

# Lei Zhengquan's Experience in Treating Insomnia in the Elderly by Combining Acupuncture and Medication based on the Theory of Mingmen (Life Gate)

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**Abstract:** *Insomnia is a multi-system disorder that afflicts the majority of elderly individuals. Chronic insomnia can increase the risk of mental health issues. Professor Lei Zhengquan, drawing on years of clinical experience, summarizes that the core pathogenesis of age-related insomnia is the deficiency of the Mingmen (Life Gate), leading to disharmony of Qi flow, which in turn causes long-term impairment of visceral functions and subsequently affects sleep quality. The theory of the Mingmen reveals that it is the fundamental source of the Five Zang and Six Fu organs, yet it exists at a level above these organs. Professor Lei integrates and extends the core principles of the Mingmen theory, proposing a combined treatment approach of acupuncture and herbal medicine centered on “nourishing the Mingmen and regulating Qi flow.” This method involves internal use of Chinese herbs to harmonize the viscera and external acupuncture to unblock meridians and facilitate Qi circulation. Such treatment establishes a communication between internal and external Qi, clears the meridians from top to bottom, and links the visceral organs and meridians, thereby balancing Yin and Yang, replenishing Qi and blood, and ensuring smooth flow throughout the body. This comprehensive approach aims to restore health and promote recovery.*

**Keywords:** The theory of Mingmen, Combination of Acupuncture and Medicine, Insomnia in the Elderly, Penetrating Acupoint Method, Acupoint DU4.

## 1. Introduction

Geriatric insomnia refers to a sleep disorder characterized by frequent and persistent difficulty initiating or maintaining sleep, resulting in unsatisfactory sleep quality [1]. Chronic severe insomnia can significantly impair patients' quality of life and increase the risk of comorbidities such as anxiety disorders, dementia, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases [2]. While insomnia affects individuals across all age groups, it is most prevalent among the elderly, with studies indicating that nearly half of older adults experience sleep disturbances, with higher incidence in women and increasing prevalence with advancing age. Modern medical treatments for insomnia primarily include Western pharmacotherapy and physical therapies; however, Western medications often cause adverse effects such as morning dizziness, respiratory depression, and withdrawal reactions. Additionally, current therapies face challenges like lengthy treatment durations and poor patient compliance [3]. Traditional Chinese medicine offers clear advantages and potential in treating insomnia, but for age-related or refractory cases, the sole use of herbal medicine or acupuncture often yields limited results.

Professor Lei Zhengquan (hereinafter referred to as Master Lei) is a renowned traditional Chinese medicine practitioner in Shaanxi Province, with many years of clinical experience in acupuncture and Tuina therapy. He employs the “JianNao Anshen Needle Technique” to treat insomnia, demonstrating profound research and insights into TCM approaches for sleep disorders. The concept of Mingmen originates from the “Ling Shu · Gen Jie,” and through scholarly exploration by subsequent generations of physicians, the Mingmen theory has been developed. It reveals the fundamental essence of the

Five Zang and Six Fu organs, yet exists at a level above them. Damage to the Mingmen affects the interrelated functions of the acquired Zang and Fu organs. Based on Master Lei's clinical experience in treating insomnia, he has refined therapeutic methods to address complex cases by delving into root causes. Grounded in the Mingmen theory, he developed an integrated acupuncture and herbal approach—“Tonify the Mingmen and Unblock Qi Mechanisms”—to treat senile insomnia, achieving remarkable clinical results. My mentor, Yuan Haiguang, succeeded Master Lei as the head of his clinic, inheriting his clinical expertise. Through apprenticeship, I have summarized his experience in diagnosing and treating age-related insomnia as follows.

## 2. Pathogenesis and Mechanisms

Senile insomnia falls within the scope of traditional Chinese medicine's categories of “insomnia,” “inability to lie down,” and “inability to sleep.” Currently, clinical treatment primarily employs syndrome differentiation, addressing the imbalance of zang-fu organs, yin and yang, qi and blood fluctuations, and meridian systems. Such diversified treatment approaches have achieved favorable outcomes [4]. However, the efficacy of treatments for age-related insomnia remains modest. The pathological features in the elderly can be summarized as deficiency at the root with excess at the superficial level, a mixture of deficiency and excess, and the persistence of pathogenic factors due to true deficiency. As age advances, kidney essence becomes depleted, organ functions decline, and overall physical health gradually deteriorates. Concurrently, pathogenic factors such as phlegm dampness and blood stasis tend to accumulate over time, leading to chronic illness, weakened constitution, emotional

disturbances, and fatigue from diet and exertion. These internal and external factors further deplete vital energy, causing a gradual disharmony of yin and yang, ultimately impairing sleep quality and perpetuating a vicious cycle of insomnia that accelerates organ aging. The underlying cause is the inevitable decline of bodily resilience. Numerous methods exist for nourishing and tonifying the zang-fu organs; beyond conventional treatments, it is essential to both replenish organ deficiencies and regulate qi flow, requiring a holistic approach to the balance of the postnatal and prenatal energies. Master Lei has extensively studied the “Mingmen Theory,” integrating acupuncture and herbal medicine to achieve comprehensive regulation. Acupuncture calms the mind and stabilizes the spirit, while herbal therapy harmonizes the yin and yang of the zang-fu organs to nourish the Mingmen. This combined approach systematically adjusts the aging-related insomnia through the Mingmen, zang-fu organs, and meridian systems.

### **2.1 The Mingmen Deficiency Leads to the Weakness of the Viscera and Bowels, Forming the Fundamental Pathogenesis.**

The decline of the visceral organs is a significant factor in the onset of diseases among the elderly. The Mingmen, regarded as the repository of congenital essence and vital energy, plays a crucial role in maintaining overall health. Modern research summarizes its functions as storing essence and spirit, sustaining primordial Qi, governing reproductive development, and resisting pathogenic influences [5]. The Classic of Difficulties states, “The Mingmen’s Qi communicates with the kidneys,” a view largely supported by contemporary practitioners who recognize the close relationship between the Mingmen and the kidneys. However, some debate exists; it is generally accepted that at this level, there exists a fundamental organ influencing the growth and development of the viscera, transcending the Five Zang and Six Fu, thus forming the doctrine of the Mingmen. Its functions are considered inclusive of the kidneys’ roles.

Regarding the Mingmen’s role in maintaining Yuan Qi, it is regarded as the congenital foundation, internally storing Yuan Qi, nurturing the primordial Yin and Yang. At the onset of life, Yuan Yin and Yuan Yang generate the Five Zang and Six Fu, making the Mingmen the chief overseer of the viscera. When the Mingmen functions normally, the operation of the viscera is smooth and harmonious [5]. Master Lei also concurs with this perspective, aligning with the doctrine of the Mingmen. If the Mingmen weakens, its warming function and driving force diminish, impairing kidney Yang and subsequently weakening the vitality of all the viscera, leading to disharmony among the Five Zang and Six Fu. This imbalance can develop into chronic, lingering diseases characterized by deficiency, resulting in the accumulation of pathological conditions.

Furthermore, the Complete Works of Jing Yue states: “The kidneys contain the essence chamber, called the Mingmen, which resides in the Heaven One, the residence of true Yin.” As the organs decline with age, their ability to nourish diminishes, causing the Mingmen to lose its nourishing function. This results in Yin failing to restrain Yang, leading to internal heat and fire, often manifesting as symptoms such

as restlessness of the five hearts, insomnia, and emotional disturbances. Master Lei believes that most cases of senile insomnia are caused by the decline of various organs, with the fundamental cause being the deficiency of the Mingmen’s nourishment, which leads to the gradual deterioration of the body’s vitality.

### **2.2 The Primary Pathogenesis Involves Disharmony between the Spleen and Stomach, with Obstruction of Qi Flow.**

The circulation of qi within the zang-fu organs constitutes a complex, interwoven, and dynamically regulated balance mechanism. The ascending and descending functions of the spleen and stomach play a decisive role among the various equilibrium processes of these movements. The Suwen chapter “Liu Wei Zhi Da Lun” states: “Without proper ingress and egress, there can be no growth, development, or aging; without proper ascent and descent, there can be no transformation or storage. Therefore, the movement of ascent and descent, ingress and egress, is present in all vessels.” When the qi mechanism’s ascent, descent, ingress, and egress are harmonized, qi and blood are generated and transformed, and the interaction among the zang-fu organs proceeds in an orderly manner. Thus, the smooth flow of qi is a critical factor in reflecting the body’s vitality or the effectiveness of treatment.

In clinical practice, damage or excess of qi in other zang-fu organs can impair the movement of qi, leading the body to compensate in multiple ways. This compensation may result in impaired gastric descent, insufficient spleen ascent, and disruption of qi movement, which over time can manifest as symptoms such as loss of appetite, anxiety, emotional distress, dizziness, and vertigo. Additionally, due to the spleen’s inherent preference for dryness and aversion to dampness, prolonged dysfunction can lead to spleen deficiency, making it difficult to transform water and dampness, resulting in the gradual formation of phlegm and dampness. This further obstructs the circulation of qi and blood, causing imbalance in the yin and yang of the zang-fu organs, and disrupting the connections among the heart, spleen, stomach, kidneys, brain, and meridians. Such disharmony can disturb the mind, leading to insomnia.

### **3. A Combined Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine Treatment Approach based on the Theory of the Mingmen**

Currently, the clinical challenges involve that acupuncture alone has shown some efficacy in treating insomnia. However, for elderly patients or those with refractory insomnia, acupuncture often yields less satisfactory results. Professor Lei, in light of recent pandemic-related impacts, has conducted an in-depth analysis of the underlying causes, thoroughly understanding the visceral mechanisms, and returning to fundamental principles. He simplifies the framework starting from the concepts of Yin and Yang, emphasizing comprehensive regulation. The primary reason is the decline of Mingmen (Life Gate) function, while the secondary cause involves various factors leading to stagnation of Qi flow.

Although ancient and modern medical practitioners had different understandings of the theory of the Mingmen, they reached a relatively unified consensus on some key points. The location and function of the Mingmen are closely related to those of the kidneys; it also has an impact on the regulation of the qi of the spleen and stomach; and it is also associated with the transmission of essence and energy along the Ren and Du meridians. Most believe that the theory of the Mingmen is the foundation of the five zang organs and six fu organs, and it is at a higher level of primordial nature compared to the zang organs and fu organs [6]. Master Lei believes that its importance goes beyond the simple functions of the zang organs.

The Mingmen, serving as the primary source of vitality, maintains the normal functioning of the five zang and six fu organs and has a profound influence on the generation of kidney essence and growth and development. The kidneys govern the bones and produce marrow, with kidney essence transforming into marrow that nourishes the bones and brain. The stomach is responsible for receiving and ripening food, converting grains into refined essence and subtle substances to support normal physiological activities. The spleen governs transportation and transformation; its qi disperses essence to irrigate the four limbs and nourish the four zang organs. When the functions of the spleen, stomach, and kidneys are mutually impaired, corresponding functional disorders inevitably occur. In elderly individuals, various factors impair the spleen's transportation and upward movement of clear qi, preventing the water and grain essence from reaching the heart, leading to a deficiency in nourishing the spirit, accumulation of phlegm and dampness, stagnation of qi and blood, and obstruction of the orifices of the brain. The accumulation of various pathogenic factors causes an imbalance of yin and yang, resulting in abnormal mental and consciousness states. Prolonged deficiency further affects kidney function, making it difficult for kidney essence to transform and indirectly impairing the nourishment of the Mingmen. The vitality of the Mingmen has a bidirectional influence on the functions of the spleen, stomach, and kidneys. Therefore, Master Lei emphasizes the characteristics of the Mingmen and its relationship with the zang-fu organs, thoroughly studying the connection between organ function and insomnia. By utilizing the advantages of corresponding Chinese herbs—namely, nourishing and moistening the organs from top to bottom—this approach aims to tonify the Mingmen, strengthen the spleen and kidneys, and calm the mind. The material basis for nourishment is closely linked to the functions of the spleen and stomach, allowing the Mingmen to be nourished through the spleen, stomach, and kidneys. At this stage, the fundamental issues are addressed.

However, in elderly individuals, insomnia is often caused by multiple factors leading to stagnation of qi flow and obstruction of the pathways of qi and blood. Ensuring smooth circulation within the body's channels is therefore a crucial aspect. Master Lei opts for acupuncture to unblock the meridians. The meridian system serves as the conduit for qi movement, with the Du meridian acting as the sea of yang meridians, governing their function. Through acupuncture effects, it is possible to regulate the qi of the internal organs, achieve a positive modulation of qi and blood flow, and improve the local environment, thereby enhancing the

unobstructed flow of pathways. Key points such as Mingmen and related back-shu points serve as vital communication nodes between the interior and exterior. Research indicates that Mingmen is connected with multiple meridians and primarily functions to regulate the Du meridian, tonify the kidneys, replenish essence, warm yang, and assist fire [7]. The back-shu points are reactive points where the meridians and qi of the zang-fu organs are projected onto the back, allowing dynamic regulation of organ function. The combined stimulation of Mingmen and back-shu points plays a pivotal role in channel regulation, promoting the infusion of qi and blood into the organs, and strengthening the Du meridian's role in governing yang qi and blood flow. Additionally, to address localized qi stagnation, the acupoint selection for the Brain-Calming and Spirit-Settling acupuncture method [8] has been iteratively refined. Modern research has also incorporated deep needling techniques to intensively stimulate the sleep center. When used together, these acupuncture methods aim to facilitate smooth qi circulation and promote mental clarity and restful sleep.

The approach for elderly patients focuses on a holistic regulation involving supplementation, nourishment, and smooth flow. Acupuncture is used to adjust the body's environment, while traditional Chinese medicine improves visceral functions. Considering that older individuals often experience deficiency, blood stasis, and imbalances between yin and yang, external pathogenic factors and emotional influences are also recognized as contributing to insomnia and can be addressed with tailored modifications. Master Lei emphasizes that the core treatment principles involve nourishing the Mingmen, promoting qi circulation, strengthening the brain marrow, and calming the spirit. He advocates that in clinical management of geriatric insomnia, attention should be given to the Mingmen point, emphasizing its close relationship with the heart, spleen, stomach, kidneys, brain, and meridians. The condition is understood to result from deficiencies in the spleen and kidneys, inadequate nourishment of the Mingmen, and disrupted qi flow.

#### **4. The Specific Application of Combined Acupuncture and Herbal Therapy**

According to the natural cycles of all things, in the early morning when yang energy is generated and all things are growing, acupuncture treatment is administered to stimulate internal yang, consolidate yin, and promote the generation of yang energy, thereby ensuring the full functioning of the body's organs and viscera. This approach helps achieve an optimal physiological state conducive to healthy living. Conversely, in the evening when yang energy descends and all things settle, herbal medicine is taken to align with the nature of yin, fully leveraging the regulatory effects of herbs on the viscera, nourishing the life gate, invigorating the spleen and stomach, promoting qi flow, and calming the mind. Morning acupuncture stimulates yang to regulate functions and enhance cognitive clarity; nighttime herbal therapy nourishes yin to moistening and tonifying the organs, restoring balance, and calming the mind. This ensures internal and external communication within the body, maintains the balance of qi and blood, harmonizes yin and yang, and promotes mental well-being.

#### 4.1 Using Acupuncture to Invigorate the Mind, Calm the Spirit, and Promote the Smooth Flow of Meridians

Master Lei extends and modifies the traditional neurocalming and brain-strengthening acupuncture techniques specifically for elderly insomnia. These methods often select acupoints associated with the Governor Vessel, the Three Yang Meridians, and the Yang Wei Mai [9]. The needle insertion intersects and connects interior and exterior pathways, regulating the body's internal environment, harmonizing the qi and blood of the meridians, nourishing the brain marrow, balancing yin and yang, calming the mind, and promoting restful sleep [10]. Emphasis is placed on the Governor Vessel to regulate consciousness, with common acupoints including DU20, DU18, DU16, DU14, and DU4. Additionally, focus is given to the Yin and Yang Qiaomai, crossing points, and extraordinary points to facilitate communication between the upper and lower parts of the body, often acupoints including BL62, K16, GB20, EX-HN1, HT7, SP6, and the lateral occipital line. Special attention is paid to transdermal needling of scalp points to stimulate the sleep center, frequently choosing acupoints such as BL8 through BL7, DU20 through DU21, and DU22 through DU24. Lastly, back-shu points are highly valued for connecting internal and external pathways, commonly including BL23, BL25, BL20, BL21, and BL15. The combination of these acupoints works synergistically to regulate yin and yang, tonify and nourish weakened organs, and promote brain health, marrow nourishment, and restful sleep.

#### 4.2 Using Traditional Chinese Medicine to Tonify the Mingmen and Regulate the Internal Organs

Traditional Chinese Medicine emphasizes tonifying the Mingmen, strengthening the spleen, nourishing the heart, and calming the spirit. In particular, supplementing the Mingmen's water and fire aspects involves the use of cinnamon, Eucommia, Cistanche, Polygonatum, and Codonopsis. Additionally, a series of herbs that facilitate spleen transportation and circulation are commonly selected, such as Amomum, Atractylodes, Saussurea, Chicken Gizzard lining, Hawthorn, and Poria. These herbs play crucial roles in treatment: Amomum warms the middle and promotes qi flow; Atractylodes strengthens the spleen and boosts qi; Saussurea moves qi, relieves pain, and harmonizes the spleen and stomach; Chicken Gizzard lining aids digestion and resolves food stagnation; Hawthorn enhances digestion; and Poria promotes diuresis, drains dampness, strengthens the spleen, and calms the mind. For patients experiencing frequent dreams and easy awakening, Albizia bark and Nightshade vine are used to calm the spirit and stabilize the will, while activating blood circulation and unblocking meridians. In elderly patients with typically shorter sleep durations, Morinda root is added. For stubborn insomnia, tailored modifications with sedative and calming herbs are employed based on specific symptoms. The combined use of these herbs ensures the generation of qi from the spleen, kidney, and Mingmen, providing a continuous source. It also promotes harmonious interaction among various internal systems, regulates qi movement, and maximizes the therapeutic effects of the herbs at the disease site. This approach facilitates the flow of qi and blood, creating an optimal environment for the body's repair processes.

#### 5. Conclusion

With the aging of society, sleep disturbances have become a common problem among the elderly, and modern medicine struggles to effectively control their progression. Traditional Chinese medicine offers clear advantages in treating this condition. According to Master Lei, the primary pathogenesis involves deficiency of the Mingmen, weakness of the viscera, failure of the middle jiao to govern, meridian stagnation, and imbalance of yin and yang. It is believed that treatment of different types of senile insomnia should primarily focus on nourishing the Mingmen, supplemented by promoting qi flow. When the Mingmen is well-nourished, the viscera can generate and stabilize, and the qi of all organs can flow smoothly, enabling control of the disease. Acupuncture and herbal medicine dynamically regulate the body's vital energy, each fulfilling its role, thereby redistributing the body's meridians and qi. The core principles of treatment — nourishing the Mingmen, harmonizing the five zang organs, calming the mind, and balancing yin and yang—are consistently applied to fundamentally improve the pathological state of insomnia, achieving therapeutic goals. This approach also provides reference and treatment strategies for similar conditions.

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