

Wen Bing formulas for inflammatory skin disease

An overview from Dongzhimen Hospital's Head of Dermatology

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Wen Bing Xue, or the School of Warm Disease, is the study of externally contracted warm diseases and their treatments, which flourished during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Its outstanding contribution was the development of pattern identification according to the four aspects (wei, qi, ying and xue) and according to the three burners (upper, middle and lower). This made possible the treatment and prevention of many acute epidemic and infectious diseases in the Ming and Qing era. Several *Wen Bing* formulas are useful and effective in treating many inflammatory skin diseases.

Skin lesions were well discussed and differentiated in *Wen Bing* theory, being seen to be a manifestation of internal disease. According to *Wen Bing* theory, skin lesions such as macules and papules are a manifestation of blood heat, signifying the progress of disease from the qi aspect to the ying and blood aspects. Macules and papules both manifest as red spots on the skin, but differ in appearance and in pathology.

Macules and papules

Macules or *ban* manifest as flattish red blotches that have a tendency to run into each other. The colour does not fade when pressure is applied. Papules or *zhen* also manifest as red spots but are generally smaller and have a distinctive elevated appearance, protruding from the skin surface as well-defined small bumps. Ye Tian-Shi said: "In general, macules are associated with the blood aspect, while papules are attributed to heat in the qi aspect." From this, it is understood that the pathomechanism of macules is exuberant yang ming Stomach heat, which causes the frenetic flow of blood, while papules are associated with exuberant qi heat in the tai yin Lung scorching the network vessels.

In contemporary Western medicine, macular and papular skin lesions are the basis for the primary diagnosis of specific dermatological diseases such as eczema, contact dermatitis, solar dermatitis, drug rash, erythroderma, the butterfly blotch of lupus erythematosus, and dermatomyositis. In Chinese medicine, the diagnosis is made according to the pattern differentiation of *Wen Bing* theory. *Wen Bing* theory differentiates macules and papules according to

the colour, whether the skin blanches when pressure is applied, and their distribution. Yu Shi-Yu in his book *Yi Bing Pian* (Chapter on Epidemic Illness) said: “A deep-red macule (*ban*) is more serious than a pale red macule and in general it is associated with blood heat”. 1

Wen Bing formulas in skin disease

The general strategy in the treatment of macules (*ban*) is to use cool, acrid herbs to clear heat and relieve toxicity, and to use blood-cooling herbs to alleviate the blood heat. Wu Ju-Tong said: “The treatment for *ban* is *Hua Ban Tang* (Transform Macule Decoction), while the treatment for *zhen* is *Yin Qiao San* removing *Dan Dou Chi* (Sojae Semen Preparatum) and adding *Xi Sheng Di* (Rehmanniae Radix; a finer form of *Sheng Di Huang* which is less cloying), *Mu Dan Pi* (Moutan Cortex); *Da Qing Ye* (Isatidis Folium) and doubling the dose of *Xuan Shen* (Scrophulariae Radix).

A macular rash (*ban*) is generally classified as an inflammatory skin disease. Some of the frequently used Wen Bing formulas that are highly efficacious in the treatment of inflammatory skin diseases are listed here:

Yin Qiao San (Honeysuckle and Forsythia Powder)

San Shi Tang (Three Stones Decoction)

Hua Ban Tang (Transform Macule Decoction)

Qing Ying Tang (Clear the Nutritive Level Decoction)

Liang Ge San (Cool the Diaphragm Powder)

Xi Jiao Di Huang Tang (Rhinoceros Horn and Rehmannia Decoction)

Qing Wen Bai Du Yin (Clear Epidemics and Overcome Toxin Decoction)

Pityriasis rosea, referred to as *mei gui kang zhen* in Chinese medicine, generally falls into the category of a wind-heat rash. It usually begins with a large, scaly, pink patch on the chest or back, which is called a “herald” or “mother” patch. The red patches gradually spread to the chest, back, arms and legs and are characterised by slight scaling and a mild itch. When the diagnosis is wind-heat, a modification of *Yin Qiao San* can be used. If the colour of the rash is bright red, resembling a red rose, is itchy and has a broad distribution, then *Hua Ban Tang* (Transform Macule Decoction) or *Qing Ying Tang* (Clear the Nutritive Level Decoction) can be used to cool blood and relieve toxicity.

Solar dermatitis or sun rash is caused by exposure to sunlight. It manifests as a red macular rash, or as patches of papules. It is characterised by extreme itching and is accompanied by a thirst for cold drinks. *San Shi Tang* modified: *Shi Gao* (Gypsum Fibrosum), *Hua Shi* (Talcum), *Han Shui Shi* (Glauberitum) etc. can be used to clear heat and relieve toxicity.

Eczema has been known by various names over the ages, including *li chuang*

(chestnut lesion), *shi chuang* (damp lesion), *shi zhen* (damp rash), and *xue feng chuang* (blood wind lesion). It is characterised by a dry, scaly or vesicular rash, with red papules and severe itching, vexation and irritability. It is attributed to exuberant Heart fire and blood heat generating wind. *Qing Ying Tang* (Clear the Nutritive Level Decoction) or *Qing Xin Liang Ge San* (Clear Heat and Cool the Diaphragm Powder) can be used with appropriate modifications.

In Chinese medicine, acute eczema, contact dermatitis and summer dermatitis can be categorised as *yin chuang* (yin lesion), *qi chuang* (qi lesion) or *shu re chuang* (summer-heat lesion). Acute eczema typically takes the form of large patches of red macules, and dense papules or papulovesicular lesions, and is characterised by severe itching; there is also thirst, irritability, scant urination, a red tongue with yellow greasy tongue coat and a slippery and rapid pulse. This is attributed to damp-heat invading the San Jiao and infiltrating the skin. There is more heat than damp and the treatment strategy is to clear heat, cool blood and disinhibit damp. Formulas include *Hua Ban Tang* (Transform Macule Decoction), *Zhu Ye Shi Gao Tang* (Lophatherus and Gypsum Decoction), *Yin Chen Hao Tang* (Artemisia Yinchenhao Decoction) with addition of such herbs as *Huang Qin* (Scutellariae Radix), *Bai Mao Gen* (Imperatae rizoma), *Che Qian Cao* (Plantaginis Herba), *Ma Chi Xian* (Portulacae Herba) and *Bai Xian Pi* (Dictamni Cortex).

Drug rash refers to an allergic reaction to drugs, and in Chinese medicine is called *yao du* (drug toxicity). The patient presents with red rash or bright red or purplish macules following medication. More serious cases can manifest with blisters or even blood blisters. There can be severe pruritus, and there is often a vigorous fever, headache, restlessness, anxiety, thirst, parched lips, dark urination, constipation, a crimson tongue with a thin, yellow tongue coat, and the pulse is thready and rapid. The rash is attributed to the transformation of the drug toxin into fire, searing both qi and blood. The treatment is to clear heat, relieve toxicity, cool blood and replenish yin. A mild case can be treated with *Hua Ban Tang* (Transform Macule Decoction) combined with *Xi Jiao Di Huang Tang* (Rhinoceros Horn and Rehmannia Decoction); a more serious case can be treated with *Qing Wen Bai Du Yin* (Clear Epidemics and Overcome Toxin Decoction).

The acute phase of discoid lupus is marked with a butterfly rash across the front of the cheeks, high fever, irritability, thirst and joint pain. The correct treatment strategy is to clear heat, cool blood, relieve toxicity and clear the rash. *Qing Wen Bai Du Yin* ingredients can be used with modifications. If there is impaired consciousness, *An Gong Niu Huang Wan* (Calm the Palace Pill) or *Zi Xue Dan* (Purple Snow Special Pill) can be used.

Contraindications for venting

According to *Wen Bing* theory, it is contraindicated to vent *ban* and *zhen*. Yu Shi-Yu, who authored *Yi Zhen Yi De* (Achievements Regarding Epidemic Rashes), said: “Fire is the root of *zhen*; while *zhen* is the sprout of fire. If a venting strategy is used, the fire will be fuelled by the wind, causing the condition to worsen.” Wu Ju-Tong said: “It is contraindicated to use *Sheng Ma* (Cimicifugae Rhizoma), *Chai Hu* (Bupleuri Radix), *Dang Gui* (Angelicae Sinensis Radix), *Fang Feng* (Saposhnikoviae Radix), *Qiang Huo* (Notopterygii Rhizoma Seu Radix), *Bai Zhi* (Angelicae Dahuricae Radix), *Ge Gen* (Puerariae Radix) and *San Chun Liu* (Tamarix Cacumen) in the treatment of *ban* and *zhen*.” This is because acrid, warm herbs are drying and dispersing, damaging both yin and qi, and affecting the blood.

Therefore, a venting strategy is also contraindicated in the treatment of inflammatory skin disease. The pathology of *ban* and *zhen* in inflammatory skin disease is mainly attributed to interior pathogenic fire and heat venting outward, or to pathogenic damp-heat constrained in the muscle layer. The appropriate treatment is to clear heat, purge fire, cool blood, relieve toxicity and disinhibit damp. Once the interior heat and toxicity have been resolved, the *ban* and *zhen* will clear in due course. The objective of treating skin disease is to clear the *ban* and *zhen*, and to ease the itch, which can be a source of extreme irritation and discomfort.

In early days of practice, the author had the experience of treating a 36-year-old patient who had been treated for fever and cough with a five-day course of antibiotics. The upper respiratory tract infection had cleared up but the patient had come out in a red rash that covered a considerable part of the body. Chinese herbs were used to vent the rash, but succeeded only in making the rash worse, spreading over a greater area and becoming extremely itchy. The patient also had a fever. A modified version of *Qing Wen Bai Du Yin* (Clear Epidemics and Overcome Toxin Decoction) was then used in a large dose for 20 days, after which the patient recovered.

Case Study 1

A male patient, 25, presented with a red skin rash that appeared since taking sulphadimidine for a sore throat three days earlier. He had then been given an anti-histamine for the skin rash, which was not effective. He had a mild fever of 37.6o, thirst, irritability and a dry stool. His entire body including arms and legs were covered with round, oedematous red blotches with the centre being purplish red. His tongue was red with white coat and his pulse was slippery and rapid.

Diagnosis: Drug rash; transformation of heat into toxic fire

Treatment principle: Clear heat, relieve toxicity, cool blood and clear the rash.

Formula: *Hua Ban Tang* (Transform Macule Decoction) and *Xi Jiao Di Huang Tang* (Rhinoceros Horn and Rehmannia Decoction) modified. *Shui Niu Jiao* (Bubali Cornu) powder 30g; *Sheng Shi Gao* (Gypsum Fibrosum) 45g (decoct

first); *Zhi Mu* (Anemarrhenae Rhizoma) 10g; *Sheng Di* (Rehmanniae Radix) 30g; *Mu Dan Pi* (Moutan Cortex) 15g; *Chi Shao* (Paeoniae Radix Rubra) 15g; *Bai Mao Gen* (Imperatae Rizoma) 30g; *Bai Xian Pi* (Dictamni Cortex) 15g; *Huang Qin* (Scutellariae Radix) 10g; *Shan Zhi Zi* (Gardeniae Fructus) 10g; *Sheng Gan Cao* (Glycyrrhizae Radix) 10g.

External application: *Lu Gan Shi* solution (calamine lotion) to use as a wash. After five days of medication, the fever was resolved and the skin rash had improved, with the redness having faded. The itch had also eased substantially. Seven more packs of the same formula was given with the addition of *Dan Shen* (Salviae Miltiorrhizae Radix) 15g and there was complete recovery.

Case Study 2

A 70-year-old female patient presented with dermatitis which had come out over her whole torso during the summer. She complained of a severe itch, thirst and irritability. There was a dense red rash densely over her chest, back and abdomen, some areas having showing ulcerated scabs. Her tongue was red with a white greasy tongue coat and her pulse was slippery and rapid.

Diagnosis: Summer-heat and damp constrained in the muscle layer

Treatment principle: Clear summer-heat, disinherit damp and stop the itch.

Formula: *Zhu Ye Shi Gao Tang* (Lophatherus and Gypsum Decoction) modified.

Sheng Shi Gao (Gypsum Fibrosum) 30g; *Dan Zhu Ye* (Lophatheri Herba) 10g; *Sheng Di* (Rehmanniae Radix) 30g; *Mai Men Dong* (Ophiopogonis Radix) 12g; *Mu Dan Pi* (Moutan Cortex) 12g; *Chi Shao* (Paeoniae Radix Rubra) 12g; *Shan Zhi Zi* (Gardeniae Fructus) 10g; *Huo Xiang* (Pogostemonis/Agastaches Herba) 10g; *Bai Xian Pi* (Dictamni Cortex) 15g; *Da Qing Ye* (Isatidis Folium) 10g; *Hua Shi* 10g; *Sheng Gan Cao* (Glycyrrhizae Radix) 6g. Five packs.

External application: *Lu Gan Shi* solution (calamine lotion) to wash the affected area.

After the five packs of medication, her condition improved and the itch was eased.

Key Wen Bing formulas

Hua Ban Tang (Transform Macule Decoction): *Sheng Shi Gao* (Gypsum Fibrosum, crushed); *Zhi Mu* (Anemarrhenae Rhizoma), *Sheng Gan Cao* (Glycyrrhizae Radix); *Xuan Shen* (Scrophulariae Radix); *Xi Jiao* (Rhinocerotis Cornu); *Bai Geng Mi* (white rice).

Yin Qiao San (Honeysuckle and Forsythia Powder) modified: *Lian Qiao* (Forsythiae Fructus); *Jin Yin Hua* (Lonicerae Flos); *Jie Geng* (Platycodi Radix); *Bo He* (Menthae Haplocalycis Herba); *Dan Zhu Ye* (Lophatheri Herba); *Sheng Gan Cao* (Glycyrrhizae Radix); *Jing Jie* (Schizonepetae Herba); *Niu Bang Zi*

(Arctii Fructus), *Sheng Di* (Rehmanniae Radix); *Da Qing Ye* (Isatidis Folium); *Mu Dan Pi* (Moutan Cortex); *Xuan Shen* (Scrophulariae Radix).

Qing Ying Tang (Clear the Nutritive Level Decoction): *Xi Jiao* (Rhinocerotis Cornu); *Sheng Di* (Rehmanniae Radix); *Xuan Shen* (Scrophulariae Radix); *Dan Zhu Ye* (Lophatheri Herba); *Mai Men Dong* (Ophiopogonis Radix); *Dan Shen* (Salviae Miltiorrhizae Radix); *Huang Lian* (Coptidis Rhizoma); *Jin Yin Hua* (Lonicerae Flos); *Lian Qiao* (Forsythiae Fructus) .

Liang Ge San (Cool the Diaphragm Powder): *Da Huang* (Rhei Radix Et Rhizoma); *Mang Xiao* (Natrii Sulfas); *Gan Cao* (Glycyrrhizae Radix); *Shan Zhi* (Gardeniae Fructus); *Bo He* (Menthae Haplocalycis Herba); *Huang Qin* (Scutellariae Radix); *Lian Qiao* (Forsythiae Fructus).

Qing Wen Bai Du Yin (Clear Epidemics and Overcome Toxin Decoction): *Sheng Shi Gao* (Gypsum Fibrosum); *Sheng Di* (Rehmanniae Radix); *Xi Jiao* (Rhinocerotis Cornu); *Huang Lian* (Coptidis Rhizoma); *Shan Zhi Zi* (Gardeniae Fructus); *Jie Geng* (Platycodi Radix); *Huang Qin* (Scutellariae Radix); *Zhi Mu* (Anemarrhenae Rhizoma); *Chi Shao* (Paeoniae Radix Rubra); *Xuan Shen* (Scrophulariae Radix); *Lian Qiao* (Forsythiae Fructus); *Gan Cao* (Glycyrrhizae Radix); *Mu Dan Pi* (Moutan Cortex); *Dan Zhu Ye* (Lophatheri Herba) .

Xi Jiao Di Huang Tang (Rhinoceros Horn and Rehmannia Decoction): *Xi Jiao* (Rhinocerotis Cornu); *Sheng Di* (Rehmanniae Radix); *Chi Shao* (Paeoniae Radix Rubra); *Mu Dan Pi* (Moutan Cortex).