

Professor GUO Hongmin's Clinical Experience in Treating Insomnia in the elderly with Chaihu Longgu Muli Decoction

Jingxin Chen

Wuxi City Rehabilitation Hospital (Liangxi District Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital), Wuxi 214000, Jiangsu, China

Abstract: *The Chaihu Longgu Muli Decoction was first recorded in "Treatise on Cold Damage", Professor Guo Hongmin offers a unique perspective on this formula. Through his interpretation of the theory that "the elderly suffer from insomnia due to yang decline" and her clinical practice, Professor Guo discovered that as people reach old age, bodily functions decline, yin and yang become imbalanced, yang fails to enter yin, and insomnia results. Clinically, treatment can involve methods to invigorate the Qi of the Shaoyang channel, harmonize the Shaoyang channel, regulate the pivotal mechanism, and calm the mind and spirit. Using the Chaihu Longgu Muli Decoction as the foundation, and guided by Zang-Fu pattern differentiation, this approach treats geriatric insomnia. This article presents two verified case studies in which Professor Guo Hongmin applied modifications to this formula to treat geriatric insomnia, with the aim of providing a reference for clinical formula selection and medication use.*

Keywords: Insomnia in the elderly, Yang Deficiency, Imbalance of Yin and Yang, Experiences of Renowned Physicians.

1. Introduction

Age-related insomnia refers to a condition occurring in individuals aged 60 and older, characterized by the body's inability to achieve normal sleep. It often manifests as difficulty falling asleep, waking easily after falling asleep, waking up too early, or difficulty falling back asleep after waking, and is classified as primary insomnia [1]. Patients with geriatric insomnia experience reduced sleep duration and diminished sleep quality, which fail to meet their daily physiological needs. Over time, this can lead to cumulative damage to multiple organ systems; in severe cases, it may result in other cardiovascular and cerebrovascular events as well as psychiatric disorders. With the aging of Chinese society, the prevalence of insomnia in the elderly is increasing, possibly reaching approximately 49.9% [2], and this prevalence rises gradually with age. Long-term insomnia not only affects the physical and mental health and quality of life of older adults but is also closely associated with various physical and mental illnesses [3]; furthermore, it can trigger or exacerbate numerous chronic diseases, thereby increasing mortality rates.

In Western medicine, the clinical treatment of insomnia primarily relies on benzodiazepines, non-benzodiazepines, melatonin receptor agonists, and other medications. While these treatments yield acceptable short-term results, their significant side effects and potential for dependence, coupled with the likelihood of rebound symptoms upon discontinuation, make long-term treatment less than ideal. Elderly patients often find these medications difficult to tolerate, which significantly affects their adherence to treatment [4].

Professor Guo Hongmin is a renowned Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) practitioner in Jiangsu Province, a Chief TCM Physician, a professor, and a doctoral advisor. With over 40 years of medical experience, she specializes in the treatment of geriatric diseases and has achieved excellent clinical results. Insomnia in the elderly is a common and

frequently occurring condition among the elderly. The "Zhengzhi Yaojue" once proposed the theory that "as people age, their yang energy declines, leading to insomnia." Sleep occurs when yang enters yin; during the day, yang energy circulates on the body's surface, keeping a person awake, while at night, yang energy retracts and is stored internally, allowing a person to fall asleep. As people reach old age, yang energy declines and becomes latent and weak, rising to the surface; as a result, people often feel fatigued and unable to fall asleep. This is due to an imbalance between yin and yang, where yang fails to enter yin, leading to insomnia. "Huangdi Neijing Discourse on the Separation and Combination of Yin and Yang" states: "In the separation and union of the Three Yang, the Taiyang is the opening, the Yangming is the closing, and the Shaoyang is the pivot." The movement of the Three Yang channels involves rising, falling, entering, and exiting. The Shao Yang channel serves as the pivot: externally, it follows the opening of the Tai Yang channel; internally, it follows the closing of the Yang Ming channel. Much like a door hinge, it functions as a pivotal point and serves as the gateway where Yin and Yang intersect. If the Shao Yang pivot malfunctions, the flow of Yang energy is obstructed. Yang energy cannot smoothly transition from the body's surface to its interior, and the body is unable to complete the transition from "arousal" to "deep sleep" during the night, leading to insomnia. In her clinical practice, Dr. Guo has found that to treat insomnia caused by yang deficiency in the elderly, one should begin by invigorating the Shao Yang qi and regulating the body's Shao Yang qi dynamics, thereby harmonizing yin and yang and calming the mind. The Shaoyang corresponds to the gallbladder, and together with the Jueyin liver, they form an internal-external relationship through the meridians; the gallbladder and liver influence each other physiologically and pathologically and are closely interrelated. Regulating qi is inseparable from the liver; the liver governs the free flow of qi. If the Shao Yang pivot mechanism is impaired, the ascending and descending movements of qi become disordered, and the liver and gallbladder's functions of promoting the free flow of qi are disrupted, "By the time one reaches one's sixties or seventies, one's vital energy and blood have been depleted, life is full of

disappointments, and anger flares up easily.” As people age, the qi of the liver and gallbladder declines; internal damage caused by the seven emotions impairs the liver’s ability to regulate, leading to liver qi stagnation and an imbalance of qi and blood. This affects the mind and spirit, causing restlessness and disturbed sleep; over time, this takes a toll on the heart and spleen, giving rise to other conditions. Furthermore, the liver houses the soul and harbors the “ministerial fire.” If stagnation persists and transforms into fire, causing the ministerial fire to rise uncontrollably, the liver’s soul will not be properly housed, resulting in restless sleep at night. Furthermore, the liver is responsible for storing blood. If liver qi stagnation persists over time, it obstructs the flow of qi, leading to stasis of liver blood. This blood stasis not only directly causes insomnia but also impairs the generation of qi and blood, resulting in insomnia due to qi deficiency and blood deficiency [5], which in turn exacerbates the condition. Prolonged illness can invade the collaterals, making the condition protracted and difficult to cure.

The Chaihu Longgu Muli Decoction is derived from Zhang Zhongjing’s “Treatise on Cold Damage Diseases: differentiation of Taiyang Disease Based on Pulse and Symptoms”, Article 107. The original text states: “In cases of typhoid fever lasting eight or nine days, where purgation has been administered, and the patient presents with chest fullness, restlessness, difficulty urinating, delirium, and a feeling of heaviness throughout the body so severe that the patient cannot turn over, the Chaihu Longgu Muli Decoction is the treatment of choice.” This condition arises when, following an erroneous purgative treatment for typhoid fever, pathogenic factors become trapped in the Shaoyang channel, leading to symptoms such as chest fullness, restlessness, delirium, and general malaise. The original formula is derived from modifications to the Xiao Chaihu Decoction, the formula consists of Bupleurum, Scutellaria, minimum (red lead) (toxic; now commonly replaced with magnetite or calcined chlorite lapis), ginger, ginseng, Cinnamomum twig, Poria, Pinellia, rhubarb, dragon bone, oyster shell, and jujube. The entire formula combines cold and hot properties and employs both purgative and tonifying actions. It serves to harmonize the Shaoyang channel, soothe the liver and relieve depression, and calm the mind, Professor Huang Huang refers to it as “a psychoneurotropic sedative in traditional Chinese medicine” [6-7]. In this formula, Bupleurum has a light, clear, ascending, and dispersing action; it invigorates the Qi of the Shaoyang channel, harmonizes the Shaoyang channel to restore the opening and closing functions of the Three Yang channels, and serves as the primary herb for “regulating the pivot.” In his “An Explanation of the Classic of Materia Medica”, Ye Tianshi wrote: “Chaihu harmonizes the Shaoyang channel and is therefore effective against pathogenic factors causing fever and chills. When the energy of spring arrives, all things are renewed. Bupleurum embodies the ascending nature of heaven and earth in spring; it enters the Shaoyang channel to generate vital energy and blood, and thus serves to eliminate the old and bring forth the new.” Scutellaria baicalensis is bitter and cold in nature and has a descending action; it clears and drains stagnant heat in the Shaoyang channel. When Bupleurum and Scutellaria are combined, one ascends and the other descends; one disperses and the other clears, working together to restore the normal flow of qi in the Shaoyang meridian.

Pinellia has the effects of alleviating counterflow and stopping vomiting, Pinellia grows at the juncture of the rise of yang and matures at the transition to the rise of yin; it harmonizes yin and yang, allowing yang to enter yin and induce sleep. Ginger relieves exterior symptoms and dispels cold, and warms the middle burner to stop vomiting. Pinellia combined with ginger can soothe the stomach, relieve vomiting, resolve phlegm, and alleviate upward-moving qi. Combining Pinellia with Bupleurum enhances the effects of harmonizing the Shaoyang channel and regulating the flow of qi. Ginseng and red dates are sweet and neutral in nature; they can strengthen the middle jiao, tonify qi and blood, support the body’s vital energy, and expel pathogenic factors; The combination of ginseng, red dates, and ginger can work together to relieve stagnation in the Shaoyang channel [8]. It is particularly suitable for elderly patients with a long-standing illness or those who are physically weak. Here, Guizhi supports the heart’s yang to regulate water. When used in combination with rhubarb, it balances both ascending and descending actions. When used in combination with Poria, it promotes the flow of yang, transforms qi, harmonizes the surging energy, and promotes diuresis; Dragon Bone, Oyster Shell, and red lead (substitute) to anchor and restrain the floating and surging yang, Calms the liver and subdues yang; soothes the mind and stabilizes the spirit, Dragon Bone, Oyster shell is heavy and dense; it can draw phlegm downward and regulate the flow of qi, calm the liver and alleviate anxiety, and promote the smooth flow of qi. It can guide yang into yin, facilitating the interaction between yin and yang to induce sleep; Rhubarb clears heat and promotes bowel movements, while Bupleurum ascends and disperses; Rhubarb descends and purges. When used together, they restore the upward flow of qi; When combined with Guizhi, Rhubarb can also promote blood circulation, dispel blood stasis, unblock the meridians, and facilitate the smooth flow of qi and blood [9-11].

Looking back at medical case records from throughout history, the use of Chaihu Longgu Muli Decoction is primarily guided by the diagnostic criteria of chest fullness, restlessness and agitation, and rambling speech; in clinical practice, “restlessness and agitation” is considered the key therapeutic indicator [12-14]. These manifestations are primarily observed in the realm of mental and emotional states, such as mania, epilepsy, palpitations, and insomnia, or conditions recognized in Western medicine as schizophrenia and neurosis [15]. Older adults have the physiological characteristic that, as they grow older, the energy of the liver and gallbladder declines, making them susceptible to emotional disturbances. Furthermore, as they enter old age, yin and yang gradually decline, and the five zang organs become increasingly deficient; these various factors collectively contribute to the onset of age-related insomnia. Because elderly patients often have multiple organ disorders, the pathogenesis is complex. Taking into account the characteristics of the disease in the elderly, Professor Guo Hongmin primarily employs methods to generate Shaoyang qi, harmonize the Shaoyang channel, regulate the central mechanism, and calm the mind and soothe the spirit. She also addresses pathogenic factors such as phlegm-heat, blood stasis, and emotional disturbances. Using the Chaihu Longgu Muli Decoction as the primary formula and guided by syndrome differentiation of zang-fu organs, she treats

insomnia in the elderly with remarkable efficacy.

2. Selected Medical Cases

Patient Zhu, a 62-year-old female office worker, presented for her initial consultation on March 12, 2024. Chief complaint: insomnia for six months. Present illness history: The patient began experiencing poor sleep quality six months ago following a business trip. She previously sought treatment at Nanjing Brain Hospital, where she was prescribed oral sedatives and hypnotics; however, the treatment was ineffective. Recently, her insomnia symptoms have worsened: she has difficulty falling asleep, wakes easily after falling asleep, and finds it difficult to fall back asleep afterward, sometimes even staying awake all night. These symptoms are accompanied by poor appetite, a dry and bitter mouth, dry and red eyes, anxiety, irritability, and constipation. a red tip of the tongue, a dull tongue body, a thin white coating, and a string-like, thin pulse. The patient is currently postmenopausal, has no history of chronic diseases, denies a family history of genetic disorders, and denies a history of drug or food allergies. The patient is now postmenopausal, has no history of chronic diseases, denies a family history of genetic disorders, and denies a history of drug or food allergies. Laboratory tests showed no significant abnormalities. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, the diagnosis is insomnia (Liver Qi Stagnation Transforming into Fire Syndrome). The treatment plan aims to harmonize the regulatory mechanisms, clear the liver and purge fire, and relieve depression and calm the mind. Prescription: Bupleurum 12g, Scutellaria 10g, Taizishen 10g, Red Jujube 10g, Poria 10 g, Processed Pinellia 10g, Cooked rhubarb 4g, Calcined dragon bone 20g, Pre-decocted calcined oyster shell 20g, Pre-decocted calcined pearl shell 30g, Pre-decocted sour jujube seed 30g, Biota seed 20g, Charred gardenia 10g Euryale seed 10 g, raw coix seed 20g, light bamboo leaf 10 g, Angelica sinensis 10g, stir-fried white peony root 10g, floating wheat 30g, schisandra berry 10 g, lily bulb 10g, tangerine peel 6g. Total: 7 doses. Take 1 dose daily, decocted in water, and taken orally in the morning and evening. Second follow-up visit on March 20, 2024: The patient reported that their sleep symptoms had improved, their mood was better than before, and their bowel and bladder functions were normal, But a dry, parched mouth. The prepared rhubarb mentioned above, Add 2g of Coptis, 4g of lotus seed hearts, 20g of lotus seed kernels, and 10g of stir-fried red peony root, then prepare another 14 doses. At the third follow-up visit on April 8, 2024, the patient reported a marked improvement in sleep; while taking the medication, they occasionally experienced insomnia, The symptoms of dry mouth and a scratchy sensation gradually disappeared. After removing the lotus seed hearts from the formula and following the prescribed regimen for one month, the patient's sleep returned to near-normal, and all symptoms gradually subsided.

3. Case Analysis

Professor Guo Hongmin believes that this patient is an elderly woman who has suffered from insomnia for a long time. She presents with liver qi stagnation and impaired regulation of the flow of qi; prolonged stagnation of wood energy has transformed into fire, which travels along the meridians and disturbs the upper body. Her symptoms include restlessness

and insomnia, accompanied by a dry and bitter mouth, dry and red eyes, anxiety, irritability, and constipation. She also exhibits a red tip of the tongue and a thin, string-like pulse. Since Wood overcomes Earth, the rebellious Liver Qi overpowers the Spleen, causing the Spleen to lose its ability to transport and transform, resulting in symptoms such as poor appetite. Based on a comprehensive evaluation of the Four Diagnostic Methods, the syndrome is diagnosed as liver qi stagnation transforming into fire. Treatment was administered using the Chaihu Longgu Muli Decoction with modifications. In this formula, Bupleurum and Scutellaria harmonize the Shao Yang pivot, clear and drain the liver and gallbladder, and soothe the liver to relieve depression; Taizishen and jujubes help strengthen the Shao Yang's vital energy to expel pathogenic factors; at the same time, their sweet and warm nature nourishes the spleen. Shao Yang disorders affect the spleen and stomach; when stomach qi is out of balance, appetite is poor, Pinellia and Poria harmonize the middle burner, strengthen the spleen, and calm the mind and soothe the spirit. Since Red lead is toxic, it is replaced with mother-of-pearl, which, when combined with dragon bone and oyster shell, helps calm anxiety and soothe the mind, and can also regulate the liver and subdue its yang energy; Rhubarb and Gardenia clear internal heat and help transform yang energy; Pine Nut Kernels and Jujube Seed Kernels Nourish the Heart and Calm the Mind; Angelica sinensis and white peony root nourish the blood, soothe the liver, and subdue liver yang; Floating Wheat and Schisandra nourish the heart's yin and calm the mind; Euryale seed and raw coix seed strengthen the spleen and fortify the body's vital energy; Bamboo leaves clear heat and nourish yin; Lily relieves depression and calms the mind; Dried tangerine peel regulates the flow of qi; When used in combination, these herbs work together to harmonize the central mechanism, clear liver heat, and relieve depression and calm the mind. At the second consultation, the patient's mood had improved, bowel movements were regular, and most of the internal heat had been cleared, In that case, use processed rhubarb, combined with a small amount of Coptis to disperse stagnant heat, Add lotus seed hearts and lotus seed kernels to clear heat, calm the mind, invigorate the spleen, and tonify the middle addition, Professor Guo believes that, The pathogenesis of geriatric diseases is characterized by a mixture of deficiency and excess, with a predominance of deficiency and blood stasis; blood stasis is present throughout the entire course of the disease. In cases of insomnia that has persisted for a long time and remains intractable, In clinical practice, methods to resolve blood stasis are often employed, Therefore, the formula for the second consultation included Red Peony Root to promote blood circulation, cool the blood, clear the heart, and relieve restlessness.

4. Conclusion

As recorded in "Treatise on the Differentiation of Warm Diseases": "When Yang enters Yin, one falls asleep; when Yang emerges from Yin, one awakens." In summary, normal sleep stems from the cyclical transformation of yin and yang [16]. Due to their unique physiological and pathological characteristics, the mechanisms underlying insomnia in older adults are relatively complex, Professor Guo Hongmin believes that in the elderly, an imbalance between yin and yang—where yang fails to enter yin—leads to insomnia. As

one approaches old age, the qi of the liver and gallbladder declines, causing a disruption in the flow of qi and making one more susceptible to emotional disturbances. Therefore, while using traditional Chinese medicine to treat age-related insomnia in clinical practice, it is also important to emphasize emotional regulation. Modern medical research shows that emotional regulation is also particularly important in the treatment of insomnia. Negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, panic, and irritability are clearly evident in people with insomnia. For elderly patients with chronic insomnia, psychological counseling should be combined with the use of traditional Chinese medicine [17], Collaborative management of the condition to enhance treatment efficacy.

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