Experience in Clinical Use of Xiao Chaihu Tang

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Xiao Chaihu Tang (小柴胡汤 Minor Bupleurum Decoction) originates from Treatise on Febrile Diseases (伤寒论). As a main recipe for treating Shaoyang syndrome, it has been practiced so far with obvious therapeutic effect. The main symptoms of Shaoyang syndrome are alternate chills and fever, chest fullness, vomiting, poor appetite, bitter taste, dry throat, dizziness and wiry pulse. Zhang Zhongjing (张仲景), an ancient physician, used Xiao Chaihu Tang to treat Shaoyang syndrome.

Xiao Chaihu Tang is composed of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleurum), Huang Qin (黄芩 Radix Scutellariae), Ren Shen (人参 Radix Ginseng), Ban Xia (半夏 Rhizoma Pinelliae), Gan Cao (甘草 Radix Glycyrrhizae), Sheng Jiang (生姜 Rhizoma Zingiberis Recens) and Da Zao (大枣 Fructus Jujubae). The decoction can clear away heat and expel pathogen in the exterior, regulate qi of related internal organs, remove chest fullness and reinforce the deficiency. Ancient physicians called it the “general recipe for harmonizing the exterior and interior”. The author introduces his experience after clinical use of the recipe as follows.

1. Xiao Chaihu Tang, a prescription for reducing fever

Zhang Zhongjing referred a febrile disease to the invasion of the exterior by wind and cold with the symptoms of fever and chills. A severe febrile disease called the invasion of Taiyang Channel by cold can be treated with Mahuang Tang (麻黄汤 Ephedra Decoction), and a mild febrile disease called the attack of Taiyang Channel by wind is treated with Guizhi Tang (桂枝汤 Cinnamon Twig Decoction), with the stress on inducing diaphoresis and removing pathogenic factors. In case the syndrome is not treated in time or properly, pathogenic heat will accumulate in Shaoyang and locate between the exterior and interior, with alternate chills and fever. Then Xiao Chaihu Tang should be used to relieve the exterior syndrome and regulate interrelated functions of the internal organs with the importance attached to reducing fever. If the exopathogen enters Yangming, the patient will have fever without chills. If the exopathogen attacks channels only, Baihu Tang (白虎汤 White Tiger Decoction) can be used. If the exopathogen attacks the internal organs, Chengqi Tang (承气汤 Parugative Combination) should be used. In general, it is imperative to reduce fever. If the pathogen in the three yang channels affects the three yin channels, the course of illness will extend and vital qi will be impaired, thus leading to a series of pathological changes. Therefore, it is particularly important to treat an exogenous disease as early as possible with the stress on reducing fever so as to prevent the disease from lingering and transmission.

Some 110 g of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri), bitter and pungent in taste and slightly cold in nature, is used in Xiao Chaihu Tang and orally taken 3 times a day. So, it is important that large dosage of Chai Hu is prescribed in the formula to reduce fever. Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) has been widely used as an antipyretic in clinical practice. Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) injection, a Chinese patent drug, has a good antipyretic effect. The author has successfully used Xiao Chaihu Tang (小柴胡汤 Minor Bupleurum Decoction) to treat fever caused by exopathogen or fever due to internal dysfunctions or retention of heat in the liver and gallbladder channels with the dosage of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) modified
according to the conditions of illness, thus expanding the clinical application of Xiao Chaihu Tang (小柴胡汤 Minor Bupleurum Decoction) and conforming to the original idea of Zhang Zhongjing, who also used Xiao Chaihu Tang (小柴胡汤 Minor Bupleurum Decoction) to treat febrile and miscellaneous diseases, such as the syndromes of “vomiting with fever” and “heat in blood”. Whenever Xiao Chaihu Tang is used to treat fever, the dosage of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) must be sufficient. The author believes that the dosage of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) should be as large as 30 g.

2. Xiao Chaihu Tang, a harmonizing recipe

Xiao Chaihu Tang used as a harmonizing recipe should be comprehended as a harmonization method in a broad sense, which refers to its therapeutic effect of harmonization in relieving cold and heat, reducing the excess and strengthening the deficiency. The reason why Zhang Zhongjing originally used Xiao Chaihu Tang as an antipyretic was that 1) Xiao Chaihu Tang used as a main recipe for Taiyang syndrome was indicated to reduce fever, 2) large dosage of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) was not used for harmonization, and 3) Xiao Chaihu Tang was obviously prescribed to reduce fever either in treating febrile or miscellaneous diseases. Later physicians have annotated Xiao Chaihu Tang as a harmonizing recipe, which has been widely used in clinic so far. The author believes that the present practice is a further development of the indication of the original Xiao Chaihu Tang. Harmonization method is one of the eight therapeutic methods, which can regulate nutrient and defensive qi, the spleen and stomach, ascending and descending, interior and exterior in the treatment of diseases. Diseases caused by exogenous pathogenic factors are treated with harmonization expelling pathogenic factors. Miscellaneous diseases due to internal injury are treated with harmonization to coordinate the functions of the liver, gallbladder, spleen and stomach. The indications of Xiao Chaihu Tang in treating miscellaneous diseases due to internal injury are as follows. 1) The syndrome of heat accumulated in the liver and gallbladder with the symptoms of fullness or pain in the chest, bitter taste in the mouth, dry throat, vomiting, poor appetite or low fever is treated with Xiao Chaihu Tang with Ren Shen (人参 Radix Ginseng) removed but Jinlingzi powder (金铃子散 Sichuan Chinaberry Powder) and Erjin powder (Yu Jin 郁金 Radix Curcumae and Ji Nei Jin 鸡内金 Endothelium Corneum Gigeriae Galli) added so as to put the stress on soothing the liver and normalizing the gallbladder functions. Fever is treated with large dosage of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) to clear away heat. Dry stool is treated with Sheng Dahuang (大黄 Radix et Rhizoma Rhei Palmati) added. 2) The syndrome of disharmony between the stomach and liver (gallbladder) with the symptoms of distension and fullness in the chest, belching, acid regurgitation, vomiting and bitterness in the mouth is treated with Xiao Chaihu Tang with Ren Shen (人参 Radix Ginseng) removed and Erchen Tang (二陈汤 Two Old Drugs Decoction) added so as to put the stress on removing heat from the liver (gallbladder) and regulating the stomach. Vomiting is treated with large dosage of Banxia (半夏 Rhizoma Pinelliae) and Shengjiang (生姜 Rhizoma Zingiberis Recens) to regulate the stomach and descend adverse qi. Bitterness in the mouth is treated with small dosage of Long Dan Cao (龙胆草 Radix Gentianae) and Fu ling (茯苓 Poria) added to normalize the gallbladder functions. 3) The syndrome of disharmony between the liver and spleen with symptoms of distension and fullness in the chest, poor appetite, depression and difficult defecation is treated with Xiao Chaihu Tang with Huang Qin (黄芩 Radix Scutellariae) removed. Severe stagnation of liver-qi is treated with Xiang Fu (香附 Rhizoma Cyperi) and Chuan Xiong (川芎 Rhizoma Chuanxiong) added to soothe the liver. Severe spleen deficiency is treated with Bai Zhu (白术 Rhizoma Atractylodis Macrocephalae) and Fu ling (茯苓 Poria) added to strengthen the spleen. Weakened yang in the middle energizer is treated with Gan Jiang (干姜 Rhizoma Zingiberis) and Gui Zhi (桂枝 Ramulus Cinnamomi) added to activate yang. 4) The syndrome of fever due to internal injury, such as various kinds
of low fever or low fever with its cause unknown, is treated with Xiao Chaihu Tang. The syndrome of heat stagnated in Shaoyang can be effectively treated with Xiao Chaihu Tang.

As a harmonizing recipe widely used in clinical practice, Xiao Chaihu Tang has an obvious therapeutic effect on treating miscellaneous diseases due to internal injury, soothe the liver, normalize the gallbladder functions and coordinate the liver and spleen. However, attention should be paid to the dosage of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) in using Xiao Chaihu Tang. Zhang Zhongjing used large dosage of Chai Hu for the purpose of removing fever. But the dosage of Chai Hu should be reduced in using harmonization to soothe the liver. According to the experience of the author, less than 15 g of Chai Hu is used for soothing the liver, 15 g–30 g for clearing away heat and more than 30 g for removing fever.

3. Similar recipes of Xiao Chaihu Tang

There are 5 recipes of Xiao Chaihu Tang modified by Zhang Zhongjing

(1) Da Chaihu Tang (大柴胡汤 Major Bupleurum Decoction) made from Xiao Chaihu Tang with Ren Shen and Gan Cao removed and about 40 g of Shao Yao (芍药 Radix Paeoniae Alba), 4 pieces of Zhi Shi (枳实 Fructus Aurantii Immaturus) and some 30 g of Da Huang (大黃 Radix et Rhizoma Rhei) added can mediate Shaoyang and relieve interior excess to treat accumulated heat in Shaoyang, fullness in the chest, anxiety, depression, vomiting, constipation, deep wiry pulse and yellow greasy tongue coating, or sweating due to a febrile disease, heat accumulated in Yangming, vomiting, diarrhea and other symptoms of heat in Shaoyang and interior excess in Yangming. Da Chaihu Tang is widely used to treat diseases of digestive system, especially diseases of the liver-gallbladder system, such as acute cholecystitis, acute attack of chronic cholecystitis, acute infection of the gallbladder system, and hepatolith and cholelithes, with obvious effect on hypochondriac pain, fever, jaundice, dry stool and yellow greasy tongue coating. Da Chaihu Tang can also effectively treat acute pancreatitis or repeated attacks of chronic pancreatitis, especially for fast patients with acute pancreatitis because the decoction can purge heat from organs, remove liver-fire, regulate the stomach, alleviate the symptoms of digestive tract and reduce blood amylase. Da Chaihu Tang is characterized by clearing away accumulated heat from Shaoyang Channel, removing heat from the liver and gallbladder, clearing Yangming and harmonizing the stomach and intestine. Large dosage of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) is used to reduce fever and large dosage of Dahuang to unblock the bowels.

(2) Guizhi Chaihu Tang (桂枝柴胡汤 Bupleurum and Cinnamon Twig Decoction) consists of Xiao Chaihu Tang and Guizhi Tang with half of each. Guizhi Tang can coordinate nutrient and defensive, relax muscles and remove pathogen to treat exterior syndrome of Taiyang. Xiao Chaihu Tang can mediate Shaoyang to treat half-exterior and half-interior syndrome of Shaoyang. Therefore, Chaihu Guizhi Tang can treat diseases of both Taiyang and Shaoyang syndromes marked by fever, slight chills, pain in limbs and joints and other symptoms of Taiyang syndrome, as well as mild vomiting and other symptoms of Shaoyang syndrome.

(3) Chaihu Mangxiao Tang (柴胡芒硝汤 Bupleurum and Mirabilite Decoction) is made from 1/3 of Xiao Chaihu Tang and about 30 g of Mang Xiao (芒硝 Natrii Sulfas). A Small dosage of Xiao Chaihu Tang is applicable to mild heat accumulation in Shaoyang. Mangxiao used to remove heat from Yangming, soften hard mass and relieve constipation can be properly used for heat accumulation in Shaoyang, deficiency of vital qi and severe interior excess. As compared with Da Chaihu Tang, Chaihu Mangxiao Tang without Dahuang (大黄 Radix et Rhizoma Rhei Palmati) and Zhishi (枳实 Fructus Aurantii Immaturus ) reserves small dosage of Ren Shen and Gan Cao to replenish qi and strengthen the middle energizer.

(4) Chaihu Guizhi Ganjiang Tang (柴胡桂枝干姜汤 Decoction of Bupleurum, Cinnamon Twig and Dried Ginger) is prescribed for heat accumulation in Shaoyang, weakened yang in the middle energizer...
and interior retention of water-fluid with fullness of chest, alternate attacks of chills and fever, restlessness and other symptoms of Shaoyang syndrome, as well as inhibited urination, sweating in the head, thirsty and other symptoms weakened yang in the middle energizer. The disease should be treated with clearing away accumulated heat from Shaoyang, warming the middle energizer, dispersing cold and removing water retention. In the recipe, with Ban Xia (半夏 Rhizoma Pinelliae), Sheng Jiang (生姜 Rhizoma Zingiberis Recens), Ren Shen (人参 Radix Ginseng ) and Da Zao (大枣 Fructus Jujubae) removed, Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) and Huang Qin (黄芩 Radix Scutellariae) can clear away heat from Shaoyang, Guizhi (桂枝 Ramulus Cinnamomi), Ganjiang (干姜 Rhizoma Zingiberis) and Gancao (甘草 Radix Glycyrrhizae) can activate yang in the middle energizer and remove retained water, and Gua Lou Gen (瓜篓根 Radix Trichosanthis) and Mu Li (牡蛎 Concha Ostreae) can remove retained water and resolve mass. Chaihu Guizhi Ganjiang Tang, pungent in taste and cool in nature, a representative recipe for removing heat, can remove retained water, activate yang qi and coordinate the exterior with the interior.

The above-mentioned 4 recipes should be clinically used with their dosage modified according to illness conditions, constitution and pathogen. For example, severe syndrome of heat accumulation in Shaoyang should be treated with the original dosage of Chai Hu (柴胡 Radix Bupleuri) and Huang Qin (黄芩 Radix Scutellariae); and mild syndrome of heat stagnated in Shaoyang should be treated with 1/2 or 1/3 of their original dosage. Severe syndrome of heat accumulated in Yangming should be treated with modified recipes of Xiao Chaihu Tang and changes in dosage. When reading classical books, physicians should learn their original meaning, study drugs and their dosages and read notes attached to recipes. In this way, physicians are able to use ancient recipes flexibly and won’t be misled by some medical books.