengthens transporting function of St/Sp

St36, Sp3 strengthen St/Sp

Bl20, St36, Sp6 supplement St/Sp

Moxa Cv6, 12, and 13 to dispel cold from the Sp/St

Bl20 promotes circulation through the Spleen Qi

Sp8 regulates Spleen Qi

Sp6 and 9 drain Damp Heat relating to the Spleen

Sp4 harmonizes the St

Moxa Sp1 to control bleeding, needle St36 and Sp6

Moxa Cv6 and 12 to dispel Cold Damp of St/Sp

Moxa Bl 20 to fortify Spleen Yang

Moxa Sp4 and St36 to strengthen splenogastric function

Moxa GV20 to bring up sunken St/Sp Qi

St44 drains heat in the Stomach channel

Cv17 and 12, St36 correct counter-flow of Stomach Qi

P6 and Cv12 calm Stomach and check vomiting

St36, 44, and 45 calm Stomach and relieve stagnation

Chinese Five Phase Supplementation Treatment

Using tonification point and horary point on “controlling” or “mother” channel

Stomach: tonify St41, SI5. Spleen: tonify Sp2, H8

Korean Five Phase Four Needle Tonification Treatment

Spleen: tonify H8, Sp2; sedate Lv1, Sp1 Stomach: tonify SI5, St41; sedate GB41, St43

Korean Five Phase Four Needle Treatments for Hot and Cold

Cold Pattern Stomach: tonify St41, SI5; sedate St44, Bl66

Heat Pattern Stomach: tonify St44, Bl66; sedate St36, Bl54

Cold Pattern Spleen: tonify Sp2, H8; sedate Sp9, K10

Heat Pattern Spleen: tonify Sp9, K10; sedate Sp3, K3

Herbal Formulas for Spleen Patterns⁹

Astragalus Formula (*Huang Qi Jian Zhong Tang*): Also known as “Astragalus Decoction to Construct the Middle” because it builds the Qi of the Spleen and Stomach. This is a major pediatric formula, used for children with delicate constitutions or chronic ear infections. **Energetics:** Warms and tonifies the Middle Burner, dispels cold, and tonifies Qi.

Astragalus and Ligustrum Formula (*Huang Qi Dong Qing Pian*): Developed from Fuzheng Therapy research used in treatment of immune deficiency syndromes and to counteract toxic effects of radiation and chemotherapy. **Energetics:** Builds Qi, nourishes Blood and Kidneys, supports *Wei Qi*, Stomach and Spleen.

Bupleurum and Tang Kuei Formula (*Xiao Yao San*): Also known as “Free and Easy Wanderer.” Used to regulate and harmonize the energy of the Liver and Spleen, it is useful for a diverse range of symptoms resulting from constrained Liver Qi, deficient Liver Blood, and Liver-Spleen disharmony. **Energetics:** Nourishes Liver Blood and Yin, spreads Liver Qi, and strengthens the Spleen.

General Tonic Formula (*Shi Quan Da Bu Wan*): Also known as “Ginseng and Tang Kuei Ten.” Used for Qi

and Blood Deficiency when the patient also feels cold. **Energetics:** Warms and tonifies Qi and Blood, tonifies Yang, benefits the Spleen and the Heart Qi.

Ginseng and Astragalus Formula (*Bu Zhong Yi Qi Wan*): Also known as “Support Central Qi Pill.” Used to tonify Spleen and Stomach Qi and to raise sunken Yang. **Energetics:** Replenishes the Qi, tonifies the Qi of the Middle Burner, and raises sunken Yang.

Ginseng & Atractylodes Formula (*Shen Ling Bai Zhu San*): This classic formula is particularly indicated when there is dampness that obstructs the transformation and transportation of the spleen. There will be qi deficiency with possible lack of appetite, watery stools, and diarrhea. **Energetics:** Boosts Qi, supports the spleen, resolves damp, and stops diarrhea due to dampness.

Ginseng and Longan Formula (*Gui Pi Tang*): Also known as “Restore the Spleen Decoction,” a commonly used formula, especially useful with injury to the Spleen and Heart due to excessive mental activity. **Energetics:** Tonifies the Spleen and the Blood, nourishes the Heart.

Ginseng Nourishing Formula (*Ren Shen Yang Ying Wan*): Also known as “Ginseng Nutritive Formula.” Is especially appropriate for those who are chronically fatigued, anxious, lacking in vitality, or recovering from surgery or prolonged illness. **Energetics:** Tonifies Qi and Blood, nourishes the Heart and calms the Spirit.

Peaceful Spirit Formula (*Yang Xin Ning Shen Wan*): An excellent formula for nervous exhaustion, anxiety and for emotional disorders due to stress. **Energetics:** Nourishes the Heart and calms the Spirit, nourishes Blood and tonifies Qi.

Salvia Ten Formula (*Dan Shen Jia Si Jun Zi Pian*): Used to treat depression and to support the general vitality, which is diminished in chronic depression. **Energetics:** Circulates Qi and Blood, cools the Blood, builds Qi, tonifies Spleen and Stomach, calms the Spirit, and soothes the nerves.

Sea of Qi Formula (*Qi Hai Yao Fang*): This formula is used to treat persons with Cold and insufficiency of Spleen Yang and Kidney Yang, useful for patients without the digestive fire to process Kidney tonics. **Energetics:** Warms and tonifies the Middle Burner, warms the Kidneys, tonifies Qi and Yang, strengthens Spleen and Kidney Yang.

Six Gentlemen Formula (*Liu Jun Zi Tang*): Also known as “Major Six Formula.” **Energetics:** Tonifies Qi, strengthens the Spleen and transforms Phlegm and Dampness.

Footnotes

1 Unschuld, Paul. *Medicine in China, A History Of Ideas*. University of California Press: 1985, p. 177.

4 THE SCHOOL OF REPLENISHING THE SPLEEN AND STOMACH

2 Ibid. p. 178.

3 Ibid. p. 178.

4 Ibid. p. 179.

5 Ibid. p. 41.

6 Serman, Andrew. *Welcoming Food Books 1 and 2*. New York, New York: Classical Wellness Press, 2020.

7 The other Virtues are: Discrimination/Lung, Wisdom/Kidney, Benevolence/Liver, Propriety/Heart.

8 Feit, Richard and Semisweet, Paul. *Acumoxa Therapy: A Reference and Study Guide*. Brookline, Mass.: Paradigm Publications, 1989, p. 140-142.

9 Scott, John and Monda, Lorena. *Clinical Guide to Commonly Used Chinese Herbal Formulas*. Placitas, New Mexico: Jin Hua Press, 1997.