

Dialectic Treatment of Allergic Purpura Nephritis Based on the “Minister Fire Theory”

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Abstract: *The Minister Fire Theory (Xiang Huo Theory) is one of the fundamental theories in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which not only explains physiological and pathological phenomena of the human body but also serves as an important basis for dialectical treatment in clinical practice. This article applies the Minister Fire Theory for the dialectic diagnosis and treatment of allergic purpura nephritis, and discusses its etiology and pathogenesis, believing that its correlation holds clinical guiding significance. Based on the Minister Fire Theory and the clinical features of allergic purpura nephritis, this disease can be categorized as exogenous pathogenic invasion, damp-heat minister fire (damp-heat Xiang Huo), minister fire due to Yin deficiency, predominance of pathogenic toxins, blood stasis, and deficiency of minister fire. Clinically, treatment of allergic purpura nephritis guided by the Minister Fire Theory yields remarkable effects. This paper aims to provide a new approach for future clinical treatment of allergic purpura nephritis.*

Keywords: Allergic purpura nephritis, Minister Fire Theory (Xiang Huo Theory), Etiology and pathogenesis, Dialectical treatment (syndrome differentiation and treatment).

1. Introduction

The Minister Fire Theory is an important part of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). As stated in “Su Wen · Tian Yuan Ji Da Lun”: “The Imperial Fire (Jun Huo) brings illumination, while the Minister Fire (Xiang Huo) occupies its position”.^[1] (“Su Wen · Liu Wei Zhi Da Lun”) also says: “To the right of the luminosity is the position of the Imperial Fire; to the right of the Imperial Fire, stepping back one position, the Minister Fire governs. Beneath the Minister Fire, the Qi of water supports it.”^[2] The growth and development of all things in the world depend on the balance and coordination of the Imperial and Minister Fires. Successive generations of physicians have traced the origins and connotations of the Minister Fire, applying this dialectical theory to the viscera and bowels of the human body. Liu Wansu respected the theory of Shaoyang Minister Fire in the “Huangdi Neijing”, and was the first to propose the Minister Fire of the Gate of Life (Mingmen), stating in “Su Wen Bing Ji Qi Yi · Bao Ming Ji”: “The right kidney belongs to fire, circulating through the Triple Burner (San Jiao); the way of flourishing and decline lies herein^[3]. Therefore, next to the seven vertebrae lies a small heart; this refers to the Mingmen Minister Fire.” This illustrates that the Minister Fire is the foundation of the Imperial Fire; only by maintaining balance and coordination between the two can the Yang Qi ascend and transform into blood. Conversely, “if Yin is weak while Yang is strong, the Minister Fire becomes exuberant and invades the position of Yin, resulting in blood deficiency”. The smooth flow of the primordial essence of the five viscera and the distribution of Qi, blood, and fluids all depend on the prosperity or deficiency of the Minister Fire.

Allergic purpura nephritis is one of the most common renal diseases in clinical practice. It is diagnosed when hematuria and/or proteinuria develop within six months of the course of allergic purpura, with exclusion of other glomerular diseases, thus termed allergic purpura nephritis. TCM has significant advantages in the treatment of this condition. According to its

clinical manifestations and pathological features, it can be categorized under “muscle bleeding” (Ji Nü), “hematuria” (Xue Niao), “edema” (Shui Zhong), with its main pathological location in the kidney. Long-term clinical observation reveals that applying the Minister Fire Theory in the dialectic diagnosis and treatment of allergic purpura nephritis can better elucidate its etiology and pathogenesis and allows for more accurate clinical judgment, providing significant guidance in clinical therapy.

2. Minister Fire Theory (Xiang Huo Theory)

2.1 Origin and Development of Minister Fire

The term “Minister Fire” (Xiang Huo) originates from the “Huangdi Neijing Su Wen · Tian Yuan Ji Da Lun”: “Heaven is structured by six, earth governed by five. the Imperial Fire brings illumination, the Minister Fire occupies its position”, where the connotation of the Minister Fire was mainly interpreted based on the theory of Yun Qi (Movements and Phases), illustrating its characteristic of heat^[4]. In the Song Dynasty, Chen Wuzhe in “San Yin Ji Yi Bing Zheng Fang Lun · Jun Huo Lun” first introduced the Minister Fire from the theory of Yun Qi to the interpretation of human physiology, though described as “routinely used by humans”; it marked a significant conceptual transition toward a human-centered understanding of the Minister Fire, as discussed in Chen Wuzhe’s statement “one should not mention even a word about Minister Fire”^[5]. By the Jin-Yuan Dynasties, through Liu Wansu, Zhang Yuansu, Li Dongyuan, and Zhu Danxi, the understanding of the body’s Minister Fire matured, particularly through extensive discourses by Li Dongyuan and Zhu Danxi. Li Dongyuan’s theory emphasized Minister Fire in relation to spleen and stomach Qi deficiency, marking a second great leap in understanding, while Zhu Danxi’s theory focused on liver and kidney Yin deficiency, representing a third transformation. Later generations mainly followed Zhu Danxi’s view on Minister Fire^[6].

2.2 Physiological Functions of Minister Fire

(1) Minister Fire warms and regulates the five viscera and six bowels. Zhu Danxi asserted: “Minister Fire is Heavenly Fire. Fire is Yin inside and Yang outside, governing all movement, and all that moves belongs to fire.”^[7] In “Gezhi Yulun”, he wrote: “Minister Fire disseminates the fire of the entire body.”^[8] Thus, Minister Fire has a function of distributing the Yang Qi throughout the five viscera and six bowels, promoting unobstructed Qi dynamics. It is regarded as the primordial Yang of the body and aids in the transformation and generation of Qi and blood. Minister Fire, occupying its proper position, together with the Imperial Fire of the Heart, maintains normal physiological function. (2) Minister Fire aids the transformation and production of Qi and blood. “Yiguan” states: “Food and drink enter the stomach, just like grain in a pot; without fire, they cannot be cooked. The spleen transforms food, relying wholly on the formless Shaoyang Minister Fire.”^[9] The spleen and stomach are the foundation of acquired constitution and the source of Qi and blood. Under the warming influence of Minister Fire, their functions of transforming ingested grains and generating Qi and blood can normally manifest. (3) Minister Fire assists the Qi transformation of the Triple Burner (San Jiao). “Compendium of Materia Medica” (“Bencao Gangmu”) notes: “The Triple Burner functions as the Minister Fire, distributive of primordial Qi from the Gate of Life (Mingmen); it governs ascent and descent, entry and exit.”^[10] The Minister Fire originates from the Mingmen between the kidneys, resides between liver and kidney, and distributes Yuan Qi throughout the body, affecting all three burners to maintain physiological activity. (4) Minister Fire promotes the mutual transformation of essence and blood. Zhu Danxi in “Gezhi Yulun · Yang You Yu Yin Bu Zu” mentions: “The kidney governs storage, the liver governs dispersal, both have Minister Fire.”^[11] Since liver and kidney share the same origin, with the former storing blood and the latter storing essence, they transform into each other; hepatic blood depends on the nourishment of renal essence, and vice versa. Under the combined action of Minister and Imperial Fire, liver-stored blood merges with kidney essence; under similar influence, kidney essence enters the Chong Mai, transforms into blood^[12], hence Minister Fire facilitates the mutual transformation of blood and essence.

3. Understanding the Etiology, Pathogenesis, and Pathological Typing of Allergic Purpura Nephritis from the Perspective of Minister Fire Theory

The clinical course of allergic purpura nephritis is often protracted, with complex and diverse presentations. Routine urinalysis frequently reveals hematuria and/or proteinuria, often accompanied by skin purpura, abdominal pain with bloody stools, arthralgia, and in severe cases, renal dysfunction. In TCM, this disease is categorized as “muscle bleeding”, “hematuria”, or “edema”, with the kidney as the central pathological site. In recent years, studies into the etiology and pathogenesis of allergic purpura nephritis have increased. Wang Hui^[13] and colleagues posited that allergic purpura nephritis is mainly induced by a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors such as wind, heat, stasis,

toxin, and deficiency, emphasizing a pathogenesis characterized by deficiency in essence and excess in

manifestation. Early stages may result from exogenous wind pathogen, later blood-heat causes rash, blood stasis may persist throughout, making the disease lingering and refractory, with chronicity engendering toxin and complexity. Thus, the onset of allergic purpura nephritis typically involves both external injury and internal factors, often affecting the kidney. Some scholars argue that the physiological Minister Fire (Xiang Huo) originates from the Mingmen between the kidneys, possessing the function of warming and nourishing the organs, jointly maintaining physiological activity along with the Imperial Fire. “Su Wen · Yin Yang Ying Xiang Da Lun” states: “When the robust fire (Zhuang Huo) wanes, the minor fire (Shao Huo) prospers; robust fire consumes Qi, Qi nourishes minor fire; robust fire disperses Qi, minor fire generates Qi”, indicating that minor fire represents the body’s physiological fire—i.e., the Yang Qi of the viscera—primarily including the innate fire from Mingmen, the acquired fire from the spleen and stomach, and physiological Imperial Fire. They warm and nourish the organs. If the minor fire becomes abnormal due to internal or external environmental changes, resulting in dysfunction, it turns into pathological robust fire^[14]. Thus, the physiological Minister Fire is assumed by the minor fire and originates in the Mingmen between the kidneys, signifying a close association between allergic purpura nephritis pathogenesis and the Minister Fire Theory.

3.1 Exogenous Pathogenic Invasion

Chao Yuanfang in “Zhu Bing Yuan Hou Lun” recorded: “Wind evil entering Shaoyin results in hematuria”, advancing the view that wind evil invading the kidney causes disease. Wu Kun in “Yi Fang Kao · Blood Disease Chapter” stated: “The lower burner is the residence of Yin-blood; when Yang evil invades, it causes hematuria. The lower burner’s disorder is attributable to damp-heat”, indicating that invasion of Yang evil at the Yin sphere (lower burner) can result in hematuria, with damp-heat being the more common evil. Modern scholars regard wind trapping the renal collateral as the main mechanism, considering “wind” as a direct or precipitating factor, existing as both endogenous and exogenous variants^[15,16]. When the body is invaded by external pathogens, its defensive system fails to secure the exterior, resulting in the evil Qi penetrating internally, attacking the lower burner, and even descending to the bladder and renal collaterals, manifesting as allergic purpura nephritis.

3.2 Damp-Heat Minister Fire

Li Dongyuan posited that “fire and primordial Qi cannot coexist”, “Minister Fire is the thief of Yuan Qi”, and in his “Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach” differentiated external and internal damp-heat, asserting that erratic movement of Minister Fire by damp-heat constitutes “Yin fire rebelling upward”. Minister Fire’s ceaseless, inexhaustible activity maintains normal physiological function. If damp-heat descends and causes derangement of Minister Fire, Qi is depleted, Yin is injured, Yin fails to restrain Yang, essence and blood are scorched, blood-heat flows recklessly, and the persistent dampness further results in illness. Clinically, this

often presents as skin purpura, especially on the lower extremities.

3.3 Minister Fire Due to Yin Deficiency

The concept “Minister Fire Due to Yin Deficiency” first appeared in Zhu Danxi’s “Gezhi Yulun · Xiang Huo Lun”, stating: “Minister Fire is easily aroused; when the five types of Qi of vigorous Yang fan each other, it becomes rampant. The aroused fire is unpredictable, enduring at all times, parching true Yin; if Yin is deficient, disease occurs, if Yin is exhausted, death ensues.” “Jingui Gouxuan” also mentioned: “When Minister Fire becomes flourishing and invades the position of Yin, it gradually parches, giving rise to diseases of fire deficiency.”^[18] Over-exuberant Minister Fire loses its proper position, resulting in a loss of Yin’s control over Yang. Displaced Minister Fire transgresses downward, damaging the renal collaterals and bladder. Renal failure in retention leads to hematuria, proteinuria, and, in severe cases, lumbar and knee weakness. If the pulse is scorched by fire-heat, a thin, rapid pulse may be present, with red tongue and scant coating due to fluid depletion.

3.4 Excess of Pathogenic Toxins

Wang Bing, in his annotation of “Su Wen · Wu Chang Zheng Da Lun”, discussed: “Toxin is transformed from exuberant and violent Qi of the five phases”, wherein hyperactive evil Qi readily transforms into toxins. With advances in modern medical research, the pathogenic concept of toxin has gained broad application in the treatment of severe exogenous and intractable internal diseases. The “latent toxin” theory is widely used in allergic purpura nephritis, characterizing the pathogenic toxins as latent, lingering, violent, and mixed, often associated with heat and stasis^[19]. In addition, exogenous toxins such as those from food or drugs can enter orally, causing toxic accumulation in the middle burner; if these descend, they can injure kidney collaterals and the bladder.

3.5 Internal Stagnation of Blood Stasis

Yu Jiayan from the Qing Dynasty affirmed that Minister Fire is the primordial Yang of the body, stored in the kidney: “Minister Fire resides below, is the source spring’s warmth, gives rise to and nourishes all things; thus, for humans, it belongs to the kidney, where the primordial Yang is stored ...”.^[11] Thus, Minister Fire is the fire of life, likened to dragon thunder, sustaining vital force, forming the basis of all Yang Qi, with warming as its most fundamental function. “Classic of Difficulties” (“Nan Jing”) states: “Blood moves if warm, stagnates if cold.”^[20] Should Minister Fire become weak, its warming function is lost, Qi flow is obstructed, and blood circulation is impeded. Over time, blood stasis forms, which if lodged in the lumbar and back, results in stabbing pain that improves with warmth, accompanied by a dark complexion, purplish tongue, and deep, slow pulse—typical signs of blood stasis.

3.6 Deficiency of Minister Fire

Zhang Xichun in “Medical Records Based on Integration of Chinese and Western Medicine · Li Xue Tang” stated:

“Deficiency of middle Qi cannot secure blood, concurrently with Minister Fire deficiency of the Mingmen, resulting in insufficient absorption and consolidation, leading to loss of blood in urine from inability of the kidney to retain it.”^[13] Xiang Huo Lun” also points out: “Heaven cannot generate life without this fire; man cannot live without this fire.” Congenital Yang Qi deficiency, decline of Mingmen fire, excessive internal cold, prolonged disease or invasion by external cold can all cause Minister Fire deficiency.^[21] As the primordial Yang of the body, depletion of Minister Fire impairs the function of the organs, reducing the production and circulation of Qi, blood, essence, and fluids, predisposing to phlegm and blood stasis, and constitutes a key pathogenic factor in allergic purpura nephritis.

4. Dialectical Treatment of Allergic Purpura Nephritis Based on Minister Fire Theory

4.1 Expelling Evil Pathogens

Renowned nephrology expert Wang Yaoxian termed renal damage caused by allergic purpura as “Purpura Renal Wind” (Zidian Xing Shen Feng), and considered it a type of “Renal Wind” in TCM. Its etiology lies in wind, distinguished as internal or external. External wind attacks the throat, directly enters the kidney via the Shaoyin meridian^[22], and readily combines with heat to become pathogenic; pathogenic toxins take advantage of deficiencies to invade and scorch the vessels, forcing blood to flow recklessly, resulting in purpura when extravasated to the skin and relentless hematuria when seeping into the organs^[23]. Treatment should be aimed at dispersing wind and clearing heat, expelling evil, using modified “Yinqiao Baidu San”.

4.2 Clearing Heat and Draining Dampness

“Lingshu · Origin of Hundred Diseases” states: “When dampness invades deficiency, the disease starts from below.” Dampness accumulates internally and, by its nature, tends to sink; therefore, descending damp-heat leads to derangement of Minister Fire. The combination of dampness and fire forms disease, with damp-heat soaking vessels to produce purpura. At this stage, the disease is mainly excess in nature, clinically presenting with bitter taste in the mouth, sticky mouth, lassitude, dark, painful urination, sticky defecation, yellow, greasy tongue coating with teeth-marks. Treatment should focus on clearing heat and draining dampness. Ye Tianshi, founder of the Wenbing (Warm Disease) school, believed: “Heat arises from dampness; unless dampness is eliminated, heat will persist.” President Lei Genping also advocated for anti-allergic, dampness-eliminating, and clearing of damp-heat from the triple burner as the main treatment, prescribing “Anti-allergic Dampness-eliminating Decoction”, consisting of “San Ren Tang”, “Si Miao San”, “Guomin Jian”, supplemented with “Ji Xue Teng”, “Wei Ling Xian”, “Xian He Cao”, and “Zi Cao”^[24].

4.3 Nourishing Yin and Subduing Fire

Minister Fire has a constant and a variable, with rhythmic movement as the norm, and excess or disordered movement as abnormal. If Minister Fire becomes rampant and does not stay in its proper place, either excessive fire or Yin deficiency may

result. Zhu Danxi considered that Minister Fire, when pathogenic, readily injures Yin. He advocated nourishing Yin and subduing fire to treat changes in Minister Fire, with representative formulas such as “Da Bu Yin Wan” and modifications of “Si Wu Tang” with Zhimu (Anemarrhena) and Huangbai (Phellodendron)^[11]. Prescriptions often use cooked Rehmannia and tortoise shell as sovereign drugs; the former strongly tonifies marrow and essence, the latter strongly subdues Yang and tonifies Yin, together restraining the errant fire. Huangbai and Zhimu are commonly combined — the former to drain hidden fire in Yin, the latter to clear heat from the metal (lung)^[12].

4.4 Eliminating Toxin and Supporting the Vital Qi

The onset of purpura nephritis often results from congenital insufficiency or internalization of exogenous and endogenous injury leading to internal latent toxin, which descends to injure renal collaterals. Throughout the course, pathogenic toxin is often associated with stasis and heat, with their combination fostering toxin production; thus, eliminating toxin and supporting the vital Qi should be the main treatment. “Shangshu Quanshu” from the Ming Dynasty records “Shengjiang San”, originally composed of silkworm, cicada slough, turmeric, rhubarb, rice wine, and honey. Because wine is pungent and honey is sweet (possibly exacerbating fullness), current clinical practice omits these two, using the remaining four ingredients^[19]. At the same time, medicinals nourishing Yin and tonifying the kidney, such as Eclipta and Ligustrum, can be combined for a synergistic effect, targeting both elimination of toxins and reinforcement of the body’s vital energy.

4.5 Activating Blood and Resolving Stasis

Many physicians believe that blood stasis persists throughout the course of purpura nephritis, as insufficient warming by Minister Fire leads to stagnation, with stasis impeding vessel pathways and extravasated blood producing purpura. Tang Rongchuan’s “Treatise on Blood Disorders” stated that the four main methods for treating blood disorders include resolving stasis as the second: “removing stasis is essential for treating blood disease.”^[25] Therefore, the clinical treatment of the stasis type of purpura nephritis focuses on activating blood, resolving stasis, and dissipating purpura; the formula often combines peach kernel, safflower, and Chuanxiong, with the last known for promoting both Qi and blood, and the first two as classical blood-activating agents, with remarkable efficacy.

4.6 Tonifying the Spleen and Kidney

For allergic purpura nephritis with deficiency of Minister Fire and chronic organ function impairment, the principle of “tonifying deficiency” is recommended. “Su Wen · Six Section Zangxiang Lun” states: “...Therefore, the kidney is the root of the innate constitution.” The spleen belongs to earth, occupying the center (Middle Jiao), often called the “middle earth”, governing transformation and ascension of the clear. After birth, all vital activities depend on support from the spleen, which is the root of acquired constitution vis-à-vis the kidney’s innate nature^[26]. Therefore, clinical therapy commonly employs tonification of the spleen and kidney, such as with modified “Shenqi Dihuang Tang”.

5. Conclusion

The Minister Fire Theory is one of the core concepts in Traditional Chinese Medicine, gradually refined through the practice and study of generations of physicians. It is closely related to allergic purpura nephritis. This paper posits that allergic purpura nephritis is largely caused by a mixture of internal and external factors, depleting the kidney, with deficiency in the fundamental and excess in the manifestation as the key pathogenesis. Early stages are due to external pathogenic factors, followed by errant Minister Fire, reckless blood-heat, and development of purpura. Blood stasis persists throughout, contributing to chronic, refractory, and variable manifestations. According to the Minister Fire Theory, allergic purpura nephritis may be categorized into six syndrome types: exogenous pathogenic invasion, damp-heat Minister Fire, Yin deficiency Minister Fire, internal pathogenic toxin, blood stasis, and Minister Fire deficiency. Corresponding clinical treatments include expelling evil, clearing heat and draining dampness, nourishing Yin and subduing fire, eliminating toxin and supporting upright Qi, activating blood and resolving stasis, and tonifying the spleen and kidney. This study applies the Minister Fire Theory in syndrome differentiation and treatment of allergic purpura nephritis, exploring its etiology and pathogenesis, and provides a robust dialectical basis for the clinical TCM management of this disease.

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