Harmonizing the Spleen and Stomach to Achieve Balance: Professor Li Qi's Clinical Experience and Research on Applying the "Harmonizing Method" in Treating Chronic Renal Failure

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Abstract [**Objectives**] To summarize Professor Li Qi's academic viewpoints and clinical experience in treating chronic renal failure (CRF) with the "Harmonizing Method" as the core principle. [**Methods**] Through learning from the professor in outpatient settings and analyzing medical records, we summarized his core thoughts on treating CRF. A retrospective analysis was conducted involving 60 patients with early-to-mid stage CRF, who received Chinese herbal decoctions guided by Professor Li's "Harmonizing Method" in addition to conventional Western medicine treatment for a course of 12 weeks. The changes in TCM syndrome scores, serum creatinine (Scr), blood urea nitrogen (BUN), and estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) were observed before and after treatment. [**Results**] Professor Li believes that the core pathogenesis of CRF is "dysfunction of the spleen and stomach with internal accumulation of turbid toxins." The treatment is guided by the principle of "harmonizing the spleen and stomach to achieve balance," applying specific harmonizing techniques such as balancing cold and heat, combining tonification and purgation, and regulating qi and blood simultaneously. Clinical observation revealed a significant improvement in TCM syndrome scores ($p < 0.01$), a significant decrease in Scr and BUN, and a significant increase in eGFR ($p < 0.05$) after treatment. [**Conclusions**] Professor Li has rich clinical experience in treating CRF with the "Harmonizing Method." Preliminary observations indicate that this method can improve symptoms and delay the deterioration of renal function.

Key words Chronic renal failure, Harmonizing method, Harmonizing the spleen and stomach, Famous physician's experience, Li Qi, Clinical research

1 Introduction

Chronic renal failure (CRF), as the ultimate outcome of the sustained progression of various chronic kidney diseases (CKD), has a high clinical incidence and shows a rising trend year by year. The development of this disease is associated with multiple factors, and its prognosis is often poor[1]. At present, how to prevent, treat, or delay the progression of chronic renal failure has become a focus and priority of research[2]. Modern medicine has established a relatively mature comprehensive management strategy for the prevention and treatment of CRF, the core of which lies in etiological and symptomatic treatment, specifically including strict control of blood pressure and blood glucose, effective reduction of proteinuria, correction of renal anemia and water-electrolyte disorders, and the provision of high-quality nutritional support therapy[3]. Although this series of measures has achieved some success in delaying disease progression, modern medical treatment still has limitations in the face of CRF as a complex chronic progressive disease. How to fundamentally improve patients' long-term quality of life awaits further in-depth research[4].

Based on its clinical manifestations, CRF can be classified under the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) categories of "Guange" (anuria and vomiting with constipation), "Longbi" (retention of urine), "Shuizhong" (edema), "Nidu" (urine toxin), and "Xulao" (consumptive disease)[5]. Professor Li Qi is a designated mentor of the seventh national program for inheriting the academic experience of senior TCM experts and a renowned TCM physician in Yunnan Province. With over 40 years of clinical practice, she has accumulated rich experience. She advocates the academic viewpoint that "kidney disease should not be treated solely through the kidney," emphasizing the regulation of systemic qi movement and zang-fu organ functions, and particularly highlighting the important role of the "spleen and stomach" in the occurrence, development, and progression of CRF.

Professor Li Qi holds that the pathogenesis of CRF can be summarized as "root deficiency and branch excess, dynamically interwoven." Here, "root deficiency" primarily refers to deficiency of the spleen and kidney, with concomitant damage to qi, blood, yin, and yang; "branch excess" manifests as the accumulation and stagnation of pathological products such as water-dampness, turbid toxins, and blood stasis. The core contradiction running throughout this complex pathological process lies in the dysfunction of the zang-fu organs and the derangement of qi movement in terms of ascending and descending, namely, a state of "disharmony." Based on this understanding, Professor Li employs the "Harmonizing Method" as the fundamental therapeutic principle for treating CRF, and takes "harmonizing the spleen and stomach to achieve balance" as the overarching guideline for clinical prac-

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tice. The central idea is that by restoring the healthy transportation function and pivotal role of the spleen and stomach in the middle jiao (middle energizer), the qi movement can be regulated, clear qi can ascend and turbid qi can descend, thereby achieving the comprehensive treatment goals of tonifying deficiency and purging excess, harmonizing yin and yang, and delaying disease progression.

This paper aims to systematically review and summarize Professor Li Qi's academic thought and clinical experience in treating CRF with "harmonizing the spleen and stomach" as the core principle, supported by clinical observation data for corroboration, so as to provide a reference for the prevention and treatment of CRF with traditional Chinese medicine.

2 Analysis of professor Li Qi's academic thought on treating CRF with the "Harmonizing Method"

2.1 Core pathogenesis: spleen-stomach dysfunction, deranged ascending and descending, and internal accumulation of turbid toxins Professor Li Qi believes that although the disease location of CRF is the kidney, the generation and transportation of the pathological product "turbid toxin" are invariably related to the spleen and stomach. The kidney is the foundation of innate constitution, governing the essential qi reserve at the beginning of life; the spleen is the foundation of acquired constitution, influencing the daily absorption of nutrients and the production of qi and blood. When CRF persists for a long time and affects the kidney, deficiency of primordial yang results, and failing fire cannot warm the earth, inevitably leading to impairment of the spleen's transportation function. In addition, patients are often further injured by emotional and dietary factors, which further damage the spleen and stomach. The spleen and stomach are located in the middle jiao and play the key role of ascending and descending qi movement. When the spleen fails to transport properly, the essence from food and water cannot be transformed and accumulates as dampness and turbidity; when the stomach fails to descend harmoniously, waste cannot go downward and remains in the fu organs. Congestion of the middle jiao causes derangement of ascending and descending, failure of clear yang to ascend and turbid yin to descend, internal accumulation of dampness and turbidity, which transforms into heat and becomes toxin, thus forming "urine toxin." This turbid toxin attacks the heart and lung upward, invades the liver and kidney downward, and overflows the skin outward, thereby triggering the numerous complex symptoms of CRF. Therefore, "spleen-stomach dysfunction" is the key pathological link in the occurrence and development of CRF, and "internal accumulation of turbid toxins" is the core of the branch excess.

2.2 General therapeutic principle: harmonizing the spleen and stomach to achieve balance Based on the above pathogenesis, Professor Li Qi proposes that the treatment of CRF should not rely solely on aggressive purgation or drastic tonification, as this may easily violate the admonition of "treating deficiency with tonification and excess with purgation inappropriately." The principle of "harmonization" should be valued, with "balance" as the goal. The connotation of the "Harmonizing Method" is rich and is embodied in the following aspects: Harmonizing yin and yang: CRF patients often suffer from dual deficiency of yin and yang, requiring balanced tonification and purgation, for example, combining yang-warming medicinals with yin-nourishing medicinals, or *vice versa*. Harmonizing cold and heat: This disease frequently presents with mixed cold and heat patterns, such as spleen-kidney deficiency cold combined with intestinal damp-heat, necessitating the combined use of cold and warm medicinals. Harmonizing ascending and descending: The core lies in restoring the ascending and descending function of the spleen and stomach in the middle jiao, raising the clear and descending the turbid. Harmonizing deficiency and excess: The principle of "tonifying deficiency without retaining pathogens and purging excess without damaging the healthy qi" is advocated, employing simultaneous attack and supplementation. Harmonizing qi and blood: Prolonged illness invariably leads to blood stasis; CRF is often accompanied by blood stasis, requiring the promotion of blood circulation and removal of blood stasis on the basis of regulating qi.

3 Clinical experience and formula features

3.1 Pattern differentiation and application of the "Harmonizing Method" Professor Li typically differentiates CRF into the following three patterns, each treated with the "Harmonizing Method".

3.1.1 Spleen-stomach qi deficiency with internal damp-turbidity obstruction. Manifestations include general fatigue, bland taste without thirst, and abdominal bloating. The treatment involves simultaneous tonification and purgation to harmonize the spleen and stomach, using a modified combination of Xiangsha Liujunzi Decoction and Pingwei Powder. The prescription emphasizes fortifying the spleen and boosting qi, transforming dampness and harmonizing the stomach, so as to restore the middle jiao's function of transportation and transformation.

3.1.2 Pattern of mixed cold and heat with turbid toxins invading upward. The symptoms include nausea and vomiting, dry mouth and bitter taste without desire to drink water, epigastric and abdominal fullness and distension, and irregular bowel movements. This is a typical manifestation of "disharmony." The treatment principle is to balance cold and heat, and to open with acridity and descend with bitterness, with Banxia Xiexin Decoction (Pinellia Heart-Draining Decoction) serving as the main formula. In this formula, Huanglian (Coptidis Rhizoma) and Huangqin (Scutellariae Radix) are bitter and cold, capable of descending and draining; Ganjiang (Zingiberis Rhizoma) and Banxia (Pinelliae Rhizoma) are acrid and warm, functioning to open and disperse; Renshen (Ginseng Radix), Gancao (Glycyrrhizae Radix), and Dazao (Jujubae Fructus) are sweet and warm, replenishing qi. Through rational combination, the formula can achieve the effects of harmonizing cold and heat, opening bound masses,

and eliminating stuffiness.

3.1.3 Pattern of dual deficiency of the spleen and kidney with binding of stasis and turbidity. The symptoms include a dark and lusterless complexion, soreness and weakness of the lower back and knees, fatigue and poor appetite, and possibly scaly dry skin. The treatment principle is to harmonize qi and blood and to apply both tonification and purgation. The formula used is a combination of Jisheng Shenqi Pill and Danggui Buxue Decoction, with the addition of medicinals such as Danshen (Salviae Miltiorrhizae Radix), Chuanxiong (Chuanxiong Rhizoma), and Dahuang (Rhei Radix et Rhizoma). In this formula, Huangqi (Astragali Radix) and Dihuang (Rehmanniae Radix) tonify the deficiency of the spleen and kidney, Danshen and Chuanxiong harmonize the blood and resolve stasis, and processed Dahuang unblocks the bowels and discharges turbidity. Together, they embody the essential point of the Harmonizing Method.

3.2 Professor Li Qi's characteristic insights into herbal application

3.2.1 Commonly used herb pairs. Huangqi (Astragali Radix) and Huanglian (Coptidis Rhizoma): Huangqi is sweet and warm, supplementing qi and raising yang, fortifying the spleen and promoting diuresis; Huanglian is bitter and cold, clearing heat and drying dampness, descending rebellious qi and stopping vomiting. The two medicinals are combined, one warm and one cold, one ascending and one descending, together achieving the effects of simultaneous tonification and purgation and regulation of the middle jiao—a classic example of the "Harmonizing Method." Ganjiang (Zingiberis Rhizoma) and Banxia (Pinelliae Rhizoma): Ganjiang warms the middle and disperses cold; Banxia descends rebellious qi and stops vomiting. The combination of the two, acrid and warm to open and disperse, constitutes a key medicinal pair for restoring the qi movement of the middle jiao. Chenpi (Citri Reticulatae Pericarpium) and Fuling (Poria): Chenpi regulates qi and fortifies the spleen; Fuling fortifies the spleen and percolates dampness. The two are used in combination, with qi regulation and dampness percolation proceeding in parallel, embodying the Harmonizing Method concept of "treating dampness by first regulating qi".

3.2.2 Characteristic medication. Professor Li excels at using processed Dahuang (Rhei Radix et Rhizoma) for its function of "unblocking the bowels and discharging turbidity", yet she emphasizes that the dosage should be light (usually 3 – 6 g), aiming for "gentle purgation" or "harmonious purgation" so as to maintain one or two loose bowel movements per day. The objective is to provide an outlet for the pathogen rather than to injure the healthy qi through drastic purgation. She often adds Zisugeng (Perillae Caulis) to the formula, which can regulate qi and soothe the middle, harmonize the stomach and stop vomiting, as well as "diffuse the upper and drain the lower" and mediate the qi movement. It is an excellent medicinal for harmonizing the spleen stomach qi movement.

4 Clinical study

4.1 Subjects and methods A retrospective review and summary of prior clinical data was performed. Sixty patients with early-to-mid stage CRF (CKD stage 3 – 4) who attended Professor Li Qi's specialist clinic between December 2024 and December 2025 were included. Alongside standard Western medicine treatment, all patients took Chinese herbal decoctions based on Professor Li's "Harmonizing Method," one dose daily for 12 weeks. Outcome measures included: TCM syndrome scores (poor appetite, abdominal bloating, fatigue, nausea); blood urea nitrogen (BUN); serum creatinine (Scr); and estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR). SPSS 25.0 was employed for statistical analysis. TCM syndrome scores were compared using the rank-sum test. Measurement data were presented as ($\bar{x} \pm s$), and pre- and post-treatment comparisons were made with the paired-samples t-test.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 TCM syndrome efficacy. After treatment, the distribution of scores for the four core symptoms, including poor appetite, abdominal distension, fatigue, and nausea, was significantly improved compared with that before treatment ($p < 0.01$), as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Comparison of TCM syndrome scores before and after treatment ($n = 60$)

TCM syndrome	Score	Before treatment cases	After treatment cases	Z value	p value
Poor appetite	0	6	15	−2.794	<0.01
	1	8	20		
	2	21	11		
	3	25	9		
Abdominal bloating	0	11	24	−2.802	<0.01
	1	13	26		
	2	20	4		
	3	16	6		
Fatigue	0	3	18	−3.035	<0.01
	1	8	27		
	2	12	6		
	3	37	9		
Nausea	0	11	41		
	1	21	10	−2.921	<0.01
	2	15	5		
	3	13	4		

4.2.2 Laboratory indicators. Compared with the pre-treatment values, the levels of Scr and BUN decreased significantly after treatment, while the eGFR level increased significantly, with statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$), as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of laboratory indicators before and after treatment ($\bar{x} \pm s$, $n = 60$)

Before and after treatment	Scr//μmol/L	BUN//mmol/L	gGFR//mL/L
Before treatment	247.6 ± 47.3	16.6 ± 3.9	32.4 ± 8.2
After treatment	223.8 ± 50.2	13.1 ± 4.2	36.7 ± 9.7
t value	3.53	3.37	−3.01
p value	<0.05	<0.05	<0.05

5 Discussion

The results of this study indicate that treating CRF with the "Harmonizing Method" as the core principle has a positive significance in improving patients' clinical symptoms and delaying the progression of renal function, thus confirming the clinical value of this therapeutic thought. The essence of the "Harmonizing Method" lies in restoring the body's inherent balance of qi, blood, yin, and yang and the coordination of zang-fu functions, namely, the homeostatic state of "yin is balanced and yang is secure" emphasized in traditional Chinese medicine[6]. Its mechanism of action consists in harmonizing the spleen and stomach in the middle jiao, the pivot for the ascending and descending of qi movement, thereby restoring the physiological function of the spleen ascending and the stomach descending[7]. When the spleen ascends, clear yang is distributed and the essence of water and grain is transformed, enabling "healthy qi to be preserved within"; when the stomach descends, turbid yin is discharged and damp-turbidity and urine toxin are expelled, allowing "pathogens to have an outlet." This process not only directly improves middle jiao symptoms such as poor appetite, nausea, and vomiting, but also reestablishes the overall balance of transformation and metabolism in the body, thereby creating favorable internal conditions for delaying the progression of CRF[8].

From the perspective of modern medicine, this therapeutic strategy coincides in its objectives with the integrated treatment concept of delaying CRF progression through protein intake control, nutritional support, and correction of electrolyte disorders[9]. However, the advantage of the "Harmonizing Method" lies in its ability to simultaneously address the multiple, complex, and often intertwined problems in the course of CRF, such as malnutrition, inflammatory states, and the accumulation of metabolic waste, through multi-target and multi-level systemic regulation, thereby demonstrating the holistic concept of traditional Chinese medicine[10].

6 Conclusions

Professor Li Qi's treatment of CRF with the "Harmonizing Method" as the core has preliminarily established a therapeutic system centered on the spleen and stomach in the middle jiao, regulating the balance of qi, blood, yin, and yang throughout the body. This system takes "harmonization" as its fundamental therapeutic approach and restoring the body's state of "equilibrium" as its ultimate goal, embodying the core TCM principle of "treating disease by seeking the root"[11]. The distinctive feature of this academic thought lies in its departure from the local perspective of merely "treating the kidney", instead adopting a holistic view based on the "middle jiao—qi movement—whole body" axis, thereby offering a systematic treatment strategy for the complex disease of CRF.

In summary, treating CRF with the "Harmonizing Method" holds certain clinical guiding significance and provides valuable exploration and reflection for the prevention and treatment of CRF. In the future, rigorously designed clinical studies should be conducted to further verify its efficacy, and in-depth investigations should be carried out to explore its scientific connotations in regulating metabolism, improving micro-inflammation and nutritional status, and other aspects, so as to lay a more solid scientific foundation for improving clinical symptoms and enhancing the quality of life of CRF patients.

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