

Renowned Traditional Chinese Medicine Expert Professor Shen Shuwen's Clinical Experience and Medication Principles in Treating Spleen and Stomach Disorders based on the Theory of "Five Flavors Regulation and Treatment"

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Abstract: *This paper summarizes Professor Shen Shuwen's clinical medication experience in treating spleen-stomach disorders by applying the Theory of Five-Flavor Therapeutic Regulation at Shaanxi University of Chinese Medicine. Centered on the core tenet of "Harmonizing the Five Flavors to Attain Balance as the Therapeutic Principle", this theory closely aligns with the physiological characteristics and pathological features of the spleen and stomach, and rectifies zang-fu organ imbalances through the flexible compatibility of medicinal herbs with sour, bitter, sweet, pungent and salty flavors. Professor Shen's academic thought enriches the connotation of the traditional Five Flavors Theory, embodies the essence of the traditional Chinese medicine therapeutic maxim of "Taking Balance as the Ultimate Goal", provides novel insights for syndrome differentiation-based medication in spleen-stomach disorders, and holds significant theoretical value and clinical guiding significance.*

Keywords: Shen Shuwen, Five-flavor Regulation, Clinical Experience, Academic Thought, Spleen and Stomach Disorders.

1. Introduction

With social development and changes in lifestyle, the incidence of spleen-stomach disorders has been rising continuously, making them major diseases affecting national health. Li Dongyuan, a physician of the Jin-Yuan dynasties, proposed in his Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach that "internal injury to the spleen and stomach gives rise to all diseases". He systematically elaborated the core role of the spleen and stomach as the foundation of postnatal life and the source of qi and blood production, laying the theoretical foundation for the treatment of spleen-stomach disorders in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Subsequent physicians have continuously developed on this basis, forming distinctive diagnosis and treatment systems.

Professor Shen Shuwen, Chief Physician and Professor at the Affiliated Hospital of Shaanxi University of Chinese Medicine, Master's Supervisor, Doctoral Supervisor at Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Academic Leader of the Key Discipline of Gastroenterology designated by the Shaanxi Provincial Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and one of the First Batch of Famous TCM Doctors in Shaanxi Province, has been engaged in TCM teaching, research and clinical practice for nearly 50 years. He possesses rich medication experience and unique TCM therapeutic approaches, particularly holding highly original academic thoughts and insights in the clinical treatment of spleen-stomach disorders. Based on the "Theory of Five-Flavor Therapeutic Regulation", Professor Shen has put forward a series of distinctive clinical medication ideas. His clinical medication experience is summarized below for the benefit of fellow practitioners.

2. Understanding and Historical Evolution of the "Five-Flavor Therapeutic Regulation" Theory in Traditional Chinese Medicine

The embryonic form of the "Five-Flavor Therapeutic Regulation" theory first appeared in Plain Questions • On the Ultimate Truth and Supreme Essentials, which stated that "when the five flavors enter the stomach, each goes to the organ it prefers". It clarified the meridian tropism rule: sour enters the liver, bitter enters the heart, sweet enters the spleen, pungent enters the lung, and salty enters the kidney. It also initially expounded the effects of the five flavors: sour is responsible for astringing and consolidating, stimulating appetite and promoting fluid production; bitter is responsible for clearing, purging and descending, drying dampness and consolidating yin; sweet is responsible for tonifying and harmonizing the middle energizer, relieving spasm and pain; pungent is responsible for dispersing and moving qi, warming, unblocking and promoting blood circulation; salty is responsible for softening hardness and moistening to promote defecation, purging fire and nourishing yin. This laid the theoretical foundation for the treatment of spleen-stomach disorders with the five flavors.

In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Zhang Zhongjing pioneered the development of the five-flavor compatibility theory in his Treatise on Cold Damage and Miscellaneous Diseases, establishing three major therapeutic methods: "pungent-sweet transforming yang", "sour-sweet transforming yin" and "bitter-pungent unblocking and descending". For example, Cinnamon Twig and Licorice Decoction uses pungent-sweet herbs to transform yang for treating palpitations due to heart

yang deficiency; Peony and Licorice Decoction uses sour-sweet herbs to transform yin for relieving spasm and pain; Pinellia Heart-Draining Decoction uses bitter-pungent herbs to unblock and descend for resolving epigastric fullness and oppression. This advanced the five-flavor theory from mere efficacy description to clinical practical application.

During the Jin-Yuan period, Li Dongyuan created the Center-Supplementing Qi-Boosting Decoction for fever due to spleen-stomach qi deficiency and proposed the major therapeutic principle of “eliminating heat with sweet-warm herbs”. He believed that spleen-stomach weakness leads to sinking of clear yang and upward invasion of yin fire, which should be treated with pungent-sweet warm herbs such as Astragalus Root and Ginseng to supplement the center and lift yang, restoring normal qi movement of the spleen and stomach and making yin fire recede spontaneously. This represented a major breakthrough in the application of the five-flavor theory in the treatment of spleen-stomach disorders.

In the Qing Dynasty, Ye Tianshi further perfected the five-flavor therapeutic regulation thought and proposed the theory of spleen-stomach characteristics: “The Taiyin damp earth can only transport when it receives yang; the Yangming dry earth can only be calm when it receives yin”. In treating stomach yin deficiency with food stagnation, he used sweet-cold herbs such as Adenophora Root and Ophiopogon Root to nourish stomach yin, combined with bitter-dry herbs such as Pinellia Tuber and Tangerine Peel to resolve damp turbidity. This embodies the compatibility wisdom of combining sweet and bitter, and balancing moistening and drying, making systematic innovations and extensions to the five-flavor therapeutic regulation theory.

3. Professor Shen Shuwen’s Innovative Understanding of the “Five-Flavor Therapeutic Regulation” Theory and Clinical Medication Experience

Integrating the essence of physicians of past dynasties with clinical practice, Professor Shen put forward the core academic viewpoint of “Harmonizing the Five Flavors to Attain Balance as the Therapeutic Principle”. He believes that the occurrence and development of spleen-stomach disorders are essentially caused by imbalance of the five flavors, with common pathological changes such as “sweetness causing stagnation, bitterness causing injury, pungency causing dispersion, sourness causing astringency, and saltiness causing stasis”. The key to treatment lies in restoring the dynamic balance of the five flavors, emphasizing “taking balance as the ultimate goal and valuing harmony”. He flexibly selects prescriptions and herbs according to pathological changes, achieving the therapeutic effect of “tonifying without causing stagnation, clearing without causing injury” through five-flavor compatibility.

3.1 Sour Astringency for Consolidation, Stimulating Appetite and Promoting Fluid Production

3.1.1 Dark Plum Fruit (Fructus Mume)

Sour and astringent in flavor, neutral in nature, it enters the liver, spleen, lung and large intestine meridians, with significant effects of astringing the intestines to stop diarrhea, promoting fluid production to quench thirst, and calming roundworms to relieve pain. Modern pharmacological studies have shown that Dark Plum Fruit can promote bile secretion [1], exert antibacterial effects and stop diarrhea. Clinically, for chronic diarrhea and dysentery with incessant discharge, it is often combined with Medicine Terminalia Fruit and Chinese Magnoliavine Fruit; for loose stools due to spleen-stomach deficiency cold, it is combined with Dried Ginger and Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome to warm the middle and astringe the intestines; for damp-heat dysentery with tenesmus, it is combined with Coptis Rhizome and Scutellaria Root to clear heat and dry dampness; for thirst due to wasting-thirst syndrome and stomach yin deficiency, it is combined with Trichosanthes Root, Kudzu Root and Ophiopogon Root to promote fluid production and quench thirst. The usual dosage is 15-30g. It is contraindicated in patients with excess pathogenic factors and stagnation, or heat constipation with fecal impaction.

3.1.2 Mulberry Fruit (Fructus Mori)

Sour and sweet in flavor, cold in nature, it enters the heart, liver and kidney meridians, with effects of nourishing yin and blood, promoting fluid production and moistening dryness. Modern pharmacology has confirmed that it can promote intestinal peristalsis and improve digestive function [2]. Professor Shen considers Mulberry Fruit an essential herb for nourishing yin and blood. For epigastric burning pain, dry mouth and poor appetite due to stomach yin deficiency, it is often combined with Adenophora Root, Ophiopogon Root and Fragrant Solomonseal Rhizome (following the method of Stomach-Benefiting Decoction) [3]; for obvious stomach pain, White Peony Root and Licorice Root are added to relieve spasm and pain; for obvious qi deficiency, Heterophylly Falsestarwort Root and Astragalus Root are added to supplement qi and nourish yin; for constipation due to fluid exhaustion, it is combined with Hemp Seed, Chinese Angelica and Immature Bitter Orange to moisten the intestines and promote defecation. The usual dosage is 15-30g. Clinically, it can be assisted with Villous Amomum Fruit and Tangerine Peel to prevent its greasy nature from hindering stomach function. It should be used with caution in patients with spleen-stomach deficiency cold and loose stools.

3.1.3 Common Floweringquince Fruit (Fructus Chaenomelis)

Sour in flavor, warm in nature, it enters the liver and spleen meridians, with effects of promoting fluid production and harmonizing the stomach, resolving dampness and promoting digestion, relaxing tendons and relieving spasm. Modern pharmacology has shown that it has anti-inflammatory, analgesic effects, relieves gastrointestinal smooth muscle spasm and promotes digestion [4]. Professor Shen emphasizes that Common Floweringquince Fruit “astringes without retaining pathogenic factors and resolves dampness without aggravating dampness”, making it suitable for indigestion and epigastric distending pain due to damp turbidity obstructing the middle energizer. For food stagnation with indigestion, it is combined with Hawthorn Fruit, Medicated Leaven and Radish Seed to promote digestion and resolve stagnation; for

stuffiness and vomiting due to damp turbidity obstructing the middle energizer, it is combined with Fortune Eupatorium Herb, Official Magnolia Bark and Swordlike Atractylodes Rhizome to resolve dampness and harmonize the stomach; for diarrhea due to spleen deficiency with excessive dampness, it is combined with Hyacinth Bean, Coix Seed and Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome to invigorate the spleen and resolve dampness. The usual dosage is 15-20g. It should be used with caution in patients with excessive gastric acid.

3.1.4 White Peony Root (*Radix Paeoniae Alba*)

Sour and bitter in flavor, slightly cold in nature, it enters the liver and spleen meridians, with core effects of nourishing blood, softening the liver and regulating the spleen, astringing yin and harmonizing the nutrient system to relieve pain. Modern pharmacological studies have confirmed that it can regulate gastrointestinal function and exert analgesic and anti-inflammatory effects [5]. For epigastric distending pain radiating to the hypochondrium due to liver qi invading the stomach, White Peony Root is combined with Bupleurum Root and Nutgrass Galingale Rhizome (following the method of Bupleurum Liver-Soothing Powder) to soften the liver and harmonize the stomach; for abdominal pain and diarrhea due to liver-spleen disharmony, it is combined with Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome, Tangerine Peel and Divaricate Saposhnikovia Root (following the meaning of Painful Diarrhea Essential Formula). Professor Shen is skilled in using White Peony Root herb pairs: White Peony Root combined with Chinese Angelica regulates both qi and blood, enhancing the effect of softening the liver and relieving pain; White Peony Root combined with Cinnamon Twig harmonizes the nutrient and defensive systems, achieving a balance of hardness and softness; White Peony Root combined with Ark Shell uses sourness to counteract acidity, inhibiting gastric acid secretion and promoting gastric mucosal repair [6]. The usual dosage is 15-30g. It should be used with caution in patients with spleen-stomach deficiency cold.

3.2 Bitterness for Drying Dampness and Clearing Descending, Calming the Stomach and Harmonizing the Spleen

3.2.1 Coptis Rhizome (*Rhizoma Coptidis*)

Bitter in flavor, cold in nature, it enters the heart, spleen, stomach, liver, gallbladder and large intestine meridians, and is an essential herb for clearing excess fire, drying dampness and detoxifying. Modern pharmacology has shown that it has antibacterial and anti-inflammatory effects, inhibits gastric juice secretion and protects the gastric mucosa [7]. For acid regurgitation, heartburn, bitter taste and bad breath due to exuberant stomach heat complicated with liver fire disturbing the stomach, it is combined with Evodia Fruit, Ophiopogon Root and Dendrobium Stem to clear the stomach and purge liver fire while taking care of stomach yin; for epigastric stuffiness and diarrhea due to damp-heat obstructing the middle energizer, following the meaning of Pinellia Heart-Draining Decoction, it is combined with Scutellaria Root, Pinellia Tuber and Dried Ginger to regulate cold and heat, and eliminate stuffiness with bitter-pungent herbs; for bloody purulent stools due to damp-heat toxin stagnating in

the large intestine, it is combined with Amur Corktree Bark, Kudzu Root and Costus Root to clear heat and dry dampness, regulate qi and harmonize blood. The usual dosage is 6-8g. Excessive or prolonged use can easily damage spleen-stomach yang qi.

3.2.2 Official Magnolia Bark (*Cortex Magnoliae Officinalis*)

Bitter and pungent in flavor, warm in nature, it enters the spleen, stomach, lung and large intestine meridians, with excellent effects of moving qi to relieve distension, drying dampness and eliminating fullness, making it a superior herb for regulating qi movement in the middle energizer. Modern pharmacology has confirmed that it can enhance gastric motility, protect the gastric mucosa and prevent gastric ulcers [8]. For stuffiness and nausea due to damp stagnation injuring the middle energizer, it is combined with Swordlike Atractylodes Rhizome and Tangerine Peel to dry dampness and invigorate the spleen; for abdominal distension and belching with putrid odor due to food stagnation and qi stagnation, it is combined with Hawthorn Fruit and Radish Seed to promote digestion and resolve stagnation; for gastrointestinal excess heat with constipation, it is combined with Rhubarb and Immature Bitter Orange to unblock the fu organ and purge heat; for plum-stone syndrome due to phlegm-qi obstruction, it is combined with Pinellia Tuber and Perilla Leaf (following the method of Pinellia and Magnolia Bark Decoction) to resolve phlegm and descend qi. The usual dosage is 10-15g.

3.2.3 Immature Bitter Orange (*Fructus Aurantii Immaturus*)

Bitter, pungent and sour in flavor, slightly cold in nature, it enters the spleen and stomach meridians, with effects of breaking qi to resolve stagnation, resolving phlegm and eliminating stuffiness, and also lifting prolapsed organs. Modern pharmacology has shown that it can excite gastrointestinal smooth muscle and promote gastric emptying [9]. For epigastric and abdominal distending pain due to food stagnation transforming into heat, it is combined with Rhubarb, Coptis Rhizome and Medicated Leaven to clear heat and resolve stagnation; for postprandial abdominal distension due to spleen deficiency with food stagnation, following the meaning of Immature Bitter Orange and Atractylodes Decoction, it is combined with Ginseng and Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome to achieve both elimination and tonification; for stuffiness and fullness due to damp-heat stagnation, it is combined with Official Magnolia Bark and Coptis Rhizome (following the method of Immature Bitter Orange Stasis-Eliminating Pill); for organ prolapse such as gastroptosis and rectal prolapse, a small dosage (3-6g) is combined with Astragalus Root, Raising Vine Stem and Bupleurum Root to lift yang and raise prolapsed organs. The conventional dosage for resolving stagnation is 15-30g.

3.2.4 Danshen Root (*Radix Salviae Miltiorrhizae*)

Bitter in flavor, slightly cold in nature, it enters the heart and liver meridians, with effects of promoting blood circulation to remove blood stasis, unblocking meridians to relieve pain, and also clearing the heart to calm the spirit. Modern pharmacological studies have shown that it can improve microcirculation and inhibit platelet aggregation [10].

Professor Shen believes that chronic spleen-stomach disorders often enter the collaterals and cause blood stasis. For fixed stabbing epigastric pain and dark purple tongue due to blood stasis obstructing the stomach, following the meaning of Danshen Decoction and Lost Smile Powder, it is combined with Sandalwood, Villous Amomum Fruit, Cattail Pollen and Troglodytes Dung to promote blood circulation and relieve pain; for insomnia and dreaminess due to heat disturbing the heart spirit, it is combined with Tuber Fleeceflower Stem, Poria and Thinleaf Milkwort Root to clear the heart and calm the spirit. The usual dosage is 15-20g.

3.3 Sweetness for Moistening and Tonifying, Harmonizing the Middle and Relieving Spasm

3.3.1 Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome (Rhizoma Atractylodis Macrocephalae)

Sweet and bitter in flavor, warm in nature, it enters the spleen and stomach meridians, known as the “first herb for invigorating qi and strengthening the spleen”, with additional effects of drying dampness, promoting diuresis and preventing miscarriage. Modern pharmacology has confirmed that it can promote gastrointestinal peristalsis and enhance digestive and absorptive functions [11]. For poor appetite, abdominal distension, lassitude and fatigue due to spleen-stomach weakness, based on Six Gentlemen Decoction, it is combined with Ginseng, Poria and Licorice Root to invigorate qi and strengthen the spleen; for diarrhea due to spleen deficiency with excessive dampness, following the meaning of Ginseng, Poria and Atractylodes Powder, it is combined with Chinese Yam, Hyacinth Bean and Coix Seed to resolve dampness and stop diarrhea; for fifth-watch diarrhea due to spleen-kidney yang deficiency, it is combined with Malaytea Scurfpea Fruit and Nutmeg (following the method of Four Spirits Pill); for threatened miscarriage, it is combined with Scutellaria Root and Eucommia Bark to tonify both the spleen and kidney to prevent miscarriage. The usual dosage is 15-20g.

3.3.2 Bletilla Tuber (Rhizoma Bletillae)

Sweet, bitter and astringent in flavor, slightly cold in nature, it enters the lung, stomach and liver meridians, with effects of astringing to stop bleeding, reducing swelling and promoting tissue regeneration. Modern pharmacological studies have shown that Bletilla polysaccharide can form a gel-like protective film in the gastric acid environment, effectively protecting the gastric mucosa and promoting ulcer healing [12]. Clinically, for hematemesis and hemoptysis due to lung-stomach bleeding, it is combined with Loquat Leaf and India Madder Root to cool blood and stop bleeding; for chronic atrophic gastritis with erosion and gastric ulcers, it is combined with Coptis Rhizome, Evodia Fruit and Hairyvein Agrimonia Herb to clear the stomach, detoxify, protect the mucosa and promote tissue

3.3.3 Hyacinth Bean (Semen Lablab Album)

Sweet in flavor, slightly warm in nature, it enters the spleen and stomach meridians, with effects of invigorating the spleen and resolving dampness, harmonizing the middle and relieving summer-heat, characterized by “invigorating the

spleen without being greasy, resolving dampness without being dry”. Modern pharmacology has shown that it has antibacterial, antiviral and immune-enhancing effects [13]. For loose stools and poor appetite due to spleen-stomach weakness with damp obstruction, it is combined with Ginseng, Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome and Villous Amomum Fruit (following the method of Ginseng, Poria and Atractylodes Powder); for clear and thin vaginal discharge due to spleen deficiency with excessive dampness, it is combined with Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome, Swordlike Atractylodes Rhizome and Plantain Seed (following the meaning of Ending Vaginal Discharge Decoction); for vomiting and diarrhea due to yin summer-heat in summer, it is combined with Chinese Mosla Herb and Officinal Magnolia Bark (following the method of Elsholtzia Powder) to aromatically resolve turbidity and relieve summer-heat. The usual dosage is 5-10g.

3.3.4 Indian Mockstrawberry Herb (Herba Duchesneae Indicae)

Sweet and bitter in flavor, cold in nature, it enters the lung, stomach and large intestine meridians, with effects of clearing heat and detoxifying, dispersing blood stasis and relieving pain. Modern pharmacology has confirmed that it has antibacterial, anti-inflammatory effects and regulates intestinal function [14]. For epigastric burning pain and oral ulcers due to damp-heat obstructing the middle energizer, it is combined with Coptis Rhizome and Dandelion Herb to clear and resolve damp-heat; for damp-heat diarrhea with abdominal pain and burning sensation in the anus, it is combined with Purslane Herb, Scutellaria Root and Costus Root; for children with food stagnation transforming into heat, it is combined with Charred Hawthorn Fruit and Forsythia Fruit to promote digestion and clear heat. The usual dosage is 20-30g. This herb has mild toxicity and needs to be combined with Licorice Root for detoxification. It is contraindicated in pregnant women.

3.4 Pungency for Dispersing and Moving Qi, Warming Unblocking and Promoting Blood Circulation

3.4.1 Prepared Common Monkshood Root (Radix Aconiti Lateralis Preparata)

Pungent and sweet in flavor, extremely hot in nature, it enters the heart, kidney and spleen meridians. Being extremely pungent and hot, it can assist heart yang above, warm spleen yang in the middle and tonify kidney yang below. Modern pharmacology has shown that it has anti-inflammatory, analgesic effects, improves microcirculation and enhances immunity [15]. For epigastric cold pain and loose stools due to middle yang deficiency cold, following the meaning of Aconite Center-Regulating Decoction, it is combined with Dried Ginger, Ginseng and Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome to warm yang and invigorate the spleen; for soreness and cold pain in the waist and knees, frequent nocturia due to spleen-kidney yang deficiency, it is combined with Cassia Bark and Rehmannia Root to warm and tonify kidney yang; for limb edema due to yang deficiency with water flooding, it is combined with Poria and Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome (following the method of True Warrior Decoction) to warm yang and promote diuresis. The usual dosage is 10-15g. Due to its strong nature and toxicity, it must be decocted first and

for a longer time. It is contraindicated in pregnant women.

3.4.2 Tsaoko Fruit (Fructus Tsaoko)

Pungent in flavor, warm in nature, it enters the spleen and stomach meridians, with effects of warming the middle and drying dampness, promoting digestion and resolving stagnation, aromatically resolving turbidity. Modern pharmacology has shown that it inhibits gastrointestinal motility and exerts anti-inflammatory and antibacterial effects [16]. For epigastric cold pain, nausea and vomiting, thick white greasy tongue coating due to cold-dampness encumbering the spleen, it is combined with Astragalus Root, Swordlike Atractylodes Rhizome, Official Magnolia Bark and Villous Amomum Fruit to warm the spleen and resolve dampness; for bad breath due to damp turbidity obstructing the middle energizer, it is combined with Wrinkled Giant hyssop Herb, Fortune Eupatorium Herb and Coix Seed to aromatically resolve turbidity and eliminate foul odor. The usual dosage is 3-10g.

3.4.3 Lesser Galangal Rhizome (Rhizoma Alpiniae Officinarum)

Pungent in flavor, hot in nature, it enters the spleen and stomach meridians, with effects of warming the middle to stop vomiting, dispersing cold and relieving pain. Modern pharmacology has confirmed that it has anti-inflammatory, analgesic effects and promotes digestion [17]. For epigastric cold pain and vomiting of clear water due to middle energizer deficiency cold, following the meaning of Lesser Galangal and Cyperus Pill, it is combined with Nutgrass Galangale Rhizome and Cassia Bark to warm the stomach, disperse cold and relieve pain; for lower abdominal cold pain and dysmenorrhea due to cold congealing the liver meridian, it is combined with Fennel Fruit and Szechwan Chinaberry Fruit (following the method of Tiantai Lindera Powder) to soothe the liver and disperse cold. The usual dosage is 10g.

3.5 Saltiness for Softening Hardness and Moistening Descending, Purging Fire and Nourishing Yin

3.5.1 Figwort Root (Radix Scrophulariae)

Salty, sweet and bitter in flavor, slightly cold in nature, it enters the lung, stomach and kidney meridians, with effects of clearing heat and cooling blood, nourishing yin and purging fire, moistening the intestines to promote defecation. Modern pharmacology has shown that it has antibacterial, anti-inflammatory effects and enhances immunity [18]. For epigastric burning pain, dry mouth and red tongue due to stomach yin deficiency, it is combined with Adenophora Root, Ophiopogon Root and Dendrobium Stem (following the method of Stomach-Benefiting Decoction) to nourish stomach yin; for constipation due to yin deficiency and fluid depletion with intestinal dryness, following the meaning of Fluid-Increasing Chengqi Decoction, it is combined with Rehmannia Root, Ophiopogon Root and Rhubarb to nourish yin and promote defecation; for sore throat due to yin deficiency with exuberant fire, it is combined with Tendrilled Fritillary Bulb and Gypsum (following the method of Yin-Nourishing Lung-Clearing Decoction) to clear the lung and moisten dryness. The usual dosage is 10-15g.

3.5.2 Desertliving Cistanche (Herba Cistanches)

Salty and sweet in flavor, warm in nature, it enters the kidney and large intestine meridians, with effects of tonifying kidney yang, benefiting essence and blood, moistening the intestines to promote defecation, characterized by “warm, moist and moderate nature”. Modern pharmacology has confirmed that it can promote intestinal peristalsis, improve gastric mucosal injury and regulate intestinal flora [19]. For soreness and weakness of the waist and knees, impotence and seminal emission due to kidney yang deficiency, it is combined with Chinese Dodder Seed, Eucommia Bark and Barbary Wolfberry Fruit to tonify the kidney and strengthen yang; for senile constipation and postpartum constipation due to fluid depletion, it is combined with Hemp Seed, Chinese Angelica and Immature Bitter Orange to moisten the intestines and promote defecation. The usual dosage is 20-30g.

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4. Conclusion

The academic viewpoint of “Harmonizing the Five Flavors to Attain Balance as the Therapeutic Principle” is an innovative therapy proposed by Professor Shen Shuwen in the treatment of spleen-stomach disorders based on the Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon) and theories of numerous sages. Professor Shen points out that “sour and astringent herbs promote fluid production, but excessive use retains pathogenic factors”, emphasizing that although sour herbs (such as Dark Plum Fruit and Mulberry Fruit) can promote fluid production and quench thirst, their use in patients with excess pathogenic factors and stagnation will cause the disadvantage of “locking the bandit inside the house”. Bitter-cold herbs (such as Coptis Rhizome and Immature Bitter Orange) can clear heat and dry dampness, but prolonged use easily damages stomach yin, violating the physiological characteristic of the stomach that “prefers moisture and dislikes dryness”. “Sweet herbs are tonifying, but excessive use causes stagnation”: although sweet herbs (such as Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome and Hyacinth Bean) can tonify the spleen and stomach, their abuse easily leads to qi stagnation in the middle energizer, causing distension and fullness instead. “Pungent herbs disperse qi and blood, but excessive use consumes qi and injures fluid”: although pungent herbs (such as Prepared Common Monkshood Root and Lesser Galangal Rhizome) can disperse and move qi and

blood, excessive dispersion consumes qi and injures fluid, even stirring blood and damaging collaterals. “Salty herbs moisten and soften hardness, but excessive use hinders blood circulation”: although salty herbs (such as Figwort Root and Tortoise Shell) can soften hardness and moisten to promote defecation, excessive use leads to internal generation of water-dampness and slow blood circulation.

Therefore, Professor Shen advocates “five-flavor compatibility for dynamic balance”, that is, combining qi-moving herbs (such as Costus Root and Tangerine Peel) when using astringents, combining sweet-moist herbs (such as Ophiopogon Root and Dendrobium Stem) when using heat-clearing herbs, assisting with pungent-dispersing herbs (such as Tangerine Peel and Villous Amomum Fruit) when tonifying the spleen, adding sweet-moderating and sour-astringent herbs (such as Licorice Root and Chinese Magnoliavine Fruit) when using dispersants, and combining bitter-pungent herbs (such as Cinnamon Twig and Rhubarb) when using salty-moist herbs, so as to achieve the therapeutic effect of “tonifying without causing stagnation, clearing without causing injury”.

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