

# Exploration of the Treatment Strategy for Spleen Deficiency with Phlegm-Dampness Obesity Using Catgut Embedding Combined with Cangfu Daotan Decoction Based on the “Circulation of Primordial Qi, Earth as Pivot and Four Phenomena” Theory

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the treatment strategy for spleen deficiency with phlegm-dampness obesity using catgut embedding combined with Cangfu Daotan Decoction, grounded in Huang Yuanyu's theory of “Primordial Qi Circulation, Earth as Pivot Governing Four Phenomena.” The theory conceptualizes the spleen-stomach as the pivotal axis for qi movement, with the liver, heart, lung, and kidney functioning as interconnected wheels. It elucidates the core pathogenesis: central earth (spleen-stomach) dysfunction disrupts the four phenomena, manifesting as phlegm-dampness accumulation from middle jiao qi stagnation, lipid-turbid retention due to earth obstruction and wood depression, fluid retention from phlegm obstructing lung collaterals, and impaired qi transformation caused by yang deficiency and water-cold. Treatment adheres to the principle of “regulating the center to harmonize the periphery” – employing Cangfu Daotan Decoction (Cangzhu-Baizhu fortify the central pivot; Xiangfu-Chaihu disperse liver constraint; Banxia-Fuling resolve phlegm-dampness; Rougui-Guizhi warm kidney yang) synergized with acupoint embedding at Zhongwan-CV12/Tianshu-ST25 (regulate qi ascent/descent), Ganshu-BL18/Qimen-LR14 (smooth liver-gallbladder qi), Feishu-BL13/Fenglong-ST40 (transform lung phlegm), and Shenshu-BL23/Mingmen-GV4 (activate kidney qi). This integrated approach externally activates the pivot through embedding and internally resolves phlegm-dampness via the decoction, collectively restoring earth-axis function, harmonizing the four phenomena, and achieving metabolic balance through “axis rotation, wheel circulation, phlegm elimination, and lipid dissolution.”*

**Keywords:** Primordial Qi Circulation, Earth as Pivot Governing Four Phenomena, Cangfu Daotan Decoction, Obesity, Catgut Embedding.

## 1. Introduction

Spleen deficiency with phlegm-dampness obesity is a prevalent metabolic disorder in modern society, which is closely associated with spleen-stomach transportation dysfunction and internal accumulation of phlegm-dampness according to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) theory [1]. The core pathogenesis lies in the dysfunction of qi transformation in the middle jiao and impaired spleen transportation, where nutrients fail to be properly metabolized and instead accumulate as phlegm-dampness and turbid fat. Patients typically present with obesity, fatigue, abdominal distension, pale and swollen tongue with teeth marks, and white greasy coating. The pathological characteristics involve not only phlegm-dampness stagnation but also qi disorder in the liver, heart, lung, and kidney, forming a complex pattern of “earth dysfunction leading to four-phase disorder”.

Huang Yuanyu's [2] theory of “qi circulation around the body with earth as the pivot of four phases” profoundly explains the physiological basis of qi movement in the human body, emphasizing that the spleen-stomach (earth) serves as the pivot of qi circulation, while the qi of the liver, heart, lung, and kidney flows like wheels to maintain metabolic balance. If spleen-earth is obstructed, liver qi stagnates and fails to disperse, lung qi stagnates and fails to descend, kidney qi becomes cold and fails to transform, and heart qi weakens and fails to circulate, ultimately leading to the accumulation of phlegm-dampness and turbid fat, resulting in obesity.

Therefore, the treatment of spleen deficiency with phlegm-dampness obesity should focus on strengthening the middle earth while regulating the qi movement of the four organs to achieve “axis movement and wheel rotation, phlegm elimination and dampness resolution”. Currently, TCM clinical treatments for this condition include herbal medicine, acupuncture, and catgut embedding therapy. Among them, catgut embedding provides long-term stimulation to regulate meridian qi, while the Cangfu Daotan formula strengthens the spleen, resolves phlegm, and soothes the liver to regulate qi. The combination of these methods exerts a synergistic effect of “externally regulating the pivot and internally resolving phlegm-dampness”. This paper explores the pathogenesis and treatment of spleen deficiency with phlegm-dampness obesity based on the theory of “qi circulation around the body with earth as the pivot of four phases”, aiming to provide references for clinical diagnosis and treatment.

## 2. The Theory of “Unified Qi Circulation, Earth as Pivot Governing Four Phenomena”

### 2.1 Theoretical Origins

The conceptual foundation of “Unified Qi Circulation, Earth as Pivot Governing Four Phenomena” traces back to the Yellow Emperor's Canon era. Suwen·Liù Wēi Zhǐ Dà Lùn [3] states: “Raising, lowering, exiting, and entering exist in all entities,” reflecting early qi-circulation concepts, while Lingshū·Yíng Wèi Shēng Huì [4] notes: “Humans receive qi

from grains; grains enter the stomach, transmit to the lungs, nourishing all organs,” establishing the spleen - stomach - centered transformation theory. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Zhang Zhongjing’s Treatise on Cold Damage [5] pioneered the Six Meridians Qi Transformation doctrine through Three Yin and Three Yang frameworks, laying groundwork for qi-transformation theories. In the Jin-Yuan period, Li Dongyuan’s Treatise on Spleen and Stomach explicitly [6] proposed the “spleen-stomach as pivot of ascent-descent,” declaring: “Damaged spleen-stomach deprives the five viscera of vitality,” foreshadowing the Earth Pivot concept. Qing scholar Huang Yuanyu [7] synthesized predecessors’ wisdom in Four Sages’ Origin, systematically articulating: “Central qi serves as the pivotal axis of yin-yang ascent-descent... rotating to spiral clear qi leftward into fire and turbid qi rightward into water,” completing this theoretical lineage.

## 2.2 Theoretical Connotation

Physiologically, this theory constructs a dynamic qi-transformation model where the spleen-stomach functions as the pivotal axis controlling ascending-descending movements, while the liver, heart, lung, and kidney operate as interdependent wheels: liver qi ascending leftward, heart fire disseminating upward, lung qi descending rightward, and kidney water storing downward - all circulating continuously under the spleen-stomach pivot’s regulation to maintain normal qi transformation [8]. Pathologically, it reveals how “Earth deficiency causes four-dimensional disorders” [9]: spleen-stomach dysfunction induces visceral qi chaos - liver constraint causing qi stagnation, lung obstruction leading to fluid retention, heart impairment resulting in blood stasis, and kidney failure generating dampness accumulation - forming obesity’s vicious cycle of spleen deficiency → dampness → phlegm → qi obstruction → blood stasis. Therapeutically, it establishes the principle “regulate the center to harmonize the periphery,” prioritizing earth-pivot fortification to reactivate four-phenomena circulation, embodying TCM’s core tenet of root-cause treatment through balanced holistic and targeted intervention.

## 3. Pathogenesis of Spleen Deficiency with Phlegm-Dampness Obesity Based on the “Unified Qi Circulation, Earth as Pivot” Theory

### 3.1 Earth Pivot Dysfunction: The Root of Phlegm - Dampness Endogenesis

Origin of the Four Sages [10] states: “Central qi decline obstructs ascent-descent: kidney water chills causing essence disorders, heart fire flares inducing spirit ailments, liver wood stagnating left leading to blood pathologies, lung metal obstructing right resulting in qi diseases.” This underscores that the core pathogenesis of obesity lies in earth pivot failure. The spleen-stomach governs the middle jiao - spleen elevating clear yang, stomach descending turbid yin. When dietary excess or fatigue damages spleen transport, food essence transforms pathologically into dampness, congealing as phlegm-dampness obstructing middle jiao qi movement. As Yizong Bidu [11] observes: “Weak spleen-earth prevents

clear ascent and turbid descent, stagnating in diaphragmatic regions to form phlegm” - initiating obesity’s pathological cascade.

### 3.2 Liver Wood Constraint: The Mechanism of Lipid Turbidity Accumulation

Suwen-Precious Life [12] declares: “Earth requires wood for patency.” Liver governs dispersion and assists spleen transport. When earth pivot fails, liver wood becomes constrained (“earth obstruction with wood depression”). Impaired liver dispersion causes: (1) lipid distribution failure → turbid accumulation; (2) prolonged constraint generating heat → fluid consumption → aggravated phlegm-dampness. Harmonious liver qi ensures smooth qi-blood circulation preventing phlegm formation. Clinically, this manifests as the “qi stagnation → phlegm congealing → lipid accumulation” chain affecting adipose tissue metabolism.

### 3.3 Lung Metal Failure: The Trigger for Fluid Retention

As the upper source of water, lung governs fluid pathways. When middle jiao phlegm-dampness ascends, it impairs lung’s depuration and descent function, causing fluid retention. Concurrently, lung qi stagnation disrupts nutrient-defensive circulation, exacerbating phlegm-dampness diffusion. Patients exhibit obesity with chest oppression and shortness of breath - forming the vicious cycle: phlegm-dampness invading lungs → failed depuration → internal fluid retention.

### 3.4 Kidney Water Chill: The Foundation of Impaired Qi Transformation

Kidney governs water and qi transformation. Jingyue’s Complete Works [13] emphasizes: “Phlegm transformation relies on spleen, but its root resides in kidney.” Chronic spleen deficiency damages kidney yang, causing: 1) failed qi transformation → water-dampness retention; 2) “fire failing to warm earth” → aggravated phlegm-dampness. Modern research [14] confirms kidney yang deficiency correlates with hypothalamic-pituitary-target gland axis hypofunction, disrupting metabolic networks. Declining kidney qi transformation often marks obesity’s refractory stage.

### 3.5 Four-Phenomena Mutual Aggravation: The Vicious Cycle

Peripheral disorders reciprocally reinforce each other. Advanced obesity develops complex cross-organ pathologies: liver constraint overacts on spleen → spleen deficiency affects lung → lung weakness harms kidney → kidney deficiency counter-invades spleen. This cyclic damage creates “five-organ impairment with rampant phlegm-dampness” - explaining treatment-resistant obesity. Breaking this cycle requires restoring normal qi circulation.

## 4. Therapeutic Approach to Spleen Deficiency with Phlegm-Dampness Obesity

### 4.1 Regulating the Pivot: Fortifying the Earth Axis to Restore Ascent-Descent Dynamics

Huang Yuanyu's Origin of the Four Sages [15]: Heavenly Manifestations establishes that "central qi constitutes the pivotal axis of yin-yang ascent-descent," where its rotation directs clear qi leftward transforming into fire and turbid qi rightward condensing into water. This underscores that robust earth function ensures orderly spleen-ascent and stomach-descent, preventing food essence congealing into phlegm-dampness. Under Taiyin damp-earth governance, middle jiao transformation prioritizes spleen transport while stomach yang succumbs to dampness obstruction—core to phlegm-dampness pathogenesis. Earth axis failure distorts qi dynamics: deficient clear yang impairs digestion, stagnant turbid yin accumulates phlegm. Treatment thus centers on earth axis restoration via modified Cangfu Daotan Decoction, featuring Cangzhu (awakening spleen, resolving dampness) synergized with Baizhu (fortifying spleen qi), augmented by Fuling and Zexie to drain dampness. Concurrent acupoint embedding at \*Zhongwan-CV12\* (governing ascent) and \*Tianshu-ST25\* (controlling descent) sustains spleen-stomach qi regulation per Huang's mechanical principle.

#### 4.2 Dispersing Wood Constraint: Freeing Liver-Gallbladder to Restore Dispersion

As Origin of Four Sages [16]: Six Qi clarifies: "Liver wood governs dispersion; its dysfunction stagnates qi and congeals blood." Jueyin wind-wood's innate free flow becomes constrained amid earth-dampness predominance ("earth obstructing wood"), blocking triple jiao transformation and lipid distribution. Treatment activates dispersion using Cangfu Daotan Decoction's pivotal pair: Xiangfu ("commander of qi disorders" dispersing constraint) combined with Chaihu (lifting liver qi), enhanced by Chuanxiong to invigorate blood. Embedding at \*Ganshu-BL18\* and \*Qimen-LR14\* (Back-Transport and Front-Mu points) concurrently regulates lipid metabolism.

#### 4.3 Depurating Metal: Resolving Phlegm by Unblocking Water Pathways

Lung metal's depurative descent governs fluid distribution. When phlegm-dampness ascends, it obstructs lung qi ("phlegm obstructing qi counterflow"), causing fluid retention and somatic swelling. Treatment employs Banxia (drying damp-phlegm) paired with Fuling (percolating dampness) in Cangfu Daotan Decoction, assisted by Chenpi to move qi. Acupoint selection targets \*Feishu-BL13\* and \*Fenglong-ST40\*—the latter renowned as the "phlegm-resolving point"—whose combined action (diffusion and descent) clears water passages and dissolves phlegm.

#### 4.4 Warming Water: Activating Kidney Yang to Dissipate Yin Congelation

Kidney yang drives water transformation. Chronic phlegm-dampness injures kidney fire, creating "water-cold and earth-dampness" wherein yang deficiency fails to transform fluids, exacerbating obesity. Treatment incorporates Rougui in Cangfu Daotan Decoction to ignite life-gate fire, supported by Buguzhi to warm kidney yang. Embedding at \*Mingmen-GV4\* and \*Shenshu-BL23\* (anterior-posterior pairing) synergistically activates qi transformation to steam dampness.

### 5. Case Illustration

A 38-year-old male patient presented on September 12, 2024, with progressive weight gain (25 kg over 3 years) and persistent fatigue. He reported habitual consumption of fatty/sweet foods and sedentary lifestyle, with unsuccessful prior weight-loss attempts. Clinical examination revealed obesity (height 175 cm, weight 98 kg, BMI 32 kg/m<sup>2</sup>), sallow complexion, epigastric distension, sticky oral sensation, and loose stools 2-3 times daily. Tongue presentation showed pale, swollen body with teeth marks and thick white greasy coating; pulse was soggy and moderate. Western diagnosis: Simple obesity (Grade III); TCM diagnosis: Obesity (spleen deficiency with phlegm-dampness pattern). Treatment employed spleen-strengthening, phlegm-resolving, and qi-regulating principles using modified Cangfu Daotan Decoction: Cāngzhú (*Atractylodis Rhizoma*) 15g, Báizhú (*Atractylodis Macrocephalae Rhizoma*) 12g, Xiāngfù (*Cyperus Rhizoma*) 10g, Bànxià (*Pinelliae Rhizoma*) 9g, Fúlíng (*Poria*) 15g, Zéxiè (*Alismatis Rhizoma*) 12g, Chénpi (*Citri Reticulatae Pericarpium*) 10g, Guìzhī (*Cinnamomi Ramulus*) 6g, Hòupò (*Magnoliae Officinalis Cortex*) 10g, Yìyǐrén (*Coicis Semen*) 30g, and honey-fried Gāncǎo (*Glycyrrhizae Radix*) 6g. Seven doses were prescribed (one daily decoction). Catgut embedding at Zhōngwǎn (CV12), Tiānshū (ST25), Gānshū (BL18), Qīmén (LR14), Fèishū (BL13), Fēnglóng (ST40), Shènsū (BL23), and Míngmén (GV4) used absorbable PGLA sutures.

At follow-up (September 19), abdominal distension decreased with formed stools (1-2×/day) and thinner tongue coating. The original formula continued for seven days with repeated embedding. By October 3, weight reduced by 4.5 kg, waist circumference decreased 5 cm, with improved energy and appetite. Zéxiè was removed; Huángqí (*Astragali Radix*) 15g and Dǎngshēn (*Codonopsis Radix*) 12g were added for 14 doses. Embedding frequency reduced to biweekly. At November 2023 follow-up, total weight loss reached 8.2 kg (current 89.8 kg, BMI 29.3 kg/m<sup>2</sup>), waist circumference reduced 8 cm. Symptoms significantly improved with ongoing lifestyle modification.

Commentary: This classic spleen deficiency phlegm-dampness obesity originated from dietary excess and physical inactivity, echoing Suwen's assertion: "Rich men's diseases stem from rich foods." Chronic rich food intake damaged spleen-stomach transportation, transforming nutrients into damp-turbidity accumulating in the middle jiao. Sedentary habits further constrained qi movement, creating "earth obstruction and wood constraint." Tongue/pulse signs confirmed spleen deficiency with dampness excess. Treatment applied the "Unified Qi Circulation" theory: Cāngzhú-Báizhú paired to activate and fortify earth transport; Xiāngfù-Chénpi regulated liver qi; Fúlíng-Zéxiè drained turbidity; Guìzhī-Yìyǐrén warmed yang and percolated dampness. Embedding at pivotal points regulated central qi (Zhōngwǎn-Tiānshū), dispersed liver-gallbladder (Gānshū-Qīmén), resolved lung phlegm (Fèishū-Fēnglóng), and activated kidney yang (Shènsū-Míngmén), achieving holistic "central axis-four dimension" regulation. Second-visit improvement confirmed recovering earth function, warranting formula continuation. Third-visit weight

reduction prompted adding Huángqí-Dǎngshēn to reinforce spleen qi without damaging uprightness. This phased approach—initial phlegm-dampness resolution followed by spleen qi consolidation—exemplified “treating branch in urgency, root in chronicity,” ultimately restoring “axis rotation and harmonious four phenomena.”

## 6. Conclusion

Huang Yuanyu’s groundbreaking theory of “Unified Qi Circulation with Earth as Pivot Governing the Four Phenomena” builds upon the qi transformation principles of the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon, establishing the spleen-stomach as the central axis regulating yin-yang ascent-descent while conceptualizing the liver, heart, lung and kidney as interdependent wheels of physiological activity. This theoretical framework demonstrates how robust central qi maintains harmonious functioning - the liver’s upward diffusion coordinating with the lung’s downward depuration, the heart’s distribution complementing the kidney’s storage - creating continuous cyclical movement. Conversely, dysfunction of the earth pivot leads to pathological cascades: constrained liver qi promotes lipid accumulation, impaired lung descent causes fluid retention, deficient kidney yang fails to transform fluids, and weakened heart fire results in blood stasis, collectively manifesting as obesity through systemic phlegm-dampness and adipose tissue proliferation.

Clinical application of this theory follows the principle of “regulating the center to mobilize the periphery.” Initial earth-axis restoration employs Cangfu Daotan Decoction, where Cangzhu’s spleen-activating properties combine with Baizhu’s fortifying action, assisted by Fuling and Zexie’s dampness-draining capacities to reestablish normal ascent-descent dynamics. Subsequent modulation addresses constrained liver qi through Xiangfu and Chaihu’s dispersing effects, lung qi obstruction via Banxia’s phlegm-resolving and Fuling’s dampness-percolating actions, and kidney yang deficiency using Rougui’s life-gate-warming properties - each phase supported by corresponding acupoint embedding to regulate qi movement.

The integrated treatment strategy combines herbal therapy and catgut embedding synergistically: while the decoction internally resolves phlegm-dampness and restores organ function, embedding at key points like Zhongwan (CV12) and Tianshu (ST25) provides sustained regulation of qi dynamics. This dual approach mirrors natural rhythms - the sutures’ persistent stimulation resembling constant river flow, while the herbs’ time-sensitive actions echo seasonal changes - collectively achieving “external pivot regulation and internal phlegm transformation.” Through this comprehensive method restoring “axis rotation and wheel circulation,” clear yang ascends appropriately, turbid yin descends smoothly, and the resolution of phlegm-fat deposits enables complete physiological and psychological recovery, offering a robust theoretical and practical framework for managing spleen deficiency phlegm-dampness obesity.

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