

Feed a cold, starve a fever

Or was it the other way around?

A personal essay by Wang Shi-Xiong (1808-1867)¹

Kidneys are the constitutional basis, Spleen is the postnatal basis. If one has Stomach qi one lives, without Stomach qi one dies. So this issue of Spleen and Stomach is not inconsequential.

WHEN ZHANG ZHONG-JING TREATED cold damage, after giving *Gui Zhi Tang* (Cinnamon Decoction) a bowl of rice congee would be provided, in order to help the Stomach qi and promote the effect of the herbs. The reasoning is as follows. Cold injures the nutritive qi, which becomes bound internally and unable to pass outward to the protective qi, so that the interstices and pores remain secured and there is no sweating. Wind [on the other hand] injures the protective qi, which drains away externally and cannot defend the nutritive qi, and as the surface tissues are insecure there is sweating. Therefore some rice congee is quickly consumed to help supplement the nutritive qi.

A person's Spleen and Stomach is like the grain stores of a country. But it is not only food and drink that enter the Stomach and pass out as essential qi into the five channels; medicine must also pass the Stomach, for all that it "enters such and such a channel" or "treats such and such a condition". If the Stomach qi is weak, digestion and distribution suffer, so that a tonifying formula simply turns into phlegm, and an eliminating formula simply damages the normal qi. How can they reach their channels and treat an illness?

Speaking generally, patients attacked by wind or cold pathogens where the pattern is still in *tai yang* can eat, but once the pathogen has entered *yang ming* they cannot eat. If they cannot eat but you force them to eat, that of course is wrong; nonetheless old or weak

patients still need a bit of rice gruel to drink to support their Stomach qi. If a patient still has an appetite, you can give them a watery congee, but as for dry rice or glutinous rice or meat, do not let them have it.

As you would expect, if you forbid eating the Stomach qi will gradually become exhausted, and then wind or cold in turn find it easier to invade the interior. Others may say to starve them, but in fact it just harms them.

The constitution of people south of the Yangzi river is such that when they catch cold, it always makes them really hungry. Wait until the fever has gone after three or four days and they have cooled down, then start to give them some congee to eat. Strong ones should be harmoniously tonified so that they recover completely, but weak ones may retain deep but hidden injury.

When I was seven or eight years old a shonky doctor was treating me for a cold. Five days and the cold was gone, leaving Spleen deficiency and some heat, but he did not recognise it and still forbade grains. This lasted right up until I was wheezing and sweating badly – a major illness!

Luckily my family met an old woman masseuse who said: "This is no big deal, it is nothing but Spleen deficiency following the illness. Give him some millet congee and the sweating will gradually stop." They followed her advice and I got better. So I am speaking from personal experience as a patient: when the doctor says he is doing everything possible, can he be totally believed?

– *Thirty Chapters on Medicine*

1. Found in Wang XH (ed) 1(983) *Zhong Yi Li Dai Yi Lun Xuan* (Selected Medical Essays by Traditional Chinese Doctors of Past Generations). Nanjing: Jiangsu Science and Technology Press, pp. 719-720.

2. Scheid, V (2007) *Currents of Tradition in Chinese Medicine*. Seattle: Eastland Press, p. 179.

■ Wang Shi-Xiong (王士雄) was, according to Volker Scheid, "a key figure in the development of the warm pathogen disorder current as a distinctive medical tradition, who lived in Shanghai for as much as 10 of the 30 years he spent criss-crossing Jiangnan".² Wang is the author of the *Wen Re Jing Wei* (The Warp and Woof of Warm- and Hot-Pathogen Disorders) and the *Huo Luan Lun* (Discussion of Sudden Turmoil), both major foundation texts in the warm disorder school.