

# Huang Qi through the Tradition of Zhang Zhong-Jing

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## Abstract

This article looks at source texts and commentary to dissect how Zhang Ji (Zhang Zhong-Jing) used one medicinal, Huang Qi (Astragali Radix),<sup>1</sup> to not only introduce a style of studying classical texts, but also render fresh clinical choices and perspectives that lie outside mainstream TCM.

## Introduction

Zhang Ji (Zhang Zhong-Jing) has had a profound influence on the development of Chinese herbal medicine. His books, *Shang han lun* (Discussion of Cold Damage) and *Jin gui yao lue* (Essentials from the Golden Cabinet) form the foundation of modern Chinese medical herbology, supplying around twenty percent of prescriptions found in modern formularies. By analysing such classical texts, coupled with later commentaries, we can gain insights that provide sometimes less obvious clinical options. For example, where traditionally *Ma Huang Tang* might be thought of for an external wind-cold attack, through the examination of commentaries and deeper understanding we can use it to treat dysmenorrhoea (Chen, 2000).

It is worth noting that when Zhang Ji wrote his material there was no zangfu diagnosis, and hence no such phrases as 'tonifies the Spleen' or zangfu descriptions such as 'Spleen qi deficiency'. Although TCM has integrated many of Zhang Ji's ideas, many have been left out. Therefore studying Zhang Ji's usage of, for example, the herb Huang Qi (Astragali Radix) can provide us with a different perspective on how to view diseases and herb uses, enriching our practice and liberating us from the confines of the somewhat simplified approach many of us are used to.

More specifically, by analysing how Zhang Ji prescribed Huang Qi to treat swelling, sweating and joint pain we can gain insights into the overall nature of this herb. Of equal importance is recognising the specific herbal combinations that allow Huang Qi to treat such complaints, as many actions attributed to individual herbs such as Huang Qi occur only when paired with other herbs.

## The Huang Qi person

A fairly unique way of approaching Chinese herbs is to consider the type of person best suited to the use of a particular herb. This approach has spawned terms like 'Huang Qi constitution' and 'Huang Qi abdomen.' Such perspectives provides us with a fresh lens

through which to view Huang Qi, complementing our zangfu training.

Laying the foundation for linking a patient's constitution and lifestyle with what many call "Huang Qi symptoms (patterns)" is Zhang Ji himself. When Zhang Ji was asked, "What is the cause of painful obstruction of the blood (血痺, *xue bi*) disease?", he responded, "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 lay down they frequently toss and turn (Chapter 6)". Exuberant flesh here refers to someone who is obese (Döng, 2001). Zhang Ji uses the prescription *Huang Qi Gui Zhi Wu Wu Tang* (Astragalus and Cinnamon Five-Substance decoction) for painful obstruction of the blood, the principal herb of which is Huang Qi.

From this, commentators have created the label, "a person of luxury" to describe those for whom Huang Qi is indicated. A person of luxury has weak bones, lives too comfortably and lacks proper exercise which leads to muscles that are soft and weak (Huang, 1998). Therefore Huang Qi is indicated for people that have a tendency towards plumpness with muscles that are soft. Huang (1998) thinks that constitutional Huang Qi patterns often appear in the clinic and labels such people as having a "Huang Qi constitution."

A person with a Huang Qi constitution has a facial complexion that lacks lustre and is yellow-white, dull yellow-red, or dark yellow. They have soft muscles, a puffy, swollen appearance, dull eyes, a weak and feeble abdominal wall, and a pale, fat tongue body with a moist coat. Normally they sweat easily, are afraid of wind and often have allergies, nasal congestion and cough/wheezing and catch colds and flu. Bowel movements tend to be watery and without form or the first part is dry then sloppy. They complain of a poor appetite, thirst with no desire to drink, frequent abdominal 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 Huang Qi constitution

	Fang Ji Huang Qi Tang pattern			Fang Ji Fu Ling Tang pattern		
<b>Pathomechanism</b>	Wind-water, insecurity of exterior qi			Skin-water, water qi exuberance with yang evil		
<b>Signs and Symptoms</b>	Floating and moderate pulse, heavy body stagnation, sweat with aversion to wind			Puffy swelling and twitching of the four limbs, inhibited urination, abdominal fullness		
<b>Treatment Method</b>	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		
<b>Formula Content</b>	Herb	Traditional dose	Modern dose	Herb	Traditional dose	Modern dose
	Fang Ji Huang Qi Gan Cao Bai Zhu Sheng Jiang Da Zao	1 liang 1 liang, 1 fen .5 liang 3 fen 4 slices 1 piece	3g 3.75g 1.5g 2.25g	Fang Ji Huang Qi Gan Cao Fu Ling Gui Zhi	3 liang 3 liang 2 liang 6 liang 3 liang	9g 9g 6g 18g 9g

present with an abdomen that is soft and spongy and a navel which 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 'Huang Qi abdomen' presentation (Huang, 1998).

### Huang Qi's nature

Zhang Ji's use of Huang Qi in *Huang Qi Gui Zhi Wu Wu Tang* to treat painful obstruction of the blood presenting with "external symptoms, including body numbness or insensitivity, and other manifestations similar to painful obstruction of wind" (风痹, *feng bi*)<sup>2</sup> (Zhang Ji, Chapter 6) highlights Huang Qi's sometimes overlooked, moving or opening nature. When used in this formula Huang Qi has the function of activating the yang qi, easing blood circulation and dispersing numbness (Luo, 1987; Fan, 2000). It also has an indirect function of supplementing blood by moving it. Its moving nature is also alluded to in Bensky's (2004) *Materia Medica*, which refers to Huang Qi as 'quick' and by Fan when he refers to Huang Qi as 'carrying strength to the moving [sic]' (Fan, 2000).

Although it may be necessary to combine Huang Qi with other moving herbs such as Gui Zhi (Cinnamomi Ramulus), Wu Tou (Aconiti Radix preparata) or Xi Xin (Asari Herba) in order to really engage this function, it is clear that Huang Qi is effective for promoting urination and reducing swelling on its own (Bensky, 2004). This moving and opening nature is clearly used by Zhang Ji in his formulae for the treatment of swelling, sweating and joint pain.<sup>3</sup>

### Huang Qi for sweating and swelling

*Huang Qi Shao Yao Gui Zhi Ku Jiu Tang* (Astragalus, Peony, Cinnamon and Vinegar Decoction) contains the largest dose of Huang Qi (5 liang, 15g<sup>4</sup>) and the

fewest ingredients out of Zhang Ji's prescriptions. It is therefore very reliable for understanding Huang Qi's essence. It treats the "disease of yellow sweat, with body swelling (heaviness in movement), heat effusion, sweating and thirst. Also present are symptoms similar to those of wind-water<sup>5</sup> and sweat that soaks the clothes and is the colour of Huang Bai [Cortex Phellodendri] juice. The pulse is deep." (Zhang Ji, 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."<sup>6</sup> The other primary symptom is copious, yellow sweating.

*Huang Qi Shao Yao Gui Zhi Ku Jiu Tang* is a good example of the difference between modern TCM style and Zhang Ji's style of prescribing. 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 instead include deep heat clearers and miss this potential use. This formula addresses the pathomechanism, thereby dealing with the heat. Therefore there is no need to include any heat clearers except for the mild Shao Yao.

Another Zhang Ji formula, *Fang Ji Fu Ling Tang* (Stephania and Poria Decoction), treats "skin water,<sup>7</sup> a disease where there is swelling of the four limbs, water-qi in the skin, and trembling/twitching of the four limbs (Zhang Ji, chapter 14)."

A third formula, *Fang Ji Huang Qi Tang* (Stephania and Astragalus Decoction), treats "wind-water, floating pulse, heavy body<sup>8</sup>, sweat,<sup>9</sup> and aversion

Table 1:

to wind (Zhang Ji, chapter 2). Commentary from *Arcane Essentials from the Imperial Library* says that *Fang Ji Huang Qi Tang* 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,<sup>10</sup> where above the waist is harmonised, and below the waist is swollen [extending] to the genitals, with difficulty in bending.”

The common thread in these three formulae is Huang Qi and together they illustrate how Zhang Ji used Huang Qi to disperse swelling and eliminate dampness.<sup>11</sup>

The last two formulae have the common ingredients of: Huang Qi, Fang Ji (*Stephania tetrandae Radix*) and Gan Cao (*Glycyrrhizae Radix*). Both formulae treat water qi disease with water qi spilling into the exterior muscles and puffy swelling of the body. These herbs work together to travel the exterior (走表, *zǒu biǎo*), promote urination, and reduce swelling.

One further formula that is instructive is *Gui Zhi Jia Huang Qi Tang* (Cinnamon plus Astragalus Decoction) which adds Huang Qi to *Gui Zhi Tang* (Cinnamon Twig Decoction) to treat “A person with a heavy body that after sweating feels lighter. If the condition progresses for a long time there will be body twitching accompanied by chest pain. There will be sweat above the waist and none below. The waist and hips 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. There is yellow sweat (Zhang Ji, chapter 14).” The sweat, body pain and heaviness, and vexation and agitation are symptoms of a *Gui Zhi Tang* pattern. The addition of Huang Qi helps treat the heaviness, sweat, and inhibited urination (Huáng, 1998).

### Sweating summarised

Huang Qi 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 and will sweat copiously when they eat, most notably on the upper part of the body. Some will not only have spontaneous sweat in the day, but also have 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 (Huáng, 1998). One of Huang Qi’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 Huang Qi 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 is often aware of body heaviness, non-flexibility with exercise, and heavy joint pain (Huáng, 1998). Huang Qi’s mechanisms of action here are to promote urination, as well as activate the yang and qi (in the organs and channels.)

### Huang Qi for joint pain

The use of Huang Qi for joint pain is an example of its ‘opening and moving’ qualities. This is illustrated in the formulae: *Wu Tou Tang* (Aconite Decoction), which treats “panarthralgia (历节病, *lì jié bìng*)<sup>12</sup> where the joints are very painful and are unable to bend and stretch” (Zhang Ji, chapter 5), and *San Huang Tang* (Three Yellows Decoction)<sup>13</sup>, which treats “wind stroke 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 (Zhang Ji, chapter 5).” Because Huang Qi and Ma Huang are the common ingredients in these formulas, we can see that together they can treat joint pain.

### Summary

We can see that exploring Huang Qi through Zhang Ji’s approach can lead us to a broader understanding than we gain from most modern materia medicas. Although simplified interpretations of these functions do appear in modern texts, it is clear that much useful information has been lost in the distillation process which has given rise to modern TCM. Returning directly to the source literature and early commentaries allows us to fill some of these gaps and arrive at a more full and balanced understanding of the clinical possibilities of herbs such as Huang Qi. ■

Jason Blalack, who is primarily a clinician, has written and published many articles that integrate material he has translated with his own clinical and theoretical understanding. He graduated from PCOM in San Diego, and has since pursued advanced training in Asia. He has held teaching and clinical supervisor positions at SWAC (Boulder Campus) and CSTCM (Denver). He currently maintains a private practice in Boulder, Colorado and teaches advanced classes to graduates and students.

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## Huang Qi and its combinations

Name	Huang Qi dosage	Other ingredients	Indications
Huang Qi Gui Zhi Wu Wu Tang	3 liang (modern 9g)	Gui Zhi Shao Yao Sheng Jiang Da Zao	painful obstruction of the blood, whole body insensitivity, numbness
Huang Qi Jian Zhong Tang	1.5 liang (modern 4.5g)	Gui Zhi Shao Yao Sheng Jiang Zhi Gan Cao Da Zao Yi Tang	deficiency taxation and abdominal urgency, various signs and symptoms from insufficiency (chapter 6).
Huang Qi Shao Yao Gui Zhi Kǔ Jiǔ Tang	5 liang (modern 15g)	Gui Zhi Shao Yao	yellow sweat, body swelling
Gui Zhi Jia Huang Qi Tang	2 liang (modern 6g)	Gui Zhi Shao Yao Gan Cao Sheng Jiang Da Zao	whole body encumbered and heavy with pain and sweat

### Huang Qi, Gui Zhi (Cinnamomi Ramulus) and Shao Yao (Paeoniae Radix).

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

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

### Huang Qi and Fang Ji (Stephania tetrandae Radix)

*Treats:* swelling of the four limbs.

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

### Huang Qi and Ma Huang (Ephedrae Herba)

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

## Footnotes

- 1 A full list of pinyin, Chinese characters, and Latin names of herbs mentioned are at the end of the article.
- 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 (Dong, 2001).
- 3 Zhong Ji does also make use of Huang Qi's ability to secure / tonify (the exterior), namely for sweating.
- 4 Dosage in a complicated issue in the shang han lun. Therefore I have included both the original dose in liang (or fen), followed by the most commonly used modern dosage in grams. One must be aware that a modern day liang is around 31.25g and the translation to grams is not a mistake.
- 5 Wind-water has a floating pulse, external signs, joint pain, aversion to wind (Zhong Ji, chapter 14). Water swelling (oedema) is caused by wind-evil with puffy swelling of the face spreading to the whole body (Dong 2001).
- 6 Wind-water is further defined by Zhong Ji in Chapter 14 as puffy swelling of the whole body.
- 7 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. (Zhong Ji chapter 14, Dong 2001)
- 8 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 (Dong, 2001).
- 9 Spontaneous sweating (Dong, 2001)
- 10 下重 - This can also mean rectal heaviness.
- 11 For example, Huang Qi with *Bai Zhu* and *Gan Cao* reinforces yang qi (Luo, 1987).
- 12 This can be an acute condition or an acute attack of a chronic condition (Fan, 2000).

## Herbal Pinyin Glossary:

<i>Bai Zhu</i>	(白朮)	(Rhizoma Atractylodis Macrocephalae)
<i>Chuan Wu</i>	(川烏)	(Radix Aconiti Carmichaeli)
<i>Da Zao</i>	(大棗)	(Fructus Jujubae)
<i>Du Huo</i>	(獨活)	(Radix Angelicae Pubescentis)
<i>Fang Ji</i>	(防己)	(Radix Stephaniae Tetrandrae)
<i>Fu Ling</i>	(茯苓)	(Poria)
<i>Gan Cao</i>	(甘草)	(Radix Glycyrrhizae)
<i>Gui Zhi</i>	(桂枝)	(Ramulus Cinnamomi)
<i>Huang Bai</i>	(黃柏)	(Cortex Phellodendri)
<i>Huang Qi</i>	(黃芪)	(Astragali Radix)
<i>Huang Qin</i>	(黃芩)	(Radix Scutellariae)
<i>Jiao Yi</i>	(膠飴)	(Maltose)
<i>Ku Jiu</i>	(苦酒)	(Acetum)
<i>Ma Huang</i>	(麻黃)	(Herba Ephedrae)
<i>Sheng Jiang</i>	(生姜)	(Rhizoma Zingiberis Officinalis)
<i>Shao Yao</i>	(芍藥)	(Radix Paeoniae Alba)
<i>Xi Xin</i>	(細辛)	(Herba Asari)