Xiao Yao San

Classical usage and modern research

By Duncan McGechie

Experienced practitioners have often said to me that *Xiao Yao San* (Rambling Powder or Free and Easy Wanderer) and common variants like *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* (Added Flavour Rambling Powder) is over-used by Chinese herbalists.

JIA WEI XIAO YAO SAN is the most commonly prescribed formula in Taiwan[1], and the second most common for chronic hepatitis[2] An investigation into the origins and use of this formula through history and in the present according to scientific research should offer insight as to whether it is being used in ways contrary to those outlined in the classics, and as to whether the research conducted reflects actual usage. This article attempts to tease out knowledge in regards to the comparison of traditional literature and research literature.

Xiao Yao San (Rambling Powder) was first recorded in the *Taipeng Huimin Heji Jufang* (太平惠民和劑局方 Imperial Grace Formulary of the Taiping Era) commissioned by Emperor Taizong in the Northern Song dynasty, published in 1107ce[3] or 1151ce[4] depending on the source. This was after the rediscovery of the classical text *Shang Han Lun* (伤寒论 Discussion of Cold Damage) to Chinese medicine and its increased use in the context of a series of epidemic diseases in the 11th century. It was also published after the establishment of an imperial formulary and pharmacy (1076) which, under Emperor Huizong, moved from selling individual herbs to pre-packaged formulas and powders that were available "off the shelf" possibly directly to the public, and with only a brief description of symptoms. All of this may have had an impact on the kinds of formulas in use at the time, and how they were understood.

The name 'Xiao Yao San'

Xiao Yao San (Rambling Powder) is so named after the first chapter of the Taoist classic *Zhuang Zi*. The chapter title is "Xiao yao you" which Watson translates as "Free and easy wandering"[5] and contains many stories about the changing of perception to be more all-encompassing in one's world view, ie. to see the bigger picture. This is thought to be related to the formula's functions, as it primarily works on a pattern in which the Liver qi is unable to course the middle *jiao* due to a deficiency of blood. This failure also involves Spleen weakness since without the supportive dredging and draining function of the Liver, the Spleen may not transform and transport effectively. The philosophical connotation of its distinctive name also suggests that the formula treats emotional disorders. Other translations of the term include "melting

and moving"[6] and the suggestion that it is synonymous with the Chinese homonyms for *xiao* and *yao*, which mean "reduce and shake"[7].

Other texts describe "Liver-Spleen disharmony"[8] or "wood overly restraining earth". Still more describe the formula as treating an excess Liver pattern with concurrent Spleen deficiency[9].

The original formulation of *Xiao Yao San* is as a powder (*san*) and this has implications for its use. The kind of powders used in the Song dynasty were made of mixed ground-up ingredients that were usually taken as a draft with the *Bo He* (Menthae Haplocalycis Herba) and *Wei Jiang* (Zingiberis rhizoma preperata) added at this stage[3]. As such the formulas are easily pre-prepared, quick and convenient, useful in emergency situations. Master Li Dong-Yuan of the Jin dynasty states: "A powder is to disperse, and used to treat urgent diseases."[10] *Xiao Yao San* does disperse constrained Liver qi, but is now rarely used for emergencies.

Provenance

Xiao Yao San (Rambling Powder) is considered to be a variation of *Si Ni San* (Four Counterflow Powder) or a combination of that formula with *Dang Gui Shao Yao San* (Dang Gui and Peony Powder) both of which are formulas recorded by Zhang Zhong-Jing in the *Shang Han Lun* and *Jin Gui Yao Lue* (Essentials from the Golden Cabinet) respectively. These two texts together comprise the *Shang Han Za Bing Lun* (Discussion of Cold Damage and Miscellaneous Diseases). *Xiao Yao San* (Rambling Powder) was first recorded in the period after the reintroduction of these classics as described above.

The original indication for *Si Ni San* (Four Counterflow Powder) was of a *shaoyin* level pattern with counterflow cold in the limbs, abdominal pain and diarrhoea, to course the Liver and harmonise the Stomach.[11] *Dang Gui Shao Yao San* (Dang Gui and Peony Powder) was designed to treat a pattern of Liver blood deficiency and Spleen disharmony with qi stagnation and accumulation of dampness characterised by abdominal pain[3].

The most common modification, *Dan Zhi* or *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San*[a] has been attributed to both Xue Ji[b] in the Ming dynasty[12] and to Wen Shang in the Qing Dynasty, circa 1860[3].

Composition and indications

The formula is comprised of *Chai Hu* (Bupleuri Radix) and *Bo He* (Menthae Haplocalycis Herba) which together assist the expansive outward movement of Liver qi and vent constrained heat. *Dang Gui* (Angelicae Sinensis Radix) and *Bai Shao* (Paeoniae Radix Alba) together nourish the Liver blood and prevent damage to Liver yin and blood. The *Jin Gui Yao Lue* (Essentials from the Golden Cabinet) notes that since, in a Liver disorder, the Liver will transmit to the Spleen, one should also treat the Spleen. *Bai Zhu* (Atractylodis Macrocephalae Rhizoma) and *Fu Ling* (Poria) are added to support the Spleen and Stomach function and drain dampness. *Wei Jiang* (Zingiberis Rhizoma Preperata) or *Sheng Jiang* (Zingiberis Rhizoma Recens) in some formulations together with *Zhi Gan Cao* (Glycyrrhizae Radix Preparata) harmonise the Stomach and prevent the development of rebellious qi while supporting the functions of the middle *jiao*. The addition of *Mu Dan Pi* (Moutan Cortex) and *Zhi Zi* (Gardeniae Fructus) clears stagnant heat.

The Liver is closely linked to the reproductive system, the menses in particular, and to Spleen disharmony with digestive disorders. The Liver is also seen as important in emotional issues and *Xiao Yao San* is applied to many disorders including depression and stress related problems. As such the formula is considered to have a wide range of applications and indications in terms of diseases and symptoms including optic neuritis[13], fibrocystic breast disease[14], fibroids[15] and insomnia[16].

The appropriate application of the formula however, is contingent upon the right physiological pattern being identified as present. Cardinal signs common to all sources are a wiry (*xian* 弦) or wiry and "deficient" pulse and a pale red or pale purple tongue. Deficient is highlighted because

a. 丹梔逍遙散.

b. In his *Nei Ke Zhai Yao*《内科摘要》, Summary of Internal Medicine, Ming dynasty.

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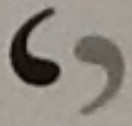

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there are issues also around language and pulse definitions; deficient may refer to different pulse manifestations that could be described as, for example, forceless (*wu li* 无 力), fine/ thready (*xi* 細), weak (*ruo* 弱), deep (*chen* 沉) or even "choppy" (*se* 澀) depending on context. For the purposes of this review a combination of wiry (*xian* 弦) with any of the other terms was taken as indicative of the classical pattern picture.

This raises an issue in linguistic standardisation, especially as concerns communicating about pulse diagnosis[16]: how can we be sure we are talking about the same felt pulse if we are using different words, or using the same word to describe different pulses?

This kind of thing presents a constant challenge to non-Chinese-speaking practitioners not only in communicating but also understanding their practice. The arguments range from translation being flexible[17] to being standardised and fixed[10] or something in between which attempts to convey contextual meanings of the characters in a consistent way[18]. A pertinent example of this is in the discussion of "stagnation" as it is a part of what *Xiao Yao San* treats and "depression" which is a biomedically defined condition for which *Xiao Yao San* is often used.

Normally the English term stagnation refers to *zhi* 滯 which has connotations of being "silted up" and flow being impaired. However the term *yu* 郁 (鬱) is also translated as stagnation by some, and distinction between the term's meanings – and therefore the differing treatment strategies that should be applied – is not made clear in many English language texts. Some authors translate *yu* 郁 (鬱) as constraint or depression, because the character particles connote bearing down.

Thus in some texts the term "depression-stagnation" is used, while in others "stagnation" is used without the distinction being made clear, and since the word "depression" refers to a disease condition, it is almost inevitable that qi stagnation has become tied up in the understanding of depression as illness. We see this in the research presented next, where we find that *Xiao Yao San* is one of the most widely used used formulas for depression.

Biomedical research

The research literature was searched using databases Pubmed, AMED, Althealthwatch, Psychinfo, and biomed central using the Chinese, Japanese and English pseudonyms as search terms. The *Journal of Chinese Medicine*, *The Lantern*, The *European Journal of Oriental Medicine* and online resources at www.bluepoppy.com and www.itmonline.com were also searched for translations and abstractions of research. The aim was not to critically review each paper but to get an overview of what was being researched and translated, and was accessible to non-Chinese-language-reading practitioners. The paper had to be making some claim about the clinical application of *Xiao Yao San* or modifications.

Depression and psychological disorders

There is more research literature available on the treatment of depression and mood disorders by *Xiao Yao San* (Rambling Powder) formulas than any other disease category. Some of the research overlaps with that on menstrual disorders[22] and is mentioned below. These are also some of the better-designed and more rigorous tests. There is a research paper[23] and discussion editorial[24] specifically looking at post-stroke depression and finding benefit. One trial looks at using *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* (Added Flavour Rambling Powder) for bipolar disorder and finds that the dosage of Carbamazapine may be lowered if given with the herbal medicine and that side effects are therefore reduced.[25] Another paper by the same team follows up with further data on bipolar disorder and reviews further application to depressive illness, again finding positive results.[26]

Gynaecological

Some of the research found on *Xiao Yao San* modifications in gynaecological disease overlaps with that discussing psychological problems, for example *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* applied to pre-menstrual stress and depression disorders[27,28]. Menopausal syndromes also appear in the research literature on *Xiao Yao San*,

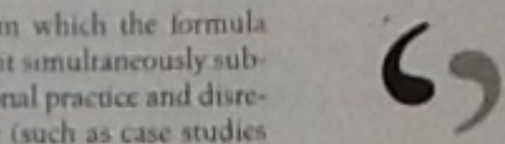
investigating endocrine effects in mice and hypothesising mechanisms of action involving neurosteroid synthesis,[29] on cytokine effects in humans compared with SSRI,[30] or by measuring clinical markers in a group.[31] Other hormone influenced problems for which *Xiao Yao San* was used in trials includes fibrocystic breast disease.[32]

General research included pharmacological analysis of constituents and examinations of the effects of formulas that contained *Chai Hu* (Bupleuri Radix) on various neurohumoral factors involved in both psychological diseases and other problems.[33] Translated research also looked at *Xiao Yao San* (Rambling Powder) modifications in the treatment of insomnia,[34] irritable bowel syndrome,[35] chronic fatigue syndrome,[36] "male menopause"[37] and menopausal hypertension.[38]

Conclusions

In examining the biomedical and Chinese medical literature, a straight-forward comparison of diseases to which *Xiao Yao San* (Rambling Powder) formulas are applied is inadequate since it is well known that Chinese formulas may be applied to a wide range of conditions and this is especially acknowledged for *Xiao Yao San* as stated in the adage, "One disease (can be treated by) many formulas, one formula (can treat) many diseases." Many of the papers identified do not give Chinese pattern differentiation information, but apply the Chinese medicinal to the biomedically defined disease category in a process of subsuming and subordinating traditional medical practices to the dominant model.

Chinese medicine has been shown to be constantly shifting and changing, pluralistic[39] and subject to historical reinterpretations and rewritings[40] and changing its theory to accommodate biomedical knowledge from the early 19th century[41]. While its development has also clearly been influenced by political factors, more recently globalisation has also played a role in shaping and changing how Chinese medicine is described and presented to the world. When research into a Chinese herbal formula applies it to a biomedically defined disease without reference to the pattern or model of health from which the formula originally is derived, it simultaneously subordinates the traditional practice and disregards other evidence (such as case studies and even physiological or pharmacokinetic research). That is, practitioners learn from research that, for example, *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* is effective for treating "depression" or "premenstrual stress" and then use that in their clinical decision-making, extraneous to the pattern diagnosis decided upon. This should make us question what constitutes knowledge and how we construct our treatments. What is more valuable, historical wisdom, modern technology or personal experience? Can they even be compared, or could they be somehow reconciled? Each method produces knowledge, but they are suited to answering different kinds of question, and this consideration is often ignored when valuing one method (such as the randomised controlled trial) over another (such as a case study).



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Endnotes

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Ante Babic's

Tips for running a successful clinic ...

Aunty Marija told me: When people are bursting to talk, let them. All those words held inside block up their ears, and they cannot hear you until the words come out.