

Use of Danzhi Xiaoyao Powder in the Treatment of Diseases by Chief Physician Wang Defen: Case Examples

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Abstract: Danzhi Xiaoyao powder was first introduced by Xue Ji, a Ming Dynasty physician, in the “Summary of Internal Medicine.” It is primarily used for treating the syndrome of liver depression transforming into heat and is widely used in the treatment of dermatology, internal medicine, gynecology, and other multi-system diseases. This medical prescription is aptly dispensed, its detoxification effect is strong, and it is a representative medical prescription for soothing the liver, strengthening the spleen and stomach, as well as eliminating heat stagnation. Chief Physician Wang Defen inherited the academic experience of the fifth batch of nationally known Chinese medicine experts, under the guidance of Professor Ji Haiwang, a notable Chinese medicine practitioner in Shaanxi Province and Professor Shi Bingyin, a renowned endocrinologist. Through follow-up studies, the various methods and empirical prescriptions of Danzhi Xiaoyao powder applied by Chief Physician Wang Defen in the treatment of common clinical diseases are summarized. They have been proven to have conclusive efficacy, thus providing guidance and reference for the dialectical treatment using traditional Chinese medicine.

Keywords: Danzhi Xiaoyao powder; Learning from experts; Wang Defen

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1. Introduction

Danzhi Xiaoyao powder was first introduced in the “Summary of Internal Medicine.” Consisting of peony peel and gardenia based on Xiaoyao powder (“Prescription of Peaceful Benevolent Dispensary”), it has the effect of fortifying the spleen and nourishing the blood, as well as soothing the liver and clearing heat. It is mainly used in the treatment of liver depression and blood deficiency with stagnated heat syndrome ^[1]. However, it is also widely used for treating diseases related to various systems, including internal medicine, gynecology, dermatology, ophthalmology, and psychiatry ^[2]. The Chinese thoroughwort root in its prescription can soothe the liver and relieve depression, making the liver’s energy smooth; Chinese angelica, on the other hand, can nourish and harmonize the blood, while white peony root can nourish the blood and astringe yin as well as nourish the liver and stop the pain. By combining Chinese angelica, white peony root, and thoroughwort root, it can tonify the liver and allow it to function normally. If blood is harmonious, the same goes for the liver; if the blood is well-nourished, the liver will be calm. Hepatic depression syndrome would lead to insufficiency and unsmoothness of spleen; thus, white *Atractylodes rhizome*, *Poria cocos*, and honey-fried licorice root can be used to invigorate the spleen and supplement energy, which would not only prevent the spleen from being affected by the liver, but also protect the source of energy and blood. Peony peel, gardenia, and *Mentha haplocalyx* Briq. can clear heat and depression in liver channels; the addition

of *Glycyrrhiza uralensis* plays a role in alleviating the medicinal properties of other materials.

2. Case 1: acne

Zhao, a 21-year-old female, who is a junior student, had her first consultation on November 15, 2020. She had recurrent acnes, closed papules, pustules, and nodules on her face and back for more than 1 year. She was diagnosed with facial acne and was treated under the Department of Dermatology at the Second Affiliated Hospital of Xi'an Jiaotong University. Her face and forehead had scattered soybean- and mung bean-sized papules and pustules; her nasolabial area had scattered deep-rooted boils with white pustules, her pores were coarse, and her skin was oily and dull. Other than being easily irritated, she had symptoms of chest distress, pain under the ribs, and rashes that aggravate before menstruation and relieve after menstruation. She liked sweet food and appeared to be overweight. Her sleep quality was poor, and she found herself having difficulty to fall asleep. Although she had irregular bowel movements, her urination was normal. Her tongue was reddish in color with a glossy coating, and she had small, wiry pulse. She was diagnosed with acne (pulmonary wind syndrome acne), and the syndrome differentiation was stagnated qi transforming into heat, syndrome of turbid phlegm and blood stasis. Her treatment was based on resolving liver stagnation and clearing heat, reducing phlegm and resolving masses. The medical prescription was Danzhi Xiaoyao powder, with its amount adjusted according to situation. The prescription mainly includes peony peel 15 g, *Gardeniae fructus* Praeparatus 12 g, vinegar *Bupleurum chinense* DC 9 g, white peony root 15 g, Chinese angelica 15 g, *Poria cocos* 15 g, *Atractylodes macrocephala* Koidz 15 g, dandelion 30 g, *Mentha haplocalyx* Briq. 5 g (decocted later), *Forsythia suspensa* 15 g, *Glycyrrhiza uralensis* 6 g, vinegar *Curcuma aromatica* 10 g, and *Semen ziziphi spinosae* 30 g. There were 6 packs in total, and each day, 1 pack was taken half an hour after breakfast and dinner, respectively, by decocting in 400 mL of warm water. Fusidic acid cream was also prescribed for external application, 2 to 3 times a day for 7 days. In the follow-up visit, although her rash improved, the pustular nodules remained the same. Hence, *Laminaria japonica* Aresch. 10 g and oysters 15 g (another pack need to be fried for 30 mins first) were added to the first prescription; fusidic acid cream was continued for external application. During her third visit, her rash basically subsided, the pustules had shrunk, her skin was not oily, and the residual symptoms improved, but dark pigmentation remained. The patient complaint of symptoms of heartburn and acid regurgitation following meals. Although the prescription remained the same, there was a slight change to its amount. In order to consolidate the efficacy of the treatment, the patient continued to take 6 packs.

In this case, the patient was diagnosed with acne. Acne, commonly known as blackheads, is a common skin disorder in adolescents and a chronic inflammatory disorder that occurs in the pilosebaceous structure, commonly on the face, chest, and back. Its clinical manifestations include blackheads, papules, pustules, and nodules, which all belong to the category of “pulmonary wind syndrome acne” in traditional Chinese medicine. They are caused by dampness, heat, phlegm, stasis, and other pathogenic factors blocking the face, neck, chest, back, and other parts of the body. The patient is a young woman who is irritable due to high levels of stress arising from pressure to pass her postgraduate entrance examination. The depression of the liver’s energy can result in the disturbance of qi movement, and over time, the stagnated qi will transform into heat, blocking the facial skin, and forming papules and pustules. The retention of phlegm over time generates dampness, which eventually leads to the transformation into nodules and abscesses. Therefore, the treatment is mainly based on soothing the liver and clearing heat, as well as dissolving phlegm and dispersing stagnation. Danzhi Xiaoyao powder can be used as a prescription for this condition, in which its amount can be adjusted depending on the situation. The Chinese thorowax root, Chinese angelica, and white peony root in the prescription can soothe the liver and resolve depression, as well as nourish the blood and liver; *Atractylodes macrocephala* Koidz and *Poria cocos* can strengthen the spleen and dispel dampness; peony peel and *Gardeniae fructus* Praeparatus can clear away heat and toxic materials,

as well as promote blood circulation and cool blood to cure the primary disease; dandelion, *Mentha haplocalyx* Briq., and *Forsythia suspensa* can also clear away heat and toxic materials, as well as dissipate blood stasis and relieve the symptoms; vinegar *Radix curcumae* and fried *Semen ziziphi spinosae* can soothe the liver and relieve depression, as well as calm the spirit and promote sleep; the addition of *Glycyrrhiza uralensis* to Chinese medicine compounds plays a role in alleviating the medicinal properties of other materials. In the follow-up visit, *Laminaria japonica* Aresch. and *Ostreae Concha* were added to soften and resolve hard mass. The combination of various medicinal materials aids in soothing the liver and clearing heat, as well as removing phlegm and resolving mass. Patients with syndrome of stagnated heat in liver channels are often irritable, agitated, and stressed out from work or studies; moreover, their rash tends to be aggravated before menstruation and relieved after menstruation; their tongue would be red with a thin, yellow coating, and their pulse would be small and wiry. It is not necessary for all these signs and symptoms to be present as the syndrome of stagnated heat in liver channels can also be diagnosed with the identification of one or two of these symptoms. With accurate syndrome differentiation, the amount of medicine can be adjusted depending on the situation. In that way, the efficacy of treatment can be guaranteed.

3. Case 2: chloasma

Liu, who is a 35-year-old female and a native of Yulin city in Shaanxi Province, had her first consultation on June 11, 2021. After giving birth, her complexion darkened, and soon after, there were dark brown freckles scattered over her forehead and nasolabial areas. There were also some freckles over her cheekbones, forming a shape of a symmetrical butterfly. She had used various whitening and freckle-removing skin care products and took vitamin C and vitamin E supplements, but her problem persisted. Recently, the butterfly-shaped freckles became larger, and the remaining small freckles fused, with observable irregular yellowish-brown, dark brown, and dark coffee-colored patches on her face. They had varying shades, shapes, and sizes, with unclear margins and were aggravated with sun exposure and before menstruation. The patient also had a dull complexion. She had low mood and feelings of oppression over her chest as well as soreness over her mouth and tongue. She was dysphoric and easily awakened from sleep; her sleep quality was also poor. Although her appetite was normal, her stools were dry, and her urine was yellowish in color. Her tongue was red with a thin, yellow coating, and her pulse was strong. She was diagnosed with chloasma (butterfly freckles and hepatic freckles). The syndrome differentiation was syndrome of stagnated heat in liver channels, and derangement of qi and blood. The treatment was focused on soothing the liver, resolving depression and clearing heat, as well as promoting blood circulation to remove blood stasis and freckles. The prescription included *Poria cocos* 15 g, white peony root 15 g, *Atractylodes macrocephala* Koidz 15 g, vinegar *Bupleurum chinense* DC 10 g, Chinese angelica 10 g, peony peel 12 g, *Gardeniae fructus* Praeparatus 9 g, *Radix rehmanniae* Preparate 12 g, *Mentha haplocalyx* Briq. (decocted later) 6 g, rose 15 g, saline *Rhizoma anemarrhenae* 15 g, mulberry leaves 10 g, *Lophatherum gracile* Brongn. 6 g, and *Glycyrrhiza uralensis* 6 g. She was prescribed 6 packs in total, in which she took 1 pack a day, half an hour after breakfast and dinner, respectively, decocted in 400 mL of warm water. During her follow-up, she had a brighter complexion, and the patches had resolved; *Semen persicae* 10 g, safflower 5 g, and *Ligusticum chuanxiong* Hort. 9 g were added to activate qi and blood, as well as dissolve blood stasis and remove the freckles. She was prescribed 6 packs in total, in which she took 1 pack a day in the same manner. During her third visit, the patient claimed that her mood and sleep quality were better; her complexion also improved significantly. During her fourth visit, the patches had basically resolved; there were no changes to the previous prescription. After 3 months on the prescription, the chloasma changed dramatically. This prescription can be used in conjunction with external masks, made from *Bombyx mori* silk fibroin, *Bletilla striata*, white *Poria*, *Rhizoma typhonii*, white lotus seed,

excrementum passeris, *Notopterygium* root, and *Carthamus tinctorius*, which are grounded into a paste to moisturize and revitalize the skin as well as reduce freckles [4].

Melasma is a condition with localized light brown or brown skin pigments on the face. It tends to occur around the cheeks, nose, and lips, and its distribution is often symmetrical in nature [5]. In severe cases, it may spread to the entire face, seemingly like butterflies merging with each other. It may also worsen following sun exposure. Both, men and women may be affected by this disease, but young and middle-aged women are more common. This condition is stubborn and difficult to treat. Western medicine treatment focuses on preventing ultraviolet rays, consuming vitamin C pills, and carrying out cosmetic laser treatment; however, the efficacy is poor. Traditional Chinese medicine, on the other hand, is considered one of the effective ways to treat melasma. Melasma was first introduced in the “Inner Canon of Huangdi” and was called “dusty complexion.” Physicians of later generations believed that the etiology and pathogenesis of melasma were closely related to the dysfunction of the liver, spleen, and kidneys [6]. The deficiency of qi and blood, as well as the stagnation of qi and blood stasis can result in poor complexion, thus explaining the occurrence and development of this disease [7]. As written in the “General Treatise on the Cause and Symptoms of Diseases,” once the function of the liver, heart, spleen, lungs, kidneys, and other organs is abnormal, with derangement and deficiency of qi and blood, this abnormality will be reflected in the complexion. Hence, the complexion will be dull, and the facial channels and collaterals will be blocked, resulting in the formation of dark freckles. The patient is a middle-aged woman, with postpartum endocrine disorders. The increasingly aggravated pigmentation, coupled with the pressure from work and life, had led to depression, resulting in the depression of liver qi, qi stagnation, and blood stasis, thus causing dull complexion and colored freckles. The syndrome differentiation of this patient was heat stagnation in liver channels, as well as the derangement of qi and blood; thus, the treatment was based on soothing the liver, resolving the depression and clearing heat, as well as promoting blood circulation, removing blood stasis, and resolving the freckles. The patient was prescribed with Danzhi Xiaoyao powder, in which the amount was adjusted depending on the situation. The peony peel and *Gardeniae fructus* Praeparatus in the prescription can clear liver heat, cool and activate the blood, as well as resolve freckles; Chinese thoroughwort root, Chinese angelica, and white peony root can soothe the liver, resolve depression, as well as nourish the blood and liver; *Atractylodes macrocephala* Koidz and *Poria cocos* can invigorate the spleen to eliminate dampness; *Ligusticum chuanxiong* Hort. can activate and nourish the blood as well as restore vitality; increasing the amount of *Radix rehmanniae* Preparata and *Rhizoma anemarrhenae* can nourish and activate the blood, as well as nourish yin, thus brightening the patient’s complexion; rose can activate the blood, promote qi, and resolve liver heat; *Mentha haplocalyx* Briq. can clear liver heat, while mulberry leaves can disperse wind heat and resolve freckles; *Lophatherum gracile* Brongn. can eliminate the heat in the heart and relieve restlessness; *Semen persicae* and *Carthamus tinctorius* can promote blood circulation to remove blood stasis and resolve freckles; *Glycyrrhiza uralensis* can be used to harmonize the medicinal materials. The combination of various medicinal materials can soothe the liver, relieve depression and heat, as well as promote blood circulation to remove blood stasis and eliminate freckles. Melasma is mostly caused by qi and blood discord in the face. As recorded in “External Treatment of the Golden Mirror of Medicine: Concise Comprehension of Surgery in Verse,” this syndrome is caused by melancholia and worries, in which women are more prone to this disease. Therefore, the majority of patients are women with symptoms such as depression, irritability, anxiety, annoyance, insomnia, menstrual irregularities, and so on, which cause the depression of the liver’s energy. This depression can then transform into heat, which burns yin blood over time. The syndrome of heat stagnation in liver channels, as well as qi stagnation and blood stasis are the common manifestations of melasma. It should be noted that the course of the disease is long, and it is necessary to communicate clearly with these patients, pay attention to their mental health, and encourage them to adhere to the treatment. In the treatment process, the amount of medicinal materials

should be adjusted according to the changes in the disease so as to ensure good clinical efficacy.

4. Case 3: climacteric syndrome

Wang, a 49-year-old lady, had her first consultation on March 11, 2021. She complained of menstrual disorder for nearly 3 months. In which her period lasted for more than 40 days. She also experienced profuse sweating and cold intolerance for 1 year, coupled with feverish feeling, which worsened at night. Other than that, she had difficulty falling asleep, malaise, soreness and weakness over her waist and knees, as well as occasional hypogastric pain, dizziness, and palpitations. She was also easily upset, irritable, and temperamental. She was managed under the Third Hospital of Xi'an City, where abdominal ultrasound and routine blood test were done, and the levels of her sex hormones were also determined. She was diagnosed with perimenopausal disorder and anemia. There was no significant improvement after taking progesterone and iron supplements for 2 weeks. Hence, she opted for Chinese medicine treatment. The patient complained of dark and ceaseless menstruation for more than 40 days. In the past 1 week, her dizziness and palpitations worsened. She had malaise, pain over her flank, hot flushes, poor sleep, and loose stool. She was also easily upset and irritable, and she felt bitterness in her mouth. Otherwise, her urine was normal. Upon examination, her complexion was yellow and sallow, her tongue was generally pale, and the tip and sides of her tongue were red with a thin, yellow coating; additionally, she had a fine pulse. She was diagnosed with climacteric syndrome (premenopausal disorder). The syndrome differentiation was syndrome of kidney deficiency, liver depression, and spleen deficiency. The treatment was based on soothing the liver, relieving depression and clearing heat, strengthening the spleen, reinforcing the kidney, and nourishing the blood. She was then prescribed with Danzhi Xiaoyao powder with Guipi decoction: peony peel 10 g, *Gardeniae fructus* Praeparatus 10 g, Chinese angelica 10 g, vinegar *Bupleurum chinense* DC 10 g, *Poria cocos* 15 g, *Atractylodes macrocephala* Koidz 15 g, *Radix glycyrrhizae* Preparate 10 g, *Mentha haplocalyx* Briq. 5 g (decocted later), wine *Cornus* 5 g, 10 pieces of Chinese dates (the size of a thumb), *Arillus longan* 10 g, *Radix astragali* 15 g, *Polygala tenuifolia* 10 g, fried *Semen ziziphi spinosae* 10 g, *Codonopsis pilosula* 10 g, *Agrimonia pilosa* Ledeb. 10 g, salty *Phellodendri cortex* 15 g, and endothelium corneum 6 g. She was prescribed 6 packs in total, in which she took 1 pack a day, half an hour after breakfast and dinner, respectively, decocted in 400 mL of warm water. During her follow-up, there was no improvement in the other symptoms although her menstruation had stopped, and the fatigue and sweating had reduced. Therefore, *Seman biotae* 10 g was added to the previous prescription; she was given 6 packs in total. After taking it for 1 month, there was a significant improvement in all the symptoms.

Climacteric syndrome, which is also known as “premenopausal disorder” in traditional Chinese medicine, is a series of symptoms caused by the transition of the body from youth to a decline in old age, affecting the yin and yang balance, before and after menopause. This condition is generally caused by the decline in estrogen levels due to aging in women. Its clinical manifestations vary in severity. The common symptoms are menstrual disorders, hot flushes, poor sleep, as well as psychological and psychiatric symptoms. Studies have shown that Danzhi Xiaoyao powder has a regulatory effect on gonads and estrogens; thus, it can be used to treat climacteric syndrome. The case discussed above is about liver deficiency, with heat in the spleen, the failure of the spleen to govern the blood, and the syndrome of disharmony. The early manifestation of this disorder is reflected by the syndrome of heart and spleen deficiency, resulting in menostaxis, dizziness, and hypodynamia, followed by yin-deficiency symptoms of liver depression transforming into heat and abnormal catharsis. Chinese medicine believes that the liver is for storing blood, the spleen is for governing blood, and the kidney is for reproduction, having sexual functions of both sexes. This emphasizes the focus of gynecology on regulating the liver, spleen, and kidney. The Chinese thoroughax root in Danzhi Xiaoyao powder prescription is a medicinal material that plays a major role in soothing the liver and relieving depression; adding a little *Mentha haplocalyx* Briq. may help

the former medicinal material disperse the depression of the liver's energy, thus eliminating heat stagnation in liver channels; Chinese angelica can nourish and activate the blood, while white peony root can nourish the blood and astringe yin, as well as nourish the liver and relieve pain. In addition to nourishing the liver, the combination of all these medicinal materials can nourish and activate the blood. *Atractylodes macrocephala* Koidz and *Poria cocos* can invigorate the spleen to eliminate dampness; it only nourishes the spleen and stomach. The improvement of their physical functions guarantees the sources for the generation of qi and blood; a functional spleen and stomach may also enhance the liver's energy, which then promotes blood circulation, thus regulating and dredging the organic activity of qi. Peony peel and *Gardeniae fructus* Praeparatus can clear liver heat; *Radix glycyrrhizae* Preparate, which is used as a supplement medicinal material, can strengthen the middle warmer and vital energy, as well as relieve the pain in the liver; wine *Cornus* can nourish yin and supplement the kidneys. Guipi decoction can invigorate qi and blood, as well as strengthen the spleen and nourish the heart. Generally, the syndromes before and after menopause are caused by kidney deficiency. The kidneys are known to govern respiratory metabolism as well as yin and yang, circulating them in addition to regulating cold and heat. A poor kidney function will affect the functions of other organs, thus resulting in various symptoms. Therefore, when treating, the fundamental and secondary syndromes should be identified sequentially; if the syndromes are aggravated in hot and cold environments as well as at night, the harmony approach should be used to regulate yang deficiency, thus the function of kidney can be activated; if the kidneys do not nourish the liver, and there is heart-heat and liver-heat hyperactivity, then it is necessary to nourish the kidneys, disperse the liver, and strengthen the spleen; if spleen deficiency generates dampness, and heat results from the dampness and depression, then the treatment can be adroitly guided by its circumstance, and pathogens should be eliminated through purgation and diuresis; with anxiety, depression, and low mood, it is necessary to nourish yin, clear away heat, and calm the mind. Primary and secondary syndromes should be clearly distinguished and treated based on the following method: if it is urgent, target the superficial symptoms; in contrary, the fundamental cause should be treated in those that are less urgent. Treatment should also be in accordance with the actual syndromes, looking into both its root causes and symptoms. In the same manner, psychotherapy should not be neglected in the treatment process, so as to ensure that the disease is cured completely.

5. Conclusion

Chief Physician Wang Defen is quick-thinking, comprehensive, and meticulous. She tends to prescribe small dosages and treat patients like her own family members. Throughout the years of clinical work, the syndrome of liver depression transforming into heat has shown an increasing trend, and its causes are closely related to mental stress and poor lifestyle habits caused by various factors. If the liver fails to convey and disperse qi, there will be derangement of qi and blood; the depression will transform into heat and lead to various diseases. Although the locations and clinical manifestations are different for these diseases, the essence of the pathogenesis is the same: liver depression can transform into heat. Traditional Chinese medicine focuses on the integration of disease and syndromes. First of all, it is necessary to grasp the essence of the mechanism of the syndrome of liver depression transforming into heat because different diseases are in the lesion stage, thereby having the same nature; regardless of their symptoms, they can be treated by soothing the liver and relieving depression as well as eliminating heat and purging fire based on the idea of "different diseases with the same treatment"; furthermore, the dosage of medicinal materials can be adjusted depending on the characteristics of the disease itself and its syndromes. It is crucial for physicians to eliminate the interference of secondary syndromes, so as to recognize the main contradictions in the current stage of a disease, and treat the disease in accordance with the syndromes in the face of complicated syndromes in different diseases, so that the disease can be treated, with immediate effects.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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