

An Analysis of the Theory and Treatment of Insomnia in Wu Cheng's Bu Ju Ji

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Abstract: This paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the theory and methods for differentiating and treating insomnia in Bu Ju Ji by Wu Cheng, a physician of the Qing Dynasty. By systematically sorting out the origin of Wu Cheng's academic thoughts, this study explores his unique perspective on differentiating and treating insomnia, analyzes the compatibility rules of his core formulas and herbs, and reveals the characteristics of his medication use as well as its guiding value for later clinical practice. Research shows that Wu Cheng integrated the principles of the I Ching (Book of Changes) with medical theories to construct a theoretical system for consumptive diseases. In the differentiation and treatment of insomnia, he emphasized the dynamic balance of zang-fu organs, Qi, blood, Yin and Yang, with special attention to the impact of spleen-Yin deficiency on insomnia. He thus formed distinctive academic features, including treating both deficiency and excess, taking into account both Qi and blood, and regulating the spleen to protect the body's defense system. In terms of medication, he was skilled in using herbs that are sweet and warm in nature for tonification, harmonizing Qi and blood, and invigorating the spleen to nourish Yin. These insights hold significant reference value for modern TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) in the treatment of insomnia.

Keywords: Wu Cheng; Bu Ju Ji; Insomnia; Consumptive disease theory; Integration of I Ching and TCM

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1. Introduction

Wu Cheng (1680–1760), styled Jianquan and also known by his literary name Shilang, was a native of She County, Anhui Province, and a renowned physician in the Qing Dynasty. His academic thoughts were deeply influenced by the I Ching, and he advocated that “the principles of medicine are the principles of the I Ching”, integrating the principles of the I Ching with medical theories to form a unique academic system. In Bu Ju Ji, Wu Cheng named the entire book based on the principle of the I Ching that “to transform and adapt lies in change; to promote and implement lies in penetration; changes are unceasing, flowing through the six empty positions”.

This highlights that the diagnosis and treatment of diseases should be adjusted according to the specific syndrome and handled with flexibility. This paper aims to systematically sort out the theory and methods for treating insomnia in Wu Cheng's *Bu Ju Ji*, explore its academic characteristics and clinical value, and provide a reference for modern TCM in the treatment of insomnia.

2. Wu Cheng's academic thoughts on insomnia

2.1. Theoretical basis of consumptive disease for insomnia

Insomnia, corresponding to the condition of insomnia in modern medicine, is one of the common clinical syndromes in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Its pathogenesis is complex, involving disorders of zang-fu organs, Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang, which has been extensively discussed by TCM physicians in different dynasties. *Bu Ju Ji* (literally Collection of Unrelenting Studies on Diseases), written by Wu Cheng, a TCM physician from Xin'an in the Qing Dynasty, is one of the "Top Ten Xin'an Medical Works" ^[1,2]. As a comprehensive masterpiece on the diagnosis and treatment of consumptive diseases, this book also demonstrates unique insights into the differentiation and management of insomnia.

2.2. The mixed deficiency-excess characteristic of insomnia

Wu Cheng conducted in-depth research on consumptive diseases and argued that the pathogenesis of such diseases is so complex that it cannot be simply categorized as a pure deficiency syndrome or a pure excess syndrome. He proposed the theory of "deficiency accumulation with phlegm", emphasizing the pathological feature of mixed deficiency and excess in consumptive diseases. In *Bu Ju Ji*, Wu Cheng systematically summarized the experience of previous TCM physicians in treating consumptive impairment and, combined with his own clinical practice, created two therapeutic methods: "Jietuo" (relieving and supporting) and "Butuo" (tonifying and supporting) ^[3]. These methods are used to treat external impairment syndromes characterized by "internal damage caused by external pathogens" and "conditions resembling consumptive damage but not actual consumptive damage". This theory holds significant guiding value for the differentiation and treatment of insomnia, as mixed deficiency-excess and Qi-blood disorders are also common manifestations in insomnia ^[4].

2.3. The balance of Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang in insomnia

In the differentiation and treatment of diseases, Wu Cheng attached great importance to the dynamic balance of zang-fu organs, Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang. He believed that the occurrence of diseases results from the imbalance of Yin and Yang as well as the disorder of Qi and blood within the human body. When treating insomnia, Wu Cheng emphasized a holistic approach: regulating the functions of zang-fu organs and harmonizing Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang to achieve the therapeutic goal. This thought runs through the entire discussion on the treatment of insomnia in *Bu Ju Ji*.

3. Characteristics of Wu Cheng's syndrome differentiation and treatment for insomnia

3.1. Treating both deficiency and excess, and considering Qi and blood simultaneously

In differentiating and treating insomnia, Wu Cheng emphasized treating both deficiency and excess while taking into account Qi and blood. He believed that insomnia involves not only deficiency syndromes such as heart-spleen deficiency and insufficient kidney essence, but also excess syndromes like internal disturbance by phlegm-

heat and liver depression transforming into fire. During treatment, Wu Cheng flexibly applied methods of tonifying deficiency and purging excess according to the deficiency-excess nature of the condition. Meanwhile, he attached great importance to regulating Qi and blood to restore the balance of the human body. Additionally, Wu particularly valued the concept of “phlegm due to impairment” and clearly defined the fundamental treatment principles for this type of phlegm^[5].

For the syndrome differentiation of insomnia, Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang should serve as the key framework, and deficiency symptoms of the five zang-organs as specific manifestations. Wu held that the syndromes of insomnia are complex and variable; to achieve accurate differentiation, it is first necessary to distinguish between Yin deficiency and Yang deficiency, otherwise, incorrect treatment is likely to occur. As stated in his theory: “Exposure to cold impairs Yang, while exposure to heat impairs Yin”^[1]. Impairment of Yang affects the heart, lung, and stomach; impairment of Yin, on the other hand, affects the liver, spleen, and kidney.

3.2. Zang-Fu syndrome differentiation, with emphasis on the liver and lung

Wu Cheng focused on zang-fu syndrome differentiation in treating insomnia, with special attention to the functions of the liver and lung. He argued that the liver governs dispersion and discharge, regulating the smooth flow of Qi; the lung governs Qi, controls respiration, and is responsible for dispersion and descent. Dysfunction of the liver and lung easily leads to poor circulation of Qi and blood, as well as insufficient nourishment of the heart-mind, thereby triggering insomnia. Therefore, in the treatment of insomnia, Wu Cheng often started with regulating the liver and lung, harmonizing the Qi movement of these two organs to help calm the heart-mind.

In his work *Bu Ju Ji* (Collected Essays on Recalcitrant Diseases) • On Sleeplessness, Wu Cheng was the first to discuss “sleeplessness on the left or right side”. He proposed: “The left and right sides are the pathways of Yin and Yang... Inability to lie on the left side is related to the liver and blood; inability to lie on the right side is related to the lung and Qi”. Based on the side on which the patient could not lie, Wu identified whether the disease location of insomnia was in the liver or the lung. Through clinical practice, he summarized that: “Sleeplessness on the left indicates liver distension, and sleeplessness on the right indicates lung distension, where both are incurable conditions”; which in other words, if insomnia persists for a long time and develops into liver distension or lung distension, it becomes a refractory disease.

3.3. Treatment based on “three factors”, with flexibility and adaptability

Wu Cheng emphasized that the diagnosis and treatment of diseases must adhere to the principle of “treatment based on three factors” and be flexible. He believed that patients in different seasons, different regions, and with different constitutions would present with different disease manifestations and require different treatment principles. In the treatment of insomnia, Wu Cheng flexibly adjusted herbal prescriptions according to the patient’s specific circumstances to achieve the best therapeutic effect. For example, for insomnia caused by summer heat in summer, he often added herbs that clear summer heat and replenish Qi; for patients in cold northern regions, he added drugs that warm Yang and dispel cold.

4. Wu Cheng’s treatment principles and prescriptions for insomnia

4.1. Prescriptions for tonifying the heart and spleen

For insomnia of the heart-spleen deficiency type, Wu Cheng commonly treated it with modified Guipi Decoction (Decoction for Nourishing the Spleen and Benefiting the Heart). Originating from *Jisheng Fang* (Formulas for Life

Salvation), Guipi Decoction has the effects of replenishing Qi and blood, strengthening the spleen, and nourishing the heart. In his application, Wu Cheng often adjusted the herbs according to the patient's condition: For example, he added Yejiaoteng (*Caulis Polygoni Multiflori*) and Hehuanpi (*Cortex Albiziae*) to enhance the sedative effect; For patients with obvious blood deficiency, he added Shudihuang (*Radix Rehmanniae Preparata*) and Baishao (*Radix Paeoniae Alba*) to nourish blood.

4.2. Prescriptions for clearing heat and resolving phlegm

For insomnia of the phlegm-heat internal disturbance type, Wu Cheng commonly used modified Wendan Decoction (Calm the Gallbladder Decoction). Derived from SanYin Fang (Formulas for the Three Categories of Pathogenic Factors), Wendan Decoction is effective in clearing heat, resolving phlegm, harmonizing the middle jiao, and calming the mind. Additionally, based on clinical practice, he proposed the “Three Methods for Treating Heat”, namely the “tonifying method”, “attacking method” and “draining method” which provided corresponding treatment principles and prescriptions for each syndrome type^[6]. In his application of Wendan Decoction: He often added Huanglian (*Rhizoma Coptidis*) and Zhizi (*Fructus Gardeniae*) to strengthen heat-clearing; For patients with severe phlegm-heat, he added Gualou (*Fructus Trichosanthis*) and Beimu (*Bulbus Fritillariae*) to resolve phlegm and dispel nodules. Among these principles, he explicitly stated that the “nourishing Yin and reducing fire” therapy is contraindicated for patients with external impairment caused by accumulated phlegm^[7].

4.3. Prescriptions for soothing the liver and relieving depression

For insomnia of the liver depression transforming into fire type, Wu Cheng commonly treated it with modified Longdan Xiegan Decoction (Gentiana Decoction for Purging the Liver Fire). Originating from Yifang Jijie (Collected Explanations of Medical Formulas), this decoction has the effects of clearing liver fire and calming the heart. In his application, Wu Cheng adjusted the herbs based on the condition: For instance, he added Mudanpi (*Cortex Moutan*) and Chishao (*Radix Paeoniae Rubra*) to cool blood and dispel blood stasis; For patients with exuberant liver fire, he added Xiakucao (*Spica Prunellae*) and Juhua (*Flos Chrysanthemi*) to clear the liver and improve eyesight.

4.4. Prescriptions for regulating nutrient Qi and defensive Qi

For insomnia of the disharmony between nutrient Qi and defensive Qi type, Wu Cheng commonly used modified Guizhi Decoction (Cinnamon Twig Decoction). Derived from Shanghan Lun (Treatise on Febrile Diseases), Guizhi Decoction functions to regulate nutrient Qi and defensive Qi, and relieve the exterior by relaxing the muscles. In his application: He often added Longgu (*Os Draconis*) and Muli (*Concha Ostreae*) to calm the mind with heavy-substantial herbs; For patients with deficiency of nutrient Qi and defensive Qi, he added Huangqi (*Radix Astragali*) and Dangshen (*Radix Codonopsis*) to replenish Qi and consolidate the exterior.

4.5. Prescriptions for regulating the spleen and harmonizing the stomach

Wu Cheng proposed targeted prescriptions for insomnia caused by disorders of the spleen and stomach, as detailed below: For insomnia due to overstrain injuring the heart and spleen, excessive thinking leading to palpitations, and Qi deficiency with essence sinking: Zicheng Decoction (Nutrition-Building Decoction) is recommended.

For insomnia caused by consumption of Qi and blood, fear and dread, essence deficiency with Qi weakness, and spirit losing its support: Zhonghe LiYin Decoction (Middle-Harmonizing Yin-Regulating Decoction) or Peitu

YangYin Decoction (Spleen-Nourishing Yin-Cultivating Decoction) is suitable. For insomnia accompanied by cold or heat symptoms, resulting from overstrain injuring the heart and spleen, insufficient middle Qi (failure of clear Yang to ascend), and concurrent external pathogenic factors: Shengbu Zhonghe Decoction (Ascending-Tonifying Middle-Harmonizing Decoction) is indicated. For insomnia due to mental disturbance from trivial matters, restless spirit, and consumption of essence and Qi: Peitu YangYin Decoction is recommended. For insomnia caused by the cold and Yin nature of tea damaging heart Qi, impairing primordial Qi, and weakening spirit: Therapy should focus on “nourishing Yang within Yin”; suitable prescriptions include Lipi Yirong Decoction (Spleen-Regulating Nutrient-Nourishing Decoction) and Lipi Yin Zheng Fang (Spleen-Nourishing Yin-Correcting Formula). All the above six prescriptions are sourced from Buju Ji^[8].

5. Characteristics of Wu Cheng’s medication for insomnia

5.1. Skilled use of sweet and warm tonifying herbs

In differentiating and treating insomnia, Wu Cheng was skilled in using sweet and warm tonifying herbs. He believed that such herbs could tonify Qi and blood, regulate zang-fu organs (viscera), enhance the body’s resistance, and help alleviate insomnia symptoms. For instance, in Guipi Decoction (Spleen-Kidney Nourishing Decoction), Wu Cheng emphasized the use of Renshen (Ginseng) and HuangQi (*Astragalus Membranaceus*) to invigorate Qi and strengthen the spleen; in Wendan Decoction (Warm Gallbladder Decoction), although the main focus was on clearing heat and resolving phlegm, he also combined it with Gancao (*Licorice Root*) to harmonize the effects of various herbs and protect the stomach Qi.

5.2. Emphasis on herbs for regulating Qi and blood

Wu Cheng attached great importance to regulating Qi and blood, ensuring their smooth circulation so that the mind could be tranquil. For example, in Guipi Decoction, he used Danggui (*Angelica Sinensis*) and Longyanrou (*Longan Aril*) to nourish blood and calm the mind, while also combining them with Muxiang (*Costus Root*) to promote Qi circulation and invigorate the spleen, preventing the tonifying herbs from being overly cloying (which might impede digestion). In Longdan Xiegan Decoction (Gentiana Liver-Draining Decoction), though the primary goal was to clear liver fire and drain dampness, he also added Danggui (*Angelica Sinensis*) and Shengdihuang (Raw Rehmannia Root) to nourish blood and activate blood circulation, avoiding damage to Qi and blood caused by the bitter and cold nature of the herbs in the formula^[9].

5.3. Flexible application of mind-calming herbs

In the treatment of insomnia, Wu Cheng flexibly applied mind-calming herbs. He held that these herbs could nourish the heart, regulate the mind, and help improve insomnia. For example, in Guipi Decoction, he used Suanzaoren (Spine Date Seed) and Yuanzhi (Polygala Root) to nourish the heart and calm the mind; in Wendan Decoction, despite the main effect being clearing heat and resolving phlegm, he combined Zhuru (Bamboo Shavings) and Zhishi (Immature Bitter Orange) to promote Qi circulation and resolve phlegm, while additionally adding Yejiaoteng (*Caulis Polygoni Multiflori*) and Hehuanpi (Albizia Bark) to enhance the mind-calming effect.

5.4. Attention to herb compatibility contraindications

When prescribing medications for insomnia, Wu Cheng paid close attention to herb compatibility

contraindications, avoiding adverse reactions caused by interactions between herbs. For example, in formulas that clear heat and resolve phlegm, he refrained from using warm-hot herbs together with bitter-cold herbs, as this would counteract their respective effects; in tonifying formulas, he avoided combining cloying-nourishing herbs with Qi-moving herbs, preventing impairment of the spleen and stomach's transportation and transformation functions.

5.5. Importance of herbs for regulating spleen Yin

Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach (Piwei Lun) proposed that “internal injury to the spleen and stomach gives rise to all diseases.” The medications used in this theory were mostly sweet and warm, tending to be warm and dry, which could easily damage Yin and exacerbate deficiency-heat; alternatively, some followed Zhu Danxi's approach of nourishing Yin and reducing fire, using mostly bitter-cold herbs, both of which led to an imbalance between Yin and Yang.

Wu Cheng believed that attention should be paid to balancing Yin and Yang, with regulating the spleen and stomach as the fundamental principle, and he particularly emphasized herbs for regulating spleen Yin^[10]. Especially for patients with consumptive impairment (xusun), most suffered from Yin-fire scorching Yin and consuming body fluids, resulting in malnutrition of the skin, meridians, muscles, and bones, which in turn gave rise to various diseases. Therefore, it was necessary to clear fire and tonify spleen Yin^[11].

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical value of Wu Cheng's treatment theory for insomnia

The theories and methods for treating insomnia recorded in Wu Cheng's Bu Ju Ji (Collection of Persistent Diseases) hold significant theoretical value. He integrated the principles of I Ching (the Book of Changes) with medical theories to construct a theoretical system for consumptive diseases. Emphasizing the dynamic balance of zang-fu organs, Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang, he developed the academic characteristics of “treating both deficiency and excess” and “considering both Qi and blood”. These theories provide important guiding significance for modern TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) in treating insomnia, helping clinicians gain a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of insomnia and formulate more reasonable treatment plans.

6.2. Clinical significance of Wu Cheng's treatment theory for insomnia

Wu Cheng's treatment theory for insomnia has remarkable clinical practical significance. Based on the deficiency or excess nature of the disease, he flexibly applied methods of replenishing deficiency and purging excess, while attaching great importance to regulating Qi and blood, with a particular emphasis on “regulating spleen Yin”. His prescriptions are rigorously formulated with distinct medication characteristics, which offer important reference for modern TCM in treating insomnia. For example, formulas such as Zhonghe LiYin Decoction and Peitu YangYin Decoction are still widely used in clinical practice today.

6.3. Inheritance and innovation of Wu Cheng's treatment theory for insomnia

Wu Cheng's treatment theory for insomnia features both inheritance and innovation. Firstly, emphasis should be placed on the holistic concept: treatment plans should be formulated comprehensively based on the dynamic balance of zang-fu organs, Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang. Secondly, as stated in the literature: “The five types of

consumptive diseases correspond to the five zang organs; treatment should nourish the ‘child’ to benefit the ‘mother’. For instance, treat liver consumption by tonifying heart Qi, treat heart consumption by tonifying spleen Qi, ...”^[1].

Thus, regulating spleen Yin is essential for treating insomnia. Finally, attention should be paid to the incompatibility of drug combinations to avoid “mutual inhibition” (a TCM term referring to the reduction of medicinal efficacy when certain herbs are used together), which could decrease therapeutic effects. All these aspects help modern TCM practitioners treat insomnia more effectively and improve clinical outcomes.

7. Conclusion

Wu Cheng inherited and developed the ideas from classical TCM works, and innovatively proposed the theories of “regulating spleen Yin” and “nourishing the child to benefit the mother”. He created nine major prescriptions for regulating spleen Yin, among which six are used for treating insomnia. In his treatment, he was skilled in applying methods such as tonifying the heart and spleen, clearing heat and resolving phlegm, soothing the liver and relieving stagnation, harmonizing nutrient and defensive Qi, and regulating the spleen and stomach, yet all these methods were always centered on “regulating spleen Yin”. Wu Cheng’s experience in the syndrome differentiation and treatment of insomnia holds important guiding value for diagnosing and treating insomnia (a disease with a high incidence rate today) and improving clinical therapeutic effects.

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