

# Stagnation, Depression, Constraint, and Stasis: Terminological Clarification

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The terms stagnation, constraint, depression, and stasis have many similarities as well as key differences that create difficulty for many students and practitioners. Some of the differentiations that have been perpetuated are real and some are artificial, many times they are based on language, terminological issues, or just plain errors in understanding. All of these words are technical terms in Chinese medicine and do have a somewhat specific usage and meaning. Their misuse / misunderstanding can lead to clinical errors. Looking at Chinese language and Chinese medical source texts we can obtain some assistance in unearthing the truth.

The first major problem encountered is that multiple Western authors will translate / use one single Chinese term differently. The Chinese character, 郁 (yù) lies at the center of most of the confusion. For example, Bensky will translate the term as **constraint** (or constrains). Unschuld as **depressed** or **impeded**. Wiseman uses **depression**. Maciocia will translate it as **stagnation**. [For use in this paper I will refer to 郁 (yù) as constraint, unless otherwise noted.]

Constraint is most often associated with the liver, used in terms like:

- 肝气郁结 (gān qì yù jié) – Constrained or clumped liver qì (Bensky) binding depression of liver qì (Wiseman) and Liver qì stagnation (Maciocia).<sup>1</sup>

Or the more simple:

- 肝气郁 (gān qì yù) Liver qì constraint, Liver qì depression (Wiseman), Liver qì stagnation (Maciocia).<sup>2</sup>
- 肝郁 (gān yù) – Liver constraint, Liver depression, or Liver stagnation.<sup>3</sup>
- 解郁, (jiě yù) - Commonly in reference to herbs like chai hu and xiang fu for their ability to ‘relieve constraint.’

Clearly, different authors’ term choices can make it thorny for the Chinese Medical audience. One of the incidents that prompted this paper was an inquiry made to

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<sup>1</sup> Wiseman also uses the phrase ‘liver qì constraint’ but uses it for another term 肝气不舒 (gān qì bù shū).

<sup>2</sup> Both 肝气郁 (gān qì yù) & 肝郁 (gān yù) are synonymous with 肝气郁结 (gān qì yù jié) – Constrained or clumped liver qì according to the Zhong Yi Da Ci Dian (The Great Dictionary of Chinese medicine)

<sup>3</sup> Both 肝气郁 (gān qì yù) & 肝郁 (gān yù) are synonymous with 肝气郁结 (gān qì yù jié) – Constrained or clumped liver qì according to the Zhong Yi Da Ci Dian (The Great Dictionary of Chinese medicine)

me, ‘What is the difference between Liver qì stagnation and Liver qì depression?’ The answer is, what language are we speaking about, Chinese or English? If we look at it from an English point of view the terms are identical, all taken from the character 郁 (yù) constraint. So Liver qì constraint, Liver qì depression & Liver qì stagnation are all the same! This is good news for some, but our journey has just begun.

There is a term, though, for **stagnation** in Chinese, 滯 (zhì). The terms stagnation and constraint (郁 yù) have similar and different usages and meanings. Generally speaking, stagnation is used more broadly, including stagnation of the spleen, intestines, food, qì, blood, water, channels & network vessels, or even references like ‘stagnant looking’ ‘rough stagnant stool’ ‘stagnant diarrhea.’ **Constraint** as mentioned above, is usually related to the liver, but can also have a broader usage like, ‘constrained exterior’, ‘constrained heat’, ‘cold constraint, ‘binding constraint, ‘constrained gallbladder’, ‘lung qì constrained block’, ‘binding-constraint of spleen qì’ ‘constrained blood’, ‘damp constraint, ‘emotional constraint, or just plain ‘qì constraint.’ One can easily see the confusion.

One should be clear that for example, Wiseman’s translation, ‘depression’郁 (yù) is NOT synonymous with the emotion depression, although when referencing the liver and liver qì depression/ constraint 肝气郁 (gān qì yù) there is many times an emotional component.<sup>4</sup> This depression 郁 (yù) is referring to a pathological mechanism which is further elaborated on below.

The term constraint (郁, yù) in one dictionary quite simply says,

“In physiology, depression (郁, yù) refers either to depressed qì dynamic (frustrated physiological activity) or to flow stoppage due to congestion...inhibition of normal emotional activity, expressing itself in the form of oppression, frustration, and irascibility. **In practice, depression (郁, yù) is usually qì stagnation due to affect damage and therefore more restricted in meaning than qì stagnation.**”<sup>5</sup>

Comparing the compounds Qi Constraint 气郁 (qì yù) & Qi Stagnation 气滯 (qì zhì) from 2 Chinese dictionaries is helpful:

气郁 (qì yù) – Qi Constraint

“This disease pattern is caused from emotional discomfort (ill-being, constraint), where the qì mechanism is pent-up. In this pattern one sees fullness in the chest and pain in the rib-side, belching, and abdominal distention. Suitable treatment is to move qì and resolve constraint (郁) with formulas like Qi Constraint Decoction (qìyùtāng), Mu Xiang harmonize the qì powder (mùxiāng tiáo qì sǎn), Major seven qì decoction (qī qì tāng), or yuè jū wán. Qi constraint can generate phlegm, [in these cases] use, Warm the Gallbladder decoction (wēn dǎn tāng), bàn xià hòu pò tang, ascending descending separating dispersion guide out the phlegm decoction (shàng xià fēn xiāo dǎo tāng). Qi constraint can transform to fire, one can use jiā wèi xiāo yào sǎn.”

<sup>4</sup> Although I have seen some Chinese translations incorrectly use ‘emotional depression’ for the term 郁(yù)

<sup>5</sup> Practical Dictionary of Chinese Medicine by Nigel Wiseman

**2<sup>nd</sup> source:** “A pathological transformation where the qi is pent-up (constrained) and not able to obtain free-coursing, effusion and dissipation.”

### 气滞 (qì zhì) – Qi Stagnation

“This disease pattern refers to a blockage or inhibited [flow] of qi in viscera and bowels and channels and network vessels. It can be caused by dietary evil qi, pent-up (constraint, ill-being) of the seven emotions, weak health qi deficiency not transporting. Depending on the place of stagnation there manifestation will be different...”

**2<sup>nd</sup> source:** “A pathological transformation where the qi movement is stagnant and not smooth (inhibited).”

Therefore with qi constraint we see an emotional component and from the 2<sup>nd</sup> source definition, we see a direct reference to the liver involvement evidenced by the mention of ‘free-coursing’ a function attributed to the liver. Qi stagnation is more generalized, but also can have an emotional component. There is clearly some overlap.

Now back to the original question that spawned this essay, what is the difference between Liver qi depression and Liver qi stagnation? As pointed out, in English the difference is a terminological issue and the terms are synonymous. But some have perpetuated the idea that Liver qi depression (constraint) has a component of heat, and Liver qi stagnation does not. Is this a Chinese understanding? The question then becomes, ‘In Chinese is there a term ‘liver qi stagnation’ or 肝气滞 (gān qì zhì)? If one checks Chinese textbooks, Chinese medical dictionaries, the Internet, and even the Wiseman digital 32,000 entry English – Chinese Dictionary one does not find this term, nor the more simplified liver stagnation 肝滞 (gān zhì). One will however find this term on a few lay person websites / internet discussions, most abundantly in reference to do with some hair loss dialogues.

This does not say, though, that there is not someone out there that uses the phrase ‘liver qi stagnation’ 肝气滞 (gān qì zhì), for Chinese medicine is a large pluralistic entity. They may in their own minds have significant meaning attached to this phrase. The clinical utility of this is probably questionable, due to its exclusion in all sources checked.<sup>6</sup> Therefore we can safely conclude that Liver qi stagnation (滞, zhì) is not a term the Chinese readily use in mainstream medical circles. There is really one major term in reference to the Liver, and that is Liver qi constraint (郁 yù)<sup>7</sup> with a whole host of English representations.<sup>8</sup> From the above dictionary entries we see that heat is NOT a differentiating factor for qi constraint (depression) and qi stagnation (without the attached ‘Liver’). We do see that there is a difference based mainly on the liver involvement and

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<sup>6</sup> Multiple versions of the ‘The Great Dictionary of Chinese Medicine’ (中医大词典) were referenced.

<sup>7</sup> When one views the treatment principles for herbs and formulas acting on the liver, i.e. chai hu, xiang fu, xiao yao sao, jia wei xiao yao san, chai hu shu gan san etc etc. they all use one term, that is constraint (郁 yù).

<sup>8</sup> There are other variations of this term like Liver qi constraint (肝气郁结 gān qì yù jié), Liver qi failing to course freely (肝气不疏, gān qì bù shū), constrained Liver qi (肝气不舒, gān qì bù shū) - Defined as light version of Liver qi constraint / depression. (All Wiseman translations and definitions from a Chinese Dictionary)

emotions. Therefore, treatment revolves around free coursing of the liver and other factors (like phlegm or heat) that may be present.

It is important when analyzing terms to relate them to some clinical reality. Noting the terms that are used in treatments, for example, herbal formulas that treat the Liver, will help answer our questions. If heat was a defining factor then one would expect to see some differentiation in terms between formulas like *xiao yao san* (no-heat) and *jia wei xiao yao san* (heat). After checking four mainstream Chinese formulary books it is clear that no differentiation is made. Both formulas use the same term constraint (郁, yù) in the phrase ‘relieve constraint’ (解郁, jiě yù). Even other liver formulas like *si ni san* and *xiao chai hu tang* use the same term, (郁, yù) in phrases like ‘relieve constraint’ and ‘dispel constraint’ (祛郁, qū yù), respectively. There is no other term used<sup>9</sup>, therefore we can conclude that the writers of these formula books do not find such a difference clinically or terminologically important.

**Stasis** (瘀 yū), is much easier to define. It specifically refers to stagnation (停滞) of the blood. Whenever this term is with another term, i.e. phlegm-stasis, we know there is blood stasis (blood stagnation) with phlegm. Stasis-heat will therefore have a component of heat and blood stasis.<sup>10</sup> The confusion revolving this term usually comes from people deciding that pinyin should be used as a language and writing ‘yu’ in charts or even worse in class notes or books. Many times contextually things will be clear, but sometimes it will not. Is the ‘yu’ in reference to stasis (瘀 yū) or constraint (郁 yù)? The ingenious thinker might decide to start using tones to differentiate the two. In my opinion we should avoid the use of ‘most’ pinyin unless it is blatantly clear like in the case of ‘qì.’ Otherwise we should just use the English word, i.e. stasis. But, since many authors translate English terms differently, there is a desire to get closer to the Chinese for clarity. One can of course use characters, but maybe more simple for people, who do not have Chinese language proficiency, is to use the English term with the pinyin in parentheses. For example, stasis (yu), or depression (yu), Stagnation (yu), or stagnation (zhi).

Hope this clarifies things...

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<sup>9</sup> Meaning (滯, zhi) in i.e. Liver stagnation is not used.

<sup>10</sup> Following are some usages of stasis from the Wiseman Dictionary: Post-partum blood stasis (产后血瘀), Liver-Spleen blood stasis (肝脾血瘀, gān pí xuè yū), Liver depression and blood stasis (肝郁血瘀, gān yù xuè yū), Cold stasis (瘀寒, hán yū), Qi deficiency blood stasis (气虚血瘀, qì xū xuè yū), Qi stagnation and blood stasis (气滞血瘀, qì zhì xuè yū), Stasis heat (瘀热, yū rè), Stasis pain (瘀痛, yū tòng), Blood stasis and qi stagnation (血郁气滞, xuè yù qì zhì)