Review

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Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM): A Review (Part 2)

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Abstract

Having been used for over 5000 years in Asian countries, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has emerged as a highly sought-after alternative treatment option both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This article provides an overview of TCM, covering its historical, cultural, and philosophical foundations; core concepts and theories; definitions of key terms; and examples of its clinical applications. Both the traditional Chinese and English titles of TCM publications, as well as the names of TCM theories, modalities, and key concepts, are provided.

This review is divided into two sections, encompassing five components. Part 1 covered the history of TCM, core concepts and theories, and definitions of acupuncture, moxibustion, and acupressure. Part 2 includes the definitions of the remaining TCM modalities as well as examples of TCM clinical practice. This article presents Part 2 of the review.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Acupuncture, Acupressure, Long COVID, Neurological disorders, Qi

Definitions of TCM Modalities

Practices used in TCM include the following: (1-4)

- Acupuncture **針灸** (Part 1)*
- Moxibustion **艾灸** (Part 1)*
- Acupressure **指壓** (Part 1)*
- Chinese herbal medicine **中草藥**
- Traditional Chinese dietary medicine
- Tui Na, manual therapy **推拿**
- Cupping **拔罐**
- Exercise, like Tai Chi **太極拳** and Qigong **氣功**, which combine movement and meditation
- Gua Sha **刮痧** (5, 6)

* Please refer to the previous journal release for Part 1 of this review.

Chinese Herbal Medicine (CHM) 中草藥

The history of Chinese herbal medicine (CHM) is deeply rooted in rich, therapeutic narratives that blend creativity with tradition. Whether passed down through classical texts or oral traditions, these narratives preserve ancient Chinese medical knowledge and continue to reinforce the belief in herbal medicine within Chinese communities today. Despite the widespread availability and affordability of modern medicine in China and Taiwan, many people prefer CHM over conventional treatments. CHM is often described as an art form, based on the

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notion that Chinese herbal substances can prevent and heal disease while also saving lives. (4, 7, 8)

Chinese herbal medicine is used in conjunction with acupuncture to enhance the healing process when appropriate. (3, 4) TCM practitioners adhere to the theory of holism, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all aspects of health. In simple terms, illness is believed to involve multiple organs, with their interactions governed by the Five Elements principle. Consequently, herbal prescriptions are designed to address multiple parts of the body simultaneously. (7, 9) Rather than prescribing individual herbs, TCM practitioners typically recommend customized herbal formulas tailored to each patient's specific medical needs based on a comprehensive TCM assessment. Patients are continuously monitored, and formulas are frequently adjusted as they progress to support the dynamic healing and recovery process. (3, 4) Herbal formulas follow a hierarchical structure, comprising Principal, Associate, Assistant, and Coordinator herbs. Additionally, the herbs are classified by their nature (hot, warm, cool, and cold) and flavor (acrid, sweet, bitter, sour, and salty), both of which are carefully considered when formulating prescriptions. (4, 7, 10)

Traditional Chinese Dietary Medicine (TCDM)

Like all aspects of traditional Chinese medicine, diet and nutrition are rooted in the fundamental concepts of yin and yang and the Five Elements. The pharmacodynamic properties of food are defined by the Four Energies of yin and yang (cool, cold, warm, and hot) and the Five Flavors, which correspond to the Five Elemental Energies: sweet (Earth), pungent (Metal), salty (Water), sour (Wood), and bitter (Fire).

The yin-yang classification describes the overall effect of food on the body's energy system: warm and hot (yang) foods stimulate vital organs and glands, increasing internal heat, while cool and cold (yin) foods soothe and cool the system. The Five Flavor classification associates specific tastes with corresponding organs. For example, sweet (Earth) foods such as corn and dates influence the spleen and stomach meridians, pungent (Metal) foods like ginger and garlic affect the lung and large intestine system, and sour (Wood) foods are linked to the liver and gallbladder. Similarly, other flavors correspond to their respective organ systems. (4)

Tui Na 推拿

Tui Na, meaning "push and rub," is a form of Chinese therapeutic massage that uses the ball of the thumb, knuckles, and elbows to relieve arthritic and rheumatic joint pain, improve sluggish blood circulation in muscles and other tissues, restore weak or damaged nerve function, and tone the spine and spinal channels. (4) A specialized branch of Tui Na focuses on the soles of the feet and aligns with reflexology, as it is known in the West. (4)

Cupping 拔罐

Cupping (*Ba Guan*), a therapy unique to traditional Chinese medicine, is sometimes used in conjunction with Tui Na therapy. Silicone, glass, or bamboo cups are applied to the skin to create a vacuum. For fire cupping, alcohol is briefly ignited inside the cup before placement, but glass cups are not used for this technique.

The vacuum pressure draws the flesh into the cup, promoting circulation, removing excess dampness, wind, or heat energies, and relieving tissue congestion. Cupping is particularly effective for acute chest congestion, joint pain, back pain, and rheumatism and can be applied to nearly any flat surface of the body. (4)

Exercise

Tai Chi guan 太極拳 and Qigong 氣功 are exercises that combine movement and meditation to promote health and recovery. Chi/Qi denotes "breath" and "air" as well as "energy," while Gong refers to any skill that requires significant time, discipline, and self-control to develop. Hence, Qigong can be translated into English as "the skill of breath and energy control."

The Tang dynasty centenarian physician Sun Ssu-miao praised the health benefits of proper breathing in his famous medical book, *Precious Recipes*:

"These breathing techniques can treat any condition, large or small. Correct breathing prevents a variety of diseases, and when respiration is depressed and pressured, a variety of disorders develop. Thus, those who want to improve their lives must first master the proper techniques for managing breath and balancing energy."

Qigong practice includes smooth, flowing physical activity known as Dao-Yin 導引 ("induce and guide"), and proper breathing regulation. The famous Taoist alchemist and esoteric writer Ko Hung, author of the encyclopedic Taoist tome *Pao Pu Tzu* (*Embracing the Uncarved Block*), recognized that the onset of disease is an indication that Qi is not flowing. He stated, “Exercise is required to unblock the numerous meridians and allow for the free flow of chi." (4)

Gua Sha 刮痧

Gua sha 刮痧 is a practice that involves scraping the skin with a smooth-edged tool using a press-stroke motion to promote blood flow, lymphatic circulation, and Qi 氣 (vital force). (5)

Research suggests that gua sha upregulates the skin’s innate and adaptive immune functions and enhances the immune response against intradermal antigens. (11) It also provides various health benefits, including stress reduction, pain and swelling relief, increased metabolism, mood enhancement, and improved mindfulness. (5) Additionally, a randomized study published in *Menopause* found that gua sha may help alleviate perimenopausal symptoms, such hot flashes, insomnia, lethargy, and headaches. (5, 6)

TCM Clinical Application Examples

Long COVID

Mounting data support TCM's therapeutic efficacy in treating the clinical symptoms of COVID-19 and other viral diseases. Its underlying mechanisms primarily include antiviral, anti-inflammatory, and immunomodulatory activities, as well as organ protection. (12) Additional mechanisms of action may include boosting hematopoiesis and coagulation, strengthening liver and heart function, and enhancing nutritional intake and lipid metabolism. (12-14)

A study by Zeng et al. (9) found that TCM treatment reduced white blood cell count, serum interleukin-6, procalcitonin, and serum γ-glutamyl transpeptidase while increasing prealbumin, albumin, red blood cell count, hemoglobin, and platelet count in COVID-19 patients compared to those who did not receive TCM treatment. Overall, TCM appears to have distinct advantages in treating Long COVID, a non-acute, systemic condition that affects multiple organs. (13)

A range of TCM treatments are frequently used in conjunction with Western medicine to improve patient outcomes. Studies show that integrating traditional Chinese and Western rehabilitative therapy with conventional treatment is more effective in reducing COVID-19-related symptoms than conventional therapy alone. (12, 13, 15)

China's National Health Commission and the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine released the Diagnosis and Treatment Protocol for COVID-19 Patients (Trial Version 10), (16) which recommends using TCM medicines and acupuncture points during the COVID-19 recovery period. The same organization also issued the Recommendation on the Rehabilitation Guidance of Traditional Chinese Medicine for COVID-19 in the Recovery Period (Trial), providing comprehensive guidelines for various TCM treatment methods, including Chinese medicines, acupuncture, moxibustion, tui na, dietary guidance, and traditional Chinese exercises. (13)

According to TCM principles, the lung and spleen are independent organs that can influence each other like mother and son. (13, 17) The most recent treatment protocol, released in January 2023, included TCM recommendations for the cold fluid retention pattern in the lungs, building on previous classifications of lung and spleen qi deficiency, as well as combined qi and yin deficiency. (13, 16, 18) During COVID-19 recovery, healthy qi and yin fluids become severely depleted throughout the disease process. However, the toxic epidemic may still persist, and residual heat can continue to damage the lung and stomach qi and yin, resulting in a deficiency of both qi and yin patterns. The primary syndrome associated with cold fluid retention in the lungs is a persistent cough. (13)

Furthermore, acupuncture is a safe and effective treatment for cancer-related fatigue and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). It reduces neuroinflammatory responses, modulates immune function, regulates neuropeptides such as dopamine and β-endorphin, promotes oligodendrocyte proliferation, and stimulates nitric oxide production. (19, 20) Acupuncture has been shown to be effective in treating CFS. (21) In general, TCM is intrinsically well suited for managing complex, multi-symptom conditions, including those resulting from infection or immunization, such as Long COVID. (20, 22, 23)

In patients with chronic and pulmonary diseases, traditional Chinese exercises have been shown to improve quality of life and alleviate associated symptoms. (13, 24, 25) By controlling the body, breath, and mind, balancing yin and yang, and harmonizing the organs (Zang-Fu 臟腑), meridians, and collaterals, Tai Chi and Qigong can strengthen the body, promote health, and reduce fatigue. (13, 26-28)

Among these therapies, Tai chi has been proven to be an effective alternative to pulmonary rehabilitation in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). (13, 29) Additionally, Tang et al.'s multicenter, prospective, self-controlled study (13) found that Liu Zi Jue (六字訣), a form of Qigong exercise, may serve as a home-based rehabilitation option, enhancing functional capacity and quality of life in discharged COVID-19 patients.

Research by Tao et al. (23) examined moxibustion in conjunction with TCM dialectical remedies to treat patients with both lung and spleen qi deficit syndrome during COVID-19 recovery. Findings suggest that moxibustion improved clinical symptoms in these patients. (13, 30)

Several Chinese herbal medicines have been studied for their potential in treating COVID-19:

- Licorice (甘草 Gan-Cao) and Ephedra (麻黄 Ma-Huang) interfere with the uptake of viruses into host cells and the interaction between the SARS-CoV-2 receptor-binding domain (RBD) and ACE2.
- Qingwenjiere Mixture (8, 26) decreases virus-induced mRNA expression of a panel of pro-inflammatory cytokines and inhibits SARS-CoV-2's RdRp/Hel and s gene expression.
- Honeysuckle (金 银 花 Jin-Yin-Hua) and Huangqi (黄芪) (12, 31) can suppress SARS-CoV-2 Mpro activity, reducing viral entry and replication.
- Ma Xing Shi Gan Decoction (麻杏石甘湯 MXSG) containing Ephedra (麻黄 Ma-Huang), Gypsum (石膏 Shi-Gao), Apricot Seeds (杏仁 Xing-Ren), and Licorice (甘草 Gan-Cao) may prevent viral adhesion and replication at the entry site. (12, 32, 33)
- Anemarrhenae Rhizoma (知母 Zhi-Mu) (12, 34) inhibits SARS-CoV-2 transcription, replication, and primary protease activity.
- Keguan-1 (12, 35) may reduce pulmonary vascular endothelial damage and inflammation.
- HSBDF and MXSG (12, 32, 36) may mitigate lung damage by regulating inflammatory cytokine production via the toll-like receptor signaling pathway.
- Rhei Radix et Rhizome (大黄 Da-Huang) and Schisandrae Sphenantherae Fructus (五味子 Wu-Wei-Zi) (12, 37) may support cardiovascular function, modulate immune response, and exhibit anti-inflammatory properties.

Neurological Disorders

A single-center, prospective, single-arm, observational study at Daejeon Korean Medicine Hospital of Daejeon University found that the Meridian Activation Remedy System (MARS) intervention, administered twice weekly for 8 weeks, improved motor symptoms and function in patients with Parkinson's disease. Participants received 16 sessions of MARS therapy, each lasting 20 minutes. (38)

TCM is also used for a variety of other conditions, including hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, cancer, psychiatric disorders, weight loss, infertility, smoking cessation, headaches, migraines, stroke and coma recovery, anesthesia (acupuncture), and asthma. (39, 40, 41)

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