



Huang Qi through the eyes of Zhang Zhong-Jing



By Jason Blalack

BY ANALYSING CLASSICAL TEXTS such as the *Jīn Guì Yào Luè*, coupled with later commentaries, we can expand our understanding of diseases and use of herbs and formulas. Furthermore, we gain insights that provide viable clinical options. For example, where traditionally *Má Huáng Tāng* might be thought of for an external wind-cold attack, through the examination of commentaries and deeper understanding we can use it to treat dysmenorrhea (Bensky, 2005). This article looks at source texts and commentary to dissect how Zhāng Jī (Zhāng Zhòng-Jīng) used one medicinal, *Huáng Qí* (Radix Astragali), not only to introduce a style of studying classical texts, but also render fresh clinical choices and perspectives that lie outside the mainstream TCM box.

Introduction

Zhāng Jī, author of the *Shāng Hán Lùn* (Discussion of Cold Damage) and the *Jīn Guì Yào Luè* (Essentials from the Golden Cabinet), supplied us with some of the most important contributions to Chinese herbal medicine. His works constitute the foundation of modern Chinese medical herbology, making up about 20 per cent of prescriptions in modern formularies.

A large percentage of Zhāng Jī's formulas con-

tain relatively few ingredients, thus creating precise, elegant prescriptions. The structure of Zhāng Jī's prescriptions provides a gateway into understanding pathomechanisms as well as actions of individual herbs. In addition to his formula's aesthetic appeal, their simplicity allows for easy dissection, giving us an insight into Zhāng Jī's thought process.

It is worth noting that when Zhāng Jī wrote his material, no zang-fu diagnosis existed. Although many of Zhāng Jī's ideas have been integrated into modern TCM, much has been left out. Therefore, studying Zhāng Jī's writing can provide us with a different perspective on how to view diseases and herb uses, and liberate us from assumptions that, unbeknownst to us, may be limiting our clinical effectiveness.

By analysing how Zhāng Jī prescribed *Huáng Qí* for swelling, sweating, and joint pain we can begin to infer elements about the overall nature of this herb. Of equal importance is recognising the specific herbal pairings that allow *Huáng Qí* to treat such complaints, as many of the actions attributed to individual herbs, such as *Huáng Qí*, are only drawn out in combination with other herbs.

The Huáng Qí person

A relatively uncommon way of approaching Chinese herbs is to consider the type of person best suited to the use of a particular herb. This

■ After graduating from the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in San Diego, Jason Blalack now practices in Boulder, Colorado, and is currently a teacher at Southwestern Acupuncture College. His web address is www.ChineseMedicineDoc.com.

approach has generated terms like “*Huáng Qí* constitution” and “*Huáng Qí* abdomen”. Such perspectives provide us with a fresh lens through which to view *Huáng Qí*, one that complements our zang-fu training.

An intimate relationship exists between the appearance of *Huáng Qí* symptoms (patterns) and the patient’s constitution. Zhāng Jī introduced this concept in the form of question and answer: “What is the cause of painful obstruction of the blood (血痺, *xuè bì*) disease? Master says: People who live a life of luxury have weak bones and exuberant flesh. This is an important reason why they are fatigued and sweat, and when they recline they frequently toss and turn (Chapter 6).” Exuberant flesh refers to someone who is obese (Dǒng, 2001). *Huáng Qí Guì Zhī Wǔ Wù Tāng* (Astragalus and Cinnamon Five-Substance decoction) is the prescription that Zhāng Jī uses for painful obstruction of the blood. Commentaries have since created the label “a person of luxury” for which *Huáng Qí* is indicated. The person of luxury has weak bones, referring to a person living in clover, lacking proper exercise, leading to muscles that are soft and lacking strength (Huang, 1998). Therefore *Huáng Qí* is indicated for **people who have a tendency towards plumpness with muscles that are soft**. Later commentaries have expanded upon this idea. Huang (1998) thinks that constitutional *Huáng Qí* patterns often appear in the clinic and labels such people as having a “*Huáng Qí* constitution”.

A person with such a constitution has a facial complexion that lacks lustre and is yellow-white, dull yellow-red, or dark yellow. Furthermore, they have soft muscles, a puffy swollen appearance, eyes lacking brilliance, a weak and feeble abdominal wall, and a pale and fat tongue body with moist coat. Normally they demonstrate an ease of sweating, fear of wind, and upon encountering a wind-cold pathogen often develop allergies, nasal congestion, cough/wheezing, or the common cold. Bowel movements are watery without form or the first part is dry then clear. They complain of a poor appetite, thirst with no desire to drink, frequent stomach distension and fullness, and a tendency towards puffy swelling, especially of the legs, as well as tingling and numbness of the extremities. Adults with a “*Huáng Qí* constitution” pattern present with a rather obvious abdominal appearance: the abdomen is soft and spongy and the navel is deep and falling. With pressure there is a feeling of no resistance as well as no real sensation of pain and distension. This can be called a “*Huáng Qí* abdomen” presentation.

Cautions: *Huáng Qí*, especially in high doses, may be deleterious to patients who have a white

face, thin body, tight hard muscles, easily get red swollen sore throat, and tend towards constipation. Inappropriate administration of *Huáng Qí* can induce abdominal distention qi as well as other side effects.

Huáng Qí’s nature

It has been my experience that one commonly overlooked quality of *Huáng Qí* is its moving or opening nature. Let us look at how Zhāng Jī used *Huáng Qí Guì Zhī Wǔ Wù Tāng* to treat painful obstruction of the blood that presents with “external symptoms including body numbness or insensitivity, and other manifestations similar to painful obstruction of wind (风痺 *fēng bì*)” (Zhāng Jī, Chapter 6).” When used for this condition many purport that *Huáng Qí* has the function of activating the yang qi, easing blood circulation, and dispersing numbness (Luo, 1987; Fan, 2000).

It has an indirect function of supplementing blood by moving it. It “carries strength to the moving [sic]” (Fan, 2000). Bensky’s (2004) *Materia Medica* refers to *Huáng Qí* as “quick”. To really engage this function, it may be necessary to combine *Huáng Qí* with other moving herbs like *Guì Zhī*, *Wū Tóu*, or *Xì Xīn*. It is clear, though, that by itself *Huáng Qí* will promote urination (利水, *lì shuǐ*) and reduces puffy swelling (Bensky, 2004). This moving and opening nature is clearly used by Zhāng Jī for swelling, sweating, and joint pain.³

Huáng Qí for sweating and swelling

Huáng Qí Sháo Yào Guì Zhī Kǔ Jiǔ Tāng (Astragalus, Peony, Cinnamon and Vinegar Decoction) contains the largest dose of *Huáng Qí* (5 liang, 15 g) and the fewest ingredients out of Zhāng Jī’s prescriptions. It is therefore one of the most reliable formulas to dissect and understand *Huáng Qí*. It treats the “disease of yellow sweat, with body swelling (heaviness in movement), heat effusion, sweating and thirst. Also present are symptoms like those of wind-water⁴ and sweat that soaks the clothes that is the color of *Huáng Bǎi* juice. The pulse is deep.” (Zhāng Jī, Chapter 14).

From this passage we can see that one of the primary symptoms is body swelling. The nature of the swelling is of the whole body because of the phrase “symptoms like those of wind-water”.⁵ The other primary symptom is sweating. The quantity of sweat is large and can cause the clothes to be soaked. The color can be yellow. From this we can see that *Huáng Qí* treats sweating with a deep pulse and swelling.

Huáng Qí Sháo Yào Guì Zhī Kǔ Jiǔ Tāng is a good example of the difference between modern TCM’s style and Zhāng Jī’s style of prescribing.

Herbal glossary

- Bái Zhú* (白朮) Rhizoma
Atractylodis
Macrocephalae
- Chuān Wū* (川乌) Radix Aconiti
Carmichaeli
- Dà Zǎo* (大枣) Fructus
Jujubae
- Dú Huó* (独活) Radix
Angelicae Pubescentis
- Fáng Jǐ* (防己) Radix
Stephaniae Tetrandrae
- Fú Líng* (茯苓) Poria
- Gān Cǎo* (甘草) Radix
Glycyrrhizae
- Guì Zhī* (桂枝) Ramulus
Cinnamomi
- Huáng Bǎi* (黄柏) Cortex
Phellodendri
- Huáng Qí* (黄芪) Radix
Astragali
- Huáng Qīn* (黄芩) Radix
Scutellariae
- Jiāo Yí* (胶饴) Maltose
- Kǔ Jiǔ* (苦酒) Acetum
- Má Huáng* (麻黄) Herba Ephedrae
- Shēng Jiāng* (生姜) Rhizoma
Zingiberis Officinalis
- Sháo Yào* (芍药) Radix Paeoniae
Alba
- Xì Xīn* (细辛) Herba Asari

From modern sources it treats “exterior deficiency, damp obstruction, evil in the exterior, and construction level heat (Dǒng, 2001).”

If one removes oneself from this discussion and clinically diagnoses the above presentation with construction level heat, from the yellow sweat and heat effusion, one would be correct. Consequently it would be easy to include deep heat clearers and miss this potential use. His formula addresses the pathomechanism, thereby dealing with the heat. Therefore, there is no need to include any heat clearers except for the mild *Sháo Yào*.

The next two formulas also treat swelling. *Fáng Jǐ Fú Líng Tāng* (Stephania and Poria Decoction) treats “skin water,⁶ a disease were there is swelling of the four limbs, water-qi in the skin, and trembling/ twitching of the four limbs” (Zhāng Jī, Chapter 14). *Fáng Jǐ Huáng Qí Tāng* (Stephania and Astragalus Decoction) treats “wind-water, floating pulse, heavy body⁷, sweat,⁸ and aversion to wind” (Zhāng Jī, Chapter 2).

Commentary from *Arcane Essentials from the Imperial Library* says that *Fáng Jǐ Huáng Qí Tāng* treats “wind-water that has a floating pulse, [indicating] that the [pathogen] is in the exterior. The patient possibly has sweating on the head with no other exterior disease. They also have lower body heaviness,⁹ where above the waist is harmonised, and below the waist is swollen [extending] to the genitals, with difficulty in bending.”

Huáng Qí is the only common medicinal in all three formulas. We can safely say it has the ability to disperse swelling and eliminate dampness, among other actions.¹⁰

We can compare these latter two formulas that have the common ingredients of *Huáng Qí*, *Fáng Jǐ* and *Gān Cǎo*. Both formulas treat water qi disease with water qi spilling into the exterior muscles. Both treat puffy swelling of the body. These herbs work together to travel the exterior (走表, *zǒu biǎo*), promote urination and reduce swelling. See the table below right.

The next formula is instructive because it adds *Huáng Qí* to the common *Guì Zhī Tāng* (Cinnamon Twig Decoction), creating *Guì Zhī Jiā Huáng Qí Tāng* (Cinnamon plus Astragalus Decoction) that treats “a person with a heavy body that after sweating will feel lighter. If the condition progresses for a long time there will be body twitching that is accompanied by chest pain. There will be sweat above the waist and none below. The waist and hip will be slack and painful, as if something was stuck under the skin. If severe the patient is unable to eat, and suffers from body pain, vexation and agitation, and inhibited urination. This is yellow sweat.” (Zhāng Jī, chapter 14). The sweat, body pain and heaviness, and vexation and agitation are symptoms of a *Guì Zhī Tāng* pattern. The body heaviness, sweat, and

inhibited urination are treated with *Huáng Qí* (Huang, 1998).

Sweating summarised: *Huáng Qí* can treat either spontaneous or night sweating. The sweating is usually severe enough that the bed covers and clothes will be completely damp. Many will have yellow sweat stains. Many will sweat copiously when they eat, most notably on the upper part of the body. Some will have not only spontaneous sweat in the day, but also sweat at night, where their whole body will be soaked upon waking. In the clinic, the patient’s chief complaint may not be sweating, but upon examination one may discover sweat that is of large amounts, elicited easily, and occurs with slight exertion (Huang, 1998). One of *Huáng Qí*’s mechanisms of action to deal with sweating is its ability to secure the exterior.

Swelling summarised: It is important that the puffy swelling in *Huáng Qí* patterns is of the whole body type, but the swelling of the lower limbs should be somewhat obvious. Because of the change of the body’s position, in the morning the face will have puffy swelling and in the afternoon there will be puffy swelling of the lower limbs. In some people the puffy swelling is not obvious but the muscles are soft and spongy just like the appearance of puffy swelling. Because of the puffy swelling, the patient often is aware of body heaviness, non-flexibility with exercise, and heavy joint pain (Huang, 1998). *Huáng Qí*’s mechanisms of action here are to promote urination, as well as activating the yang and qi (in the organs and channels.)

Huáng Qí for joint pain

Wū Tóu Tāng (Aconite Decoction) treats “pan-arthritis (历节病, *lì jié bìng*)” where the joints are very painful and unable to bend and stretch (Zhāng Jī, Chapter 5).” *Huáng Qí* and *Má Huáng* are also used together in *Sān Huáng Tāng* to treat

	Fang Ji Huang Qi Tang pattern	Fang Ji Fu Ling Tang pattern
Pathomechanism	Wind-water, insecurity of exterior qi	Skin-water, water qi exuberance with yang evil
Signs & symptoms	Floating and moderate pulse, heavy body stagnation, sweat with aversion to wind	Puffy swelling and twitching of the four limbs, inhibited urination, abdominal fullness
Treatment method	Promote urination, dispel wind, restore defensive qi and secure the exterior	Free the yang and promote qi transformation and separate and disperse the exterior and interior
Formula content	Fang Ji 1 liang (3g) Huang Qi 1 liang 1 fen (3.75g) Gan Cao .5 liang (1.5g) Bai Zhu 3 fen (2.25g) Sheng Jiang 4 slices Da Zao 1 piece	Fang Ji 3 liang (9g) Huang Qi 3 liang (9g) Gan Cao 2 liang (6g) Fu Ling 6 liang (18g) Gui Zhi 3 liang (9g)

“wind strike with hypertonicity of the hands and feet, pain of the hundred joints, heat vexation, confused mind, aversion to cold, and no desire to eat lasting all day” (Zhāng Jī, Chapter 5). Because *Huáng Qí* and *Má Huáng* are the common ingredients in these formulas, we can see that together they can treat joint pain.¹²

Although the use of *Huáng Qí* is not limited to the specific diseases discussed in this essay, it should be thought of for the above problems. Furthermore, the combinations discussed can be extracted and applied in other formulas.

Combinations

Huáng Qí, Guì Zhī, Sháo Yào

Treats: whole body insensitivity, numbness and pain, yellow sweat, puffy swelling, and inhibited urination.

Formula	Huang Qi	Ingredients	Indications
Huang Qi Gui Zhi Wu Wu Tang	3 liang (9g)	Gui Zhi Shao Yao Sheng Jiang Da Zao	painful obstruction of the blood, whole body insensitivity, numbness
Huang Qi Jin Zheng Tang	1.5 liang (4.5g)	Gui Zhi Shao Yao Sheng Jiang Gan Cao Da Zao Jiao Yi	deficiency taxation and abdominal urgency, various signs and symptoms from insufficiency (chapter 6).
Huang Qi Shao Yao Gui Zhi Ku Jiu Tang	5 liang (15g)	Gui Zhi Shao Yao	yellow sweat, body swelling
Gui Zhi Jie Huang Qi Tang	2 liang (6g)	Gui Zhi Shao Yao Gan Cao Sheng Jiang Da Zao	whole body encumbered and heavy with pain and sweat

Huáng Qí and Fang Ji

Treats: swelling of the four limbs.

Formula	Huang Qi	Ingredients
Fang Ji Huang Qi Tang	1 liang and 1 fen (3.75g)	Fang Ji Bai Zhu Gan Cao
Fang Ji Fu Ling Tang	3 liang (9g)	Fang Ji Gui Zhi Fu Ling Gan Cao

Huáng Qí and Má Huáng

Treats: whole body heaviness, sweating, and panting, or joint pain

Formula	Huang Qi	Ingredients
Fang Ji Huang Qi Tang (with mods)	1 liang 1 fen (3.75g)	Ma Huang Fang Ji Bai Zhu Gan Cao
Wu Tou Tang	3 liang (9g)	Ma Huang Shao Yao Gan Cao Chuan Wu
San Huang Tang	2 fen (1.5g)	Ma Huang Du Huo Xi Xin Huang Qin

Endnotes

1. This is not exclusive to *Huáng Qí*. For example there are *Guì Zhī Tāng* or *Má Huáng Tāng* people / problems.
2. In painful obstruction of wind the (wind) evil is relatively strong and there is migrating non-fixed pain, accompanied with limbs and body tingling and numbness. Therefore painful obstruction of the blood can have pain with a strong pathogen (Dǒng, 2001).
3. Zhāng Jī does also make use of *Huáng Qí*'s ability to secure (the exterior) / tonify, namely for sweating.
4. Wind-water has a floating pulse, external signs, joint pain, aversion to wind (Zhāng Jī, chapter 14). Water swelling (edema) is caused by wind-evil with puffy swelling of the face spreading to the whole body (Dǒng 2001).
5. Wind-water is further defined by Zhāng Jī in Chapter 14 as puffy swelling of the whole body.
6. Skin-water has a floating pulse, as well as whole body skin (and flesh) swelling, that pits when pressure is applied, no aversion to wind, abdominal distension like a drum, no thirst. (Zhāng Jī, Chapter 14, Dǒng 2001).
7. 身重 – Body heaviness and stagnation (sensation of heaviness with inhibited physical movement) with pain — wind damp causes stagnation in the muscles, bones, and joints (Dǒng, 2001).
8. Spontaneous sweating (Dǒng, 2001)
9. 下重 – This can also mean rectal heaviness.
10. For example, *Huáng Qí* with *Bái Zhú* and *Gan Cao* reinforces yang qi (Luo, 1987).
11. This can be an acute condition or an acute attack of a chronic condition (Fan, 2000).
12. One should note that both formulas also have very hot and moving herbs like *Xi Xin* and *Chuan Wu*.

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