



## CLINICAL RELEVANCE OF SHAO YAO IN THE SHANG HAN LUN

IS IT CHI SHAO OR BAI SHAO AND DOES IT MATTER?

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*May 2015*

### INTRODUCTION

During teaching the Shang Han Lun and the Jin Gui Yao Lue in the last 10 years, students often asked, “*Is shao yao (peony) in Zhang zhong Jing’s formulas chi shao (paeoniae radix rubra, red peony) or bai shao (paeoniae radix alba, white peony)?*”

During the history of TCM this question has been often discussed, because both herbs are not specifically mentioned by name.

For clinical application it is important to deeply understand Zhang Zhong Jing’s formulas and the mechanisms of the ingredients according to the classical texts.

In the Shang Han Lun, shao yao is a frequently used and important herb. It appears in 33 formulas and is mentioned in 52 items in the book.

Today, modern TCM books explain shao yao in Gui Zhi Tang or Shao Yao Gan Cao Tang as being white peony. However, this is not the original description of the Shang Han Lun. Shao yao in the Shang Han Lun is red peony and not white peony. Why? And does it matter clinically? The academic discussion could be as follows.

*Keywords: TCM, Shang Han Lun, Shao Yao, Chi Shao, Bai Shao, Clinical.*

## ACCORDING TO THE TCM HISTORY

In the Eastern Han Dynasty (220 AD), when Zhang Zhong Jing was writing his Shang Han Za Bing Lun, there was no differentiation between bai shao and chi shao. In those days, the only peony available was wild peony.

Since the Song Dynasty (960-1279) peony has been cultivated. From then on TCM practitioners started to differentiate the cultivated peony as white peony and the wild peony as red peony (Wang, Peng 2007), as described in the China National Chinese Herbal Pharmacopoeia (2005).

Therefore, the peony used in the Shang Han Lun can only be red peony, i.e. chi shao. Because bai shao did not exist at the time of the Shang Han Lun, and was described 700 years later.

## ACCORDING TO THE SHEN NONG BEN CAO JING

The Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing is the first Chinese herbal compendium (materia medica). It has been written in the Han Dynasty. In history it is of about the same time frame as the works of Zhang Zhong Jing.

In the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing, shao yao is described as: *'Shao yao tastes bitter and mild. It treats abdominal pain, resolves blood stasis, softens hardness and masses, promotes urination and benefits the qi.'*<sup>1</sup>

The nature and actions of peony as red peony are in the same line with today's Chinese herbal knowledge. Peony used in Zhang Zhong Jing's formulas is red peony, i.e. chi shao.

## ACCORDING TO THE FUNCTIONAL MECHANISM

The functional mechanisms of shao yao in the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing can be summarized in four lines:

1. Chu (除, eliminate): eliminate blood stasis. For example Gui Zhi Jia Shao Yao Tang can resolve pain in the abdomen due to Spleen deficiency causing blood stasis in the luo mai;
2. Po, (破, break): break the hardness of stasis, as in Gui Zhi Fu Ling Wan, which treats ji disease (masses) in the uterus;

3. Li (利, promote urination): shao yao in Zhen Wu Tang where it transforms water accumulation in the blood luo mai;
4. Yi (益, nourish): nourishing qi in ying and blood. Gui Zhi Tang in item 95 of the Shang Han Lun mentions Tai Yang fever due to ying and wei qi disharmony (wei relative strong and ying weak syndrome).

Zhang Yinan, the great Shang Han Lun scholar and TCM practitioner from the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), describes shao yao in his Ben Cao Cheng Yuan as, *'Shao yao has the nature of qi and its taste is bitter and mild. If wood damages the soil and induces blood stasis in the Spleen luo mai, it can cause abdominal pain. Shao yao can unblock the blood luo mai and resolve xie qi and stop the pain... Shao yao can regulate the qi from the middle jiao and resolve qi stagnation... Shao yao can benefit qi in blood and promote blood circulation... Many scholars changed the taste of shao yao to sour after Yuan and Ming dynasty. To chew Shao yao, do you taste it as sour?'*

Also Li Shi Zhen in his Ben Cao Gang Mu states that *'Bai shao benefits the Spleen, it can resolve liver stagnation. Chi shao can remove xie qi from blood stasis.'*

The functional mechanism of chi shao is shown in many of Zhang Zhong Jing's formulas, such as Si Ni San, Da Chai Hu Tang, Xiao Jian Zhong Tang, etc. Adding chi shao to formulas such as Xiao Chai Hu Tang, Dang Gui Si Ni Tang and San Wu Bai San, will assist to resolve stasis in the blood luo mai and to stop pain in abdomen.

If using 'the astringent and sour nature' of bai shao, how can it resolve the cramp and stasis of Spleen luo mai?

Hence, peony used in Zhang Zhong Jing's formulas is red peony, i.e. chi shao.

## CONCLUSION

In clinical study of the Shang Han Lun one should not only focus on the sour taste and nourishing yin of Bai shao as most modern TCM texts state. The properties and functional mechanisms of formulas and medicinal substances are important as well.

<sup>1</sup> (味苦平。主邪气腹痛，除血痹，破坚积寒热，疝瘕，止痛，利小便，益气。生川谷及丘陵。)

For clinical success it is therefore important to differentiate between chi shao and bai shao.

*‘A small pond is like an open mirror.  
It reflects the heavenly lights and clouds from the sky.  
Why is it so clear?’*

*Because the water flowing into pond comes from the source of life.’*

– The Contemplation of Study by Zhu Xi (1130-1200), philosopher in the Song Dynasty.

The study of TCM should be like this.

## REFERENCES

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First page illustration by Jean Chin.