

# Disorders of the Liver and Gallbladder

By Dr (TCM) Attilio D'Alberto, drawing on the classical TCM literature

**In Chinese medicine (TCM), the Liver ensures the smooth flow of qi throughout the body, stores blood, controls the sinews and houses the Hun (ethereal soul); the Gallbladder stores and excretes bile, governs decisiveness and shares the regulation of sinews.** Together they form the Wood-element pair. Disorders of the Liver and Gallbladder are at the root of a huge proportion of clinical presentations in TCM — the stress-related, the menstrual, the migrainous, the dermatological, the digestive interactions and the emotional disturbances all pass through this organ pair. This article presents the classical pattern differentiation and herbal treatment strategies for Liver and Gallbladder disorders, drawing on the *Nei Jing*, the *Shang Han Lun*, the works of Li Dong-Yuan, Zhu Dan-Xi, Ye Tian-Shi, Wang Qing-Ren and Tang Rong-Chuan.

## Top Chinese herbs for the Liver

The most clinically important Chinese herbs for the Liver and Gallbladder are:

1. **Chai Hu** (Bupleurum) — the principal herb for soothing the Liver and resolving Liver Qi stagnation; the emperor herb of Xiao Yao San and Xiao Chai Hu Tang
2. **Bai Shao** (White Peony) — nourishes Liver blood, softens the Liver and astringes Liver yin; pairs with Chai Hu in almost every Liver formula
3. **Dang Gui** (Angelica sinensis) — nourishes and moves Liver blood; the principal herb for Liver blood deficiency and menstrual disorders
4. **Gou Qi Zi** (Goji berry) — nourishes Liver yin and blood, brightens the eyes; food-grade, suitable for long-term use
5. **Ju Hua** (Chrysanthemum flower) — clears Liver heat, calms Liver yang and benefits the eyes
6. **Xiang Fu** (Cyperus) — the “commander of qi”; soothes Liver qi and regulates menstruation
7. **Yu Jin** (Curcuma tuber) — moves Liver qi and blood, clears Liver heat, opens the Pericardium
8. **Long Dan Cao** (Chinese gentian root) — powerfully drains Liver and Gallbladder fire and Damp-Heat
9. **Yin Chen** (Capillaris) — the principal herb for Liver-Gallbladder Damp-Heat and jaundice
10. **Gou Teng** (Uncaria stem) — extinguishes Liver wind and calms Liver yang rising
11. **Tian Ma** (Gastrodia tuber) — the principal herb for internal Liver wind; treats dizziness, vertigo and tremor
12. **Wu Zhu Yu** (Evodia fruit) — warms the Liver channel and disperses cold in the Liver and Stomach; the principal herb for cold-stagnation Liver headaches

These herbs are combined into the classical formulas Xiao Yao San (Free and Easy Wanderer) for Liver Qi stagnation with Spleen weakness, Jia Wei Xiao Yao San (Augmented Free and Easy Wanderer) when Liver fire is also present, Long Dan Xie Gan Tang (Gentian Drain the Liver Decoction) for Liver and Gallbladder Damp-Heat or Fire, Yi Guan Jian (Linking Decoction) for Liver Yin deficiency, Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin for

Liver Wind from Liver Yang rising, and Wen Dan Tang (Warm the Gallbladder Decoction) for Phlegm-Heat harassing the Gallbladder. A qualified Chinese herbalist selects and modifies these formulas based on each patient's individual pattern.

## Liver functions: the General of the organs

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In the *Su Wen*, Chapter 8, the Liver is described as “the General from whom strategy is derived” (*jiang jun zhi guan, mou lu chu yan*). This military metaphor captures the Liver's defining role: it does not store food (the Spleen's role) or breathe air (the Lung's) — it organises, deploys, and adjusts. The Liver governs the smooth flow of qi (*shu xie*) throughout the body, stores blood, controls the sinews, opens into the eyes, manifests in the nails and houses the Hun (ethereal soul). Each of these functions can fail in characteristic ways, producing the great cluster of clinical Liver patterns.

### Smoothing the flow of qi (shu xie)

The Liver's most clinically significant function is to ensure the free, smooth, unrestrained flow of qi through every channel and organ. When this function is intact, the patient feels emotionally even, digests well, menstruates regularly, sleeps soundly and moves without stiffness. When it falters — usually under sustained emotional pressure — the resulting *Liver Qi stagnation* is perhaps the most common single TCM pattern encountered in modern Western practice. The classical text *Sheng Ji Zong Lu* (Imperial Grace Formulary of the Tai-Ping Era) records that “when the Liver loses its smooth movement, the hundred channels become disordered”. The downstream effects reach every organ: stagnant Liver qi invades the Spleen (causing IBS-type bloating, alternating bowels, fatigue after eating); rebels upward into the Stomach (causing acid reflux, nausea, epigastric pain); compresses the chest (causing the classical “plum-stone” throat sensation, sighing, chest tightness); blocks the Lower Jiao (causing PMS, breast tenderness, irregular menses, dysmenorrhoea); and, over time, transforms into heat or fire.

### Storing the blood

The Liver acts as the body's blood reservoir. The classical text *Su Wen*, Chapter 10, states that “when a person lies down, blood returns to the Liver; when blood returns to the Liver, the eyes can see; when the feet receive blood, they can walk; when the palms receive blood, they can grasp; when the fingers receive blood, they can hold”. The Liver releases blood to the organs and tissues when they are active and reclaims it during rest. Failure of this function produces two characteristic patterns: *Liver blood deficiency*, in which the Liver itself does not hold enough blood (manifesting as scanty pale menses, dry brittle nails, blurred vision, floaters, muscle cramps, insomnia with vivid dreams of being chased); and *Liver blood stasis*, in which the blood becomes congealed and unmoving (manifesting as fixed sharp menstrual pain, dark menstrual clots, palpable abdominal masses, and the dark purple tongue with purple lines underneath that any experienced practitioner recognises immediately).

### Controlling the sinews and manifesting in the nails

The Liver nourishes the sinews (*jin*) — the tendons, ligaments and fascial sheets that connect muscles and allow controlled movement. When the Liver fails in this function, the patient experiences muscle and tendon stiffness, cramping, weakness, tremor and the characteristic morning stiffness that eases with movement. The nails are described as “the surplus of the sinews”: brittle, ridged, pale or thin nails are an outward sign of

Liver blood deficiency. In children and the elderly, frank Liver wind — the more extreme form of sinew disturbance — produces tremors, convulsions, twitches and tics, treated with the wind-extinguishing formula Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin.

### Opening into the eyes

The *Ling Shu*, Chapter 80, describes the Liver as “opening into the eyes”. The Liver channel rises through the head to terminate at the eyes, and the visual quality available to a person is in TCM theory a direct readout of Liver blood and yin. Liver blood deficiency produces dryness, floaters, blurred vision, night blindness and the worsening of focus during the menstrual period (when blood is being lost). Liver fire and Liver yang rising produce red, dry, burning eyes; conjunctivitis; uveitis; sudden angle-closure glaucoma; and the typical photophobia of acute migraine. The herb Ju Hua (Chrysanthemum) is the principal herb that treats the Liver via the eyes, paired with Gou Qi Zi in Qi Ju Di Huang Wan for chronic Liver yin deficiency presenting in the eyes.

### Housing the Hun

The Hun (魂, ethereal soul) is one of the five spiritual aspects (*wu shen*); it resides in the Liver and depends on Liver blood and yin for stability. When the Liver is in good condition, the Hun is “anchored”: the patient sleeps soundly, dreams calmly, has a steady sense of purpose and direction, and tolerates ambiguity. When Liver blood is deficient and Liver yin is empty, the Hun is “unanchored” (*hun bu shou she*): the patient experiences restless sleep, vivid recurring dreams, sleep-walking and sleep-talking, dissociation, a sense of being “not present”, and creative or visionary states that border on the destabilising. The formula Suan Zao Ren Tang (Sour Jujube Decoction) is the classical formula for an unsettled Hun causing insomnia in Liver blood-yin deficient patterns.

## Gallbladder functions: the Upright Official

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The *Su Wen* describes the Gallbladder as “the Upright Official who takes decisions” (*zhong zheng zhi guan, jue duan chu yan*). The Gallbladder shares the Wood element with the Liver and pairs with it as a Yin-Yang couple. Uniquely among the Fu organs, the Gallbladder stores a clear, pure substance (bile) rather than turbid waste, which is why classical texts include the Gallbladder among the six “extraordinary organs” (*qi heng zhi fu*) alongside the brain, marrow, bones, blood vessels and uterus.

### Storing and excreting bile

The Liver manufactures bile (*dan zhi*); the Gallbladder stores it; on the signal of digestive readiness, the Gallbladder releases bile into the Small Intestine. When Liver qi stagnates, this release becomes uneven; when Liver-Gallbladder Damp-Heat develops, bile becomes thickened and stagnant (the TCM explanation of cholelithiasis); when Liver-Gallbladder fire is severe, the bile overflows and produces jaundice (*huang dan*). Jaundice has been recognised in classical Chinese medicine since the *Shang Han Lun*, where Zhang Zhongjing classifies it into Yang Jaundice (Damp-Heat, treated with Yin Chen Hao Tang) and Yin Jaundice (Cold-Damp, treated with Yin Chen Wu Ling San).

### Governing decisiveness and courage

The Gallbladder governs decisiveness (*jue duan*) and courage. The classical “timid Gallbladder” pattern (*dan qie*) presents as a person who startles easily, finds decisions agonising, second-guesses everything, sleeps badly with frequent disturbing dreams of being chased or attacked, and tends toward chronic anxiety. The

herb Suan Zao Ren nourishes the Gallbladder; the formula Wen Dan Tang (Warm the Gallbladder Decoction) is the classical prescription where timidity coexists with phlegm and minor heat — classically described as the formula for “people who startle at small noises and dream of pursuit”.

## Controlling the sinews with the Liver

The Gallbladder shares with the Liver the responsibility for sinew suppleness and the smooth operation of the joints. The Gallbladder channel runs from the outer corner of the eye, around the head and ear, down the lateral neck and trunk, over the hip (at the famous point GB 30 Huantiao), down the lateral leg to the fourth toe — one of the longest channels in the body. Disorders along this pathway present as one-sided migraine (the classical Shao Yang headache pattern), lateral neck and shoulder tension, hip pain, sciatica down the lateral leg, and lateral knee disorders. The point GB 34 Yanglingquan is the Influential Point of the Sinews (*jin hui*) and treats virtually any tendinous or musculoskeletal problem.

## Liver Qi stagnation: the gateway pattern

Liver Qi stagnation (*gan qi yu jie*) is the single most commonly diagnosed Liver pattern in contemporary clinical practice and is the gateway through which a large fraction of all internal medicine disorders enter. Sustained emotional pressure — frustration, suppressed anger, the chronic low-grade tension of modern life — impairs the Liver’s smoothing function. Symptoms include irritability, sighing, frequent emotional flatness alternating with sudden anger, a sense of internal pressure with no clear source, hypochondriac fullness or pain, breast tenderness particularly premenstrually, the “plum-stone” throat sensation (a feeling as of a lump that cannot be swallowed or coughed up), PMS, dysmenorrhoea with clotted dark menstrual blood, and irregular menstrual cycles. The pulse is wiry, particularly in the left guan position (Liver position); the tongue may be near-normal or have slightly purple edges.

**Treatment strategy:** Soothe the Liver and regulate qi (*shu gan li qi*). The foundational formula is Xiao Yao San (Free and Easy Wanderer), credited to the *Tai Ping Hui Min He Ji Ju Fang* (Imperial Grace Formulary of the Tai-Ping Era, 1078 CE), which combines Chai Hu (Bupleurum) and Bai Shao (White Peony) to soothe the Liver, Dang Gui (Angelica) to nourish Liver blood, and Bai Zhu + Fu Ling + Gan Cao to strengthen the Spleen against the encroaching Liver qi. The acupuncture points LV 3 (Taichong), LV 14 (Qimen), and GB 34 (Yanglingquan) are the standard combination for Liver Qi stagnation.

Where Liver qi stagnation has begun to transform into heat (the *hua re* stage — with red eyes, irritability, bitter taste, restless sleep, dark scanty urine), shift to Jia Wei Xiao Yao San (Augmented Free and Easy Wanderer), adding Zhi Zi (Gardenia fruit) and Mu Dan Pi (Moutan bark) to clear the developing heat. Where the stagnation has manifested in the chest as oppressive constraint, plum-stone throat or palpitations, add Ban Xia Hou Po Tang (Pinellia and Magnolia Decoction) — the classical formula recorded in Zhang Zhongjing’s *Jin Gui Yao Lue* as the treatment for “the sensation of roasted meat stuck in the throat”.

Where the Liver qi has invaded the Stomach (Liver overacting on Earth) with acid reflux, nausea, epigastric pain, frequent belching and a wiry pulse, use Si Ni San (Frigid Extremities Powder) from the *Shang Han Lun* as the framework, often combined with Zuo Jin Wan (Left Metal Pill) — the famous Huang Lian / Wu Zhu Yu pair credited to Zhu Dan-Xi for Liver Fire invading the Stomach with acid regurgitation. Add Hai Piao Xiao (cuttlebone) for acid neutralisation if necessary. Where the Liver qi has invaded the Spleen with pre-defecation lower abdominal pain, urgency, looser stools that relieve the pain (the classical *Tong Xie* pattern), the prescription is Tong Xie Yao Fang (Important Formula for Painful Diarrhoea) — recorded in *Jing Yue*

*Quan Shu* by the Ming-dynasty physician Zhang Jing-Yue. Bai Shao softens the Liver, Bai Zhu strengthens the Spleen, Chen Pi regulates qi, and Fang Feng acts as a wind herb to disperse stagnation and ascend Spleen qi.

## Liver Fire blazing upwards

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When Liver Qi stagnation transforms into heat over a prolonged period — or when constitutional Yang excess meets emotional provocation — the result is Liver Fire blazing upwards (*gan huo shang yan*). This is an excess pattern, dramatic in presentation. Symptoms include sudden severe headache (typically temporal or vertex), red eyes, tinnitus with a sudden loud roaring quality, deafness of acute onset, marked irritability and outbursts of anger, restless sleep with vivid disturbing dreams, dry mouth, bitter taste, thirst for cold drinks, constipation with dry stools, dark scanty urine, sometimes nosebleeds or coughing of blood (the Liver fire scorching the Lung and damaging vessels). The tongue is red with a yellow coating, particularly on the sides; the pulse is wiry, rapid and full, particularly in the Liver position.

**Treatment strategy:** Drain Liver Fire (*qing gan xie huo*). The defining formula is Long Dan Xie Gan Tang (Gentian Drain the Liver Decoction), credited to the *Yi Fang Ji Jie* by Wang Ang. Long Dan Cao (Gentian root) acts as emperor herb; Huang Qin (Skullcap root) and Zhi Zi (Gardenia fruit) reinforce the heat-clearing; Mu Tong, Ze Xie and Che Qian Zi guide the fire down and out through the urinary route; Dang Gui and Sheng Di Huang protect the Liver blood and yin from the draining action; Chai Hu guides the formula to the Liver channel; Gan Cao harmonises. The Qing-dynasty physician Ye Tian-Shi noted that Long Dan Xie Gan Tang is “a powerful sword that cuts through the heat, but should not be used long-term lest it injure the Stomach yin.” The acupuncture combination LV 2 (Xingjian), the Fire (drainage) point of the Liver channel, plus GB 43 (Xiashi), the Water (drainage) point of the Gallbladder, is the corresponding acupuncture treatment.

Where the Liver Fire has scorched the Stomach with severe acid reflux and burning epigastric pain, add Zuo Jin Wan. Where it has caused nosebleeds (epistaxis), add Bai Mao Gen (Imperata root) and Ce Bai Ye (Biota leaves) to cool the blood. Where Liver Fire has overflowed into the Heart producing severe insomnia with manic features, switch the strategy to draining Heart and Liver fire together with the formula Zhu Sha An Shen Wan — though Prof. D’Alberto’s clinic uses plant-only substitutes for the cinnabar (Zhu Sha) component on patient-safety and conservation grounds. Where the patient develops the classical “four major signs” of Liver Fire (acute red eye, bitter taste, deaf ear, severe headache), Long Dan Xie Gan Tang is the treatment of first choice.

## Liver Yang rising

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Liver Yang rising (*gan yang shang kang*) is a deficiency-and-excess mixed pattern: a deficiency of Liver Yin or Kidney Yin below allows the Liver Yang to rise unrestrained. It is the classical TCM picture of essential hypertension, particularly in the perimenopausal and post-menopausal patient. Symptoms include throbbing temporal or vertex headache, dizziness with a sense of floatation, tinnitus with a high-pitched ringing, tightness in the neck and shoulders, blurred vision, intermittent flushing, irritability that flares quickly and subsides, insomnia with vivid dreams, dry mouth at night, hot flushes and sweats, hot sensations in the palms and soles (the “five-centre heat” sign of yin deficiency), constipation with dry stools, and

frequently low back ache (reflecting the underlying Kidney yin deficiency). The tongue is typically red, particularly at the tip and sides, with little coating or a peeled coating in patches; the pulse is wiry but thready or empty when pressed.

**Treatment strategy:** Subdue Liver Yang and nourish Liver and Kidney Yin (*ping gan qian yang, zi yin xi feng*). The foundational formula is Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin, a relatively modern formula (1950s, by Hu Guangci, *Za Bing Zheng Zhi Xin Yi*) but built entirely on classical principles. Tian Ma (Gastrodia) and Gou Teng (Uncaria) extinguish Liver wind and calm the Yang; Shi Jue Ming (Abalone shell) and Zhi Zi + Huang Qin clear Liver heat; Niu Xi directs the blood downward; Du Zhong + Sang Ji Sheng tonify the Kidney and lower back; Yi Mu Cao moves blood and promotes diuresis. For more severe Liver Yang rising with marked Kidney Yin deficiency, switch to *Zhen Gan Xi Feng Tang* (Sedate the Liver and Extinguish Wind Decoction) recorded in Zhang Xichun's *Yi Xue Zhong Zhong Can Xi Lu* (Records of Heart-felt Experiences in Medicine with Reference to the West, early 20th century) — one of the great formulas of late-classical TCM, designed for the hypertensive crisis with imminent stroke.

The acupuncture combination LV 3 (Taichong), LV 2 (Xingjian), GB 20 (Fengchi), GV 20 (Baihui) and KD 3 (Taixi) addresses both axes — the rising Yang above and the deficient Yin root below. GB 20 is the principal point for headaches of Liver Yang rising and is reached for in essentially every clinical treatment of essential hypertension, migraine, vertigo and tension headache.

## Internal Liver Wind stirring

Internal Liver Wind (*gan feng nei dong*) is the extreme end of the Liver-disturbance spectrum. Where Liver Yang rising produces dizziness and headache, internal Liver Wind produces convulsions, tremor, twitching, deviation of the mouth and eye, sudden loss of consciousness, hemiplegia, stiffness of the neck, opisthotonos, and the catastrophic presentations of stroke and seizure. The *Su Wen*, Chapter 74, states succinctly: “Wind disorders that present with sudden vertigo, rigidity and tremor all belong to the Liver” (*zhu feng zhang xuan, jie shu yu gan*). Internal Liver Wind has four common aetiologies:

1. **Extreme Heat generating Wind** (*re ji sheng feng*) — high fever causing convulsions, particularly in children. The classical formula is Ling Jiao Gou Teng Tang, recorded by Yu Gen-Chu, which clears extreme heat from the Liver channel and extinguishes wind.
2. **Liver Yang transforming into Wind** (*gan yang hua feng*) — the gradual escalation of chronic Liver Yang rising into Wind, producing the classical “stroke from internal wind” (*zhong feng*). Treatment uses *Zhen Gan Xi Feng Tang* in the prevention stage and Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin in the recovery stage.
3. **Blood deficiency generating Wind** (*xue xu sheng feng*) — the “wind” that appears when blood is too deficient to nourish the sinews. Manifests as mild tremor, twitching of muscles (particularly eyelids), tics, restless legs, peripheral numbness. Treated by nourishing blood with *Si Wu Tang* plus wind-extinguishing herbs.
4. **Yin deficiency generating Wind** (*yin xu dong feng*) — appears in late-stage febrile disease where the heat has consumed the body fluids, leaving wind to stir. Treated with Da Ding Feng Zhu (Great Wind-Settling Pearl) from Wu Jutong's *Wen Bing Tiao Bian*.

The treatment of acute stroke and acute seizure in modern TCM practice is properly integrative: the patient is managed in hospital with conventional care, and TCM acupuncture and herbs support recovery in the post-acute phase. The combination LV 3, GV 20, PC 6 and the wells of all fingers (Shi Xuan) is used in scalp

and body acupuncture protocols for post-stroke rehabilitation; the formula Bu Yang Huan Wu Tang (Tonify the Yang to Restore Five-Tenths Decoction) by Wang Qing-Ren is the principal post-stroke restoration formula.

## Liver Blood deficiency

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Liver Blood deficiency (*gan xue xu*) is the inverse of Liver excess patterns and is particularly common in menstruating and post-partum women, in patients with chronic blood loss, in the elderly and in those with chronic illness. The Liver is the “blood reservoir”; when the reservoir empties, the consequences appear across every function the Liver-blood supports. Symptoms include pallor (especially of lips, nail beds, conjunctiva), dizziness on standing, blurred vision and floaters, dry brittle nails, dry skin and hair, scanty pale or absent menses (the cardinal sign in women), insomnia with vivid dreams, irritability without obvious cause, muscle cramping (particularly at night and during the second half of the menstrual cycle), tingling and numbness of the extremities, peripheral tremor, and the classical “dream of being chased but unable to run” that signals Hun disturbance. The tongue is pale, thin and dry, particularly on the sides; the pulse is wiry but thready.

**Treatment strategy:** Nourish Liver Blood (*yang gan xue*). The foundational formula is Si Wu Tang (Four-Substance Decoction) from the *Tai Ping Hui Min He Ji Ju Fang*, combining Shu Di Huang (cooked Rehmannia) as emperor, Dang Gui (Angelica) and Bai Shao (White Peony) to nourish and move blood, and Chuan Xiong (Szechuan lovage) to ensure blood moves rather than congeals. Si Wu Tang is the great mother of women’s formulas and underlies the gynaecological practice of every classical school. For severe Liver Blood deficiency with Qi deficiency, expand to Ba Zhen Tang (Eight-Treasure Decoction), which adds the Si Jun Zi Tang base to Si Wu Tang. Where the Liver blood deficiency is causing the Hun to be unsettled with insomnia, use Suan Zao Ren Tang from Zhang Zhongjing’s *Jin Gui Yao Lue*: Suan Zao Ren (Sour Jujube) nourishes the Liver and Heart blood and calms the Hun and Shen; Zhi Mu (Anemarrhena) clears the mild heat that emerges in blood-deficient insomnia; Chuan Xiong moves; Fu Ling calms the Shen; Gan Cao harmonises.

The acupuncture points LV 8 (Ququan) — the He-Sea (Water) point that nourishes Liver blood and yin — combined with SP 6 (Sanyinjiao), BL 17 (Geshu) (the Influential Point of Blood), BL 18 (Ganshu) (Liver Back-Shu) and SP 10 (Xuehai) (“Sea of Blood”) are the standard combination for Liver Blood deficiency.

## Liver Yin deficiency

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Liver Yin deficiency (*gan yin xu*) is a deeper depletion than Liver Blood deficiency — not merely a shortage of the body’s blood, but a depletion of the cooling, moistening, anchoring substance underneath. It is the typical TCM picture of the perimenopausal patient, the chronically stressed and sleep-deprived patient, the patient with chronic auto-immune dryness syndromes (Sjögren’s, lupus), and the patient who has been over-medicated with warming herbs or stimulants. Symptoms include dry red eyes, dry mouth at night, dry vagina, dry skin, hot palms and soles, low-grade afternoon and night fevers, night sweats, insomnia with restless sleep, irritability that emerges in evening, mood lability, low back ache (because Kidney Yin is usually also depleted), brittle nails, hot flushes, and the classical sense that there is “no anchor” for either physical or emotional rest. The tongue is red, thin, dry and may have cracks particularly on the sides; the coating is scanty or peeled in patches (the “mirror tongue”); the pulse is wiry, thready and rapid.

**Treatment strategy:** Nourish Liver Yin (*zi yang gan yin*). The classical formula is Yi Guan Jian (Linking Decoction) from the *Liu Zhou Yi Hua* by the Qing-dynasty physician Wei Yu-Huang, which uses Sheng Di Huang + Gou Qi Zi + Sha Shen + Mai Men Dong + Dang Gui to nourish Liver and Kidney yin, with a small dose of Chuan Lian Zi to gently move qi without injuring the yin. Where Liver Yin deficiency coexists with severe Kidney Yin deficiency, expand to Liu Wei Di Huang Wan + Yi Guan Jian, or specifically to Qi Ju Di Huang Wan (Liu Wei Di Huang Wan + Gou Qi Zi + Ju Hua), which targets Liver yin deficiency presenting in the eyes.

The acupuncture combination LV 8 (Ququan), KD 3 (Taixi), SP 6 (Sanyinjiao), CV 4 (Guanyuan) and BL 18 (Ganshu) nourishes the Liver-Kidney Yin axis. Moxibustion is contraindicated; needle manipulation should be light and slow.

## Liver Blood stasis

Liver Blood stasis (*gan yu xue*) develops out of chronic Liver Qi stagnation (since Qi is the commander of Blood, prolonged Qi stagnation eventually causes Blood stasis), out of severe trauma, out of cold invading the Liver channel, and out of the late phase of any condition that affects the lower abdomen. Symptoms include fixed sharp stabbing pain in the hypochondrium or lower abdomen, palpable masses (the TCM picture in uterine fibroids, ovarian cysts, hepatic cirrhosis and benign hepatic tumours), heavy dark menses with large clots, painful intercourse, painful menstruation that is sharp and stabbing (different from the dull, dragging quality of qi stagnation pain), dark purple or red-purple complexion, dark veins under the tongue (sublingual varicosities), and the classical “purple lips and tongue” that any experienced TCM practitioner identifies in a few seconds. The pulse is wiry and choppy.

**Treatment strategy:** Move Liver Blood and resolve stasis (*huo xue hua yu*). The defining formula is Xue Fu Zhu Yu Tang (Drive Out Stasis in the Mansion of Blood) by the Qing-dynasty Wang Qing-Ren, recorded in his *Yi Lin Gai Cuo* (Correction of Errors in the Forest of Medicine). Wang Qing-Ren systematically created a set of regionally-targeted blood-stasis formulas based on his unusual practice of correlating clinical observation with anatomical observation in the cadavers of executed prisoners and unburied dead. Xue Fu Zhu Yu Tang treats Blood stasis in the chest and Liver area; Ge Xia Zhu Yu Tang treats Blood stasis below the diaphragm (Liver area, fibroids, hepatic masses); Shao Fu Zhu Yu Tang treats blood stasis in the Lower Jiao with cold (severe dysmenorrhoea, endometriosis); Tong Qiao Huo Xue Tang treats blood stasis in the upper orifices (chronic headache, migraine, deafness from stroke). All build on a core of Tao Ren (Peach kernel), Hong Hua (Safflower), Dang Gui, Chuan Xiong and Chi Shao.

For chronic Liver Blood stasis with palpable hepatic enlargement (Tang Rong-Chuan’s classical picture of cirrhosis), combine the blood-moving formula with Bie Jia (Turtle shell) and Mu Li (Oyster shell) to soften hardness. Tang Rong-Chuan, in *Xue Zheng Lun* (Treatise on Blood Disorders, 1884), set out a complete classification of blood disorders that remains the foundation of modern TCM haematology teaching. The acupuncture points BL 17 (Geshu, Influential Point of Blood), SP 10 (Xuehai, Sea of Blood), LV 3 (Taichong) and SP 6 (Sanyinjiao) are the principal acupuncture combination.

## Cold stagnating in the Liver channel

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Cold stagnating in the Liver channel (*han zhi gan mai*) is a less common but clinically important pattern, particularly in patients with constitutional cold and in conditions affecting the genitourinary system. The Liver channel runs through the genitals (encircling them in classical descriptions), and cold lodged in this part of the channel produces the classical Shao Jue / Han Shan presentations: testicular pain or retraction, scrotal cold, hernial pain, lower abdominal cold pain that is improved by warmth and pressure, painful menses with very dark almost black clots, dyspareunia, and the cold extremities of *han jue*. The tongue is pale and moist with a white coating; the pulse is wiry, deep and slow.

**Treatment strategy:** Warm the Liver channel and disperse cold (*nuan gan san han*). The defining formula is Wu Zhu Yu Tang from Zhang Zhongjing's *Shang Han Lun*, which uses Wu Zhu Yu (Evodia fruit) as emperor herb to warm the Liver and Stomach and disperse cold; Ren Shen (Ginseng) or Dang Shen to tonify the Stomach qi; Sheng Jiang and Da Zao to harmonise the Middle Jiao. Wu Zhu Yu Tang is the classical formula for the Jue Yin headache (vertex headache with vomiting of clear fluid — the so-called “migraine pattern” of severe vertex pain with nausea that flares with cold weather). For hernial pain, combine with Tian Tai Wu Yao San, which contains Xiao Hui Xiang (Fennel) and Wu Yao to warm the Liver channel directly. Moxibustion at LV 1 (Dadun) and CV 4 (Guanyuan) is highly effective.

## Liver and Spleen disharmony

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According to wu xing theory, the Liver is wood and the Spleen is earth; wood acts on earth through what is properly called *ke* (control). When the Liver becomes excessive or stagnant, it goes from controlling to over-controlling (*cheng*) — what classical texts call “Wood exploiting Earth” (*mu sheng tu*). This is one of the most common combined patterns in clinical practice and underlies the great majority of functional digestive presentations: IBS, functional dyspepsia, the alternating bowel pattern, post-prandial fatigue and bloating, and the chronic interaction between stress and digestion.

The pattern presents differently depending on whether the Liver is in excess or the Spleen is deficient:

**Liver Qi excess invading the Spleen:** The Liver qi excess is the leading factor; the Spleen is relatively normal but is being attacked. Symptoms include marked hypochondriac pain or fullness, irritability, abdominal distension that worsens with stress, bowel disturbance (typically diarrhoea with cramping that resolves with defecation — the classic Tong Xie pattern), wiry pulse. Treatment soothes the Liver first, then strengthens the Spleen. Use Tong Xie Yao Fang (Important Formula for Painful Diarrhoea) where the bowel features dominate; Xiao Yao San where the emotional and menstrual features dominate.

**Spleen deficiency allowing Liver Qi to encroach:** The Spleen is constitutionally weak; even normal Liver qi feels excessive against it. Symptoms include severe fatigue, post-prandial bloating and sleepiness, loose stools, pale complexion, breathlessness on exertion, and a milder degree of emotional / hypochondriac symptoms than the first variant. Treatment tonifies the Spleen first, then soothes the Liver gently. Use Xiang Sha Liu Jun Zi Tang as the base; add Chai Hu and Bai Shao. The Ming-dynasty physician Zhang Jing-Yue, in *Jing Yue Quan Shu*, emphasised that “in chronic disorders of the Spleen that involve the Liver, the practitioner must understand whether to attack the Liver or to support the Spleen; misjudging this is the source of failed treatment”.

**Liver Fire invading the Stomach with acid reflux:** When the Liver qi has transformed into heat and is invading the Stomach upward, the symptoms include severe acid reflux, burning epigastric pain, sour belching, irritability, bitter taste and dark scanty urine. The defining formula is Zuo Jin Wan (Left Metal Pill), credited to Zhu Dan-Xi, which uses just two herbs: Huang Lian (Coptis) in 6:1 ratio with Wu Zhu Yu (Evodia). The Huang Lian drains the Liver fire; the small amount of Wu Zhu Yu prevents the cold from injuring the Stomach yang and guides the formula into the Liver channel. Wang Xu-Gao, in his Qing-dynasty *Liu Pang Yi Hua*, wrote: “The use of bitter, pungent and sour herbs together can disperse Liver fire and inhibit its invasion into the Stomach”.

## Liver and Kidney: water nourishing wood

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The Liver and Kidney are described in classical TCM as having a “mother-son” relationship in the engendering cycle (Water generates Wood) and as having a unified yin axis — the Liver and Kidney share yin (*gan shen tong yuan*, “the Liver and Kidney share the same source”, recorded by Zhang Jing-Yue). In practice this means that:

1. Severe or chronic Liver Yin deficiency almost always involves Kidney Yin deficiency, and vice versa
2. The classical treatment of Liver Yin deficiency therefore nourishes Liver and Kidney Yin together
3. Liver Yang rising, internal Liver Wind and the late-stage degenerative conditions of TCM all sit within this combined deficiency framework

The defining formula for Liver-Kidney Yin deficiency is Liu Wei Di Huang Wan (Six-Ingredient Pill with Rehmannia), originally created by Qian Yi (Northern Song dynasty) as a paediatric formula for delayed development. It became the master formula of Chinese yin tonification and is the parent of an entire family of variations: Qi Ju Di Huang Wan (+ Gou Qi Zi + Ju Hua, for Liver yin with eye symptoms), Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan (+ Zhi Mu + Huang Bai, for Yin deficiency with empty heat), Mai Wei Di Huang Wan (+ Mai Men Dong + Wu Wei Zi, for Yin deficiency with Lung dryness), and Du Qi Wan (+ Wu Wei Zi alone, for the very elderly). The acupuncture combination LV 8 + KD 3 + KD 6 + SP 6 + CV 4 reinforces the same axis through the channels.

## Liver and Lung: metal controlling wood

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In the controlling cycle, Metal (Lung) controls Wood (Liver). When the Liver becomes excessive and Liver fire rebels upward, it can scorch the Lung — the classical “Wood insulting Metal” (*mu wu jin*) or “Liver fire scorching the Lung” (*gan huo fan fei*) pattern. Symptoms include sudden coughing of blood (haemoptysis), severe productive cough triggered by anger, irritable cough that worsens with stress, fullness in the chest and right hypochondrium, bitter taste, irritability and a wiry rapid pulse. The classical formula is Dai Ge San (clam shell powder, with Indigo) or Xie Bai San (Drain the White Powder) combined with Liver fire-clearing herbs. Conversely, when Lung qi is very weak it can fail to control the Liver, allowing Liver yang to rise unchecked — one of the explanations of the high prevalence of stress-related symptoms in patients with chronic respiratory disease.

## Liver and Heart: wood feeding fire

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In the engendering cycle, Wood (Liver) generates Fire (Heart). When the Liver is in good condition, it nourishes the Heart blood and yin and supports the Shen. When Liver Qi stagnates and transforms into fire, the Liver fire can ignite Heart fire, producing the “dual blazing” pattern of severe insomnia, irritability and manic features. When Liver Blood is deficient, it fails to nourish the Heart, producing the “Heart-Liver blood deficiency” pattern of palpitations, insomnia, vivid dreams, poor concentration and emotional flatness with intermittent irritability. The treatment uses Gui Pi Tang (Restore the Spleen Decoction) — despite its name, this formula nourishes Heart and Liver blood through the Spleen as the source, and is the principal formula for Heart-Liver blood deficiency with insomnia, palpitations, anxiety and post-natal depression.

## Damp-Heat in the Liver and Gallbladder

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Damp-Heat in the Liver and Gallbladder (*gan dan shi re*) is the principal TCM pattern in gallstones, cholecystitis, hepatitis, chronic urinary tract infection in men, pelvic inflammatory disease in women, and the various oily skin / oily scalp / itching anus / itching genitals presentations. The Liver-Gallbladder channel pathway and function mean that Damp-Heat lodged here produces symptoms primarily in the right hypochondrium and the lower body. Symptoms include right-sided hypochondriac pain or fullness (which may radiate to the right shoulder — the classical referred pain of cholecystitis), nausea, vomiting, bitter taste, foul greasy stools, dark scanty urine, jaundice (in severe cases), oily skin and hair, pruritus ani or vulvae, scrotal eczema or swelling, foul vaginal discharge in women, and irritability. The tongue has a yellow greasy coating; the pulse is wiry, slippery and rapid.

**Treatment strategy:** Clear Liver-Gallbladder Damp-Heat (*qing li gan dan shi re*). The principal formula remains Long Dan Xie Gan Tang, which addresses both the fire and the damp through its full ingredient list. For jaundice, the defining formula is Yin Chen Hao Tang from Zhang Zhongjing’s *Shang Han Lun*: Yin Chen (Capillaris) is the emperor herb for jaundice and the leading herb of the formula; Zhi Zi and Da Huang support it by clearing heat and moving the bowels. For gallstones with acute symptoms, classical practice uses Da Chai Hu Tang (Major Bupleurum Decoction) from the *Shang Han Lun*, which combines the harmonising Chai Hu / Huang Qin axis with the strong purgation of Da Huang and Zhi Shi. Modern Chinese hospitals routinely use modifications of these formulas for acute cholecystitis and as adjunctive treatment for gallstones, with controlled clinical trial evidence supporting their use. For chronic genital Damp-Heat (chronic pelvic inflammatory disease, recurrent vaginal thrush, prostatitis), the formula Bi Xie Fen Qing Yin separates the clear from the turbid in the lower jiao and is the classical prescription.

The acupuncture combination LV 13 (Zhangmen), GB 24 (Riyue, Front-Mu of the Gallbladder), GB 34 (Yanglingquan), BL 19 (Danshu, Back-Shu of the Gallbladder) and the ear point Dan (Gallbladder) addresses Liver-Gallbladder Damp-Heat directly. Ear acupuncture is particularly effective in cholecystitis and biliary spasm.

## Gallbladder timid / Gallbladder qi deficiency

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The Gallbladder timid pattern (*dan qie*) is a peculiarly Chinese-medicine diagnostic category that has no direct Western equivalent. The Gallbladder governs the capacity to act decisively, to take action under pressure, to commit to a course. When this capacity is deficient, the patient presents with chronic anxiety, particularly with anticipatory features; difficulty making decisions of any kind; a tendency to second-guess

every action; sleep disturbance with frequent dreams of being chased, pursued, attacked or unable to find a way out; startling easily; physical sighing; and often a baseline of low confidence. The pulse is wiry but empty or slow; the tongue is normal or slightly pale.

**Treatment strategy:** Tonify the Gallbladder, calm the Hun (*bu dan ning hun*). The defining formula is Wen Dan Tang (Warm the Gallbladder Decoction), which despite its name does not warm the Gallbladder in a thermal sense but rather restores it to its proper warming function within the body. Wen Dan Tang is a member of the Er Chen Tang family and addresses the Phlegm-Heat that frequently complicates the Gallbladder timid pattern (the “mind clouded by phlegm” that often accompanies anxiety). Where the Gallbladder timidity is more straightforward and unmixed with phlegm, the formula An Shen Ding Zhi Wan tonifies the Heart and Gallbladder together. Where there is a frank phobic anxiety with palpitations, combine Wen Dan Tang with Gan Mai Da Zao Tang (Licorice, Wheat and Jujube Decoction) from Zhang Zhongjing’s *Jin Gui Yao Lue*. The acupuncture points GB 40 (Qiuxu, Yuan-source of the Gallbladder), BL 19 (Danshu), HT 7 (Shenmen), PC 6 (Neiguan) and Yintang are the standard combination.

## Phlegm-Heat harassing the Gallbladder

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Phlegm-Heat harassing the Gallbladder (*tan re rao dan*) is the more developed pattern where Phlegm has accumulated in the chest and Heat is generating from the Phlegm. Symptoms include vivid disturbing dreams with frequent waking, insomnia, palpitations, irritability, dizziness, nausea, a heavy sense of pressure in the chest, bitter taste, sticky mouth, restless agitation, and frequently chest pain or palpitations of psychogenic origin. The tongue is red with a yellow greasy coating; the pulse is wiry and slippery. The classical formula is Wen Dan Tang with the addition of Huang Lian and Zhi Zi for the heat (sometimes called “Huang Lian Wen Dan Tang”), or Chai Hu Jia Long Gu Mu Li Tang (Bupleurum plus Dragon Bone and Oyster Shell Decoction) from the *Shang Han Lun* — one of the most useful formulas for anxiety with prominent palpitations, sleep disturbance and irritability.

## Differentiating yin and yang patterns of the Liver

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In yin and yang theory, the Liver is yin zang but contains both yin and yang components: the substance, the storage of blood, the nourishment of the sinews are the Liver yin; the smoothing of qi, the rising movement, the emotional drive are the Liver yang. This duality means that Liver disorders almost always have a yin-yang component to their differentiation:

**Liver yang excess (rising or fire):** covered above. Characterised by upward and outward movement — headache, dizziness, irritability, red eyes, the “four great signs”. Treatment uses bitter cold herbs (Long Dan Cao, Huang Qin, Zhi Zi) to drain the fire; sour herbs (Bai Shao, Wu Mei) to soften the Liver; cool moist herbs (Sheng Di, Mai Men Dong) to nourish the yin underneath.

**Liver yin deficiency:** covered above. The defining substance deficiency — less common than Liver Qi stagnation but increasingly seen in stressed, peri-menopausal and chronically over-worked patients. Treatment nourishes Liver and Kidney yin together with sweet cool moist herbs.

**Liver yang deficiency:** a rare and somewhat controversial pattern in TCM — some schools recognise it, some do not. Where it is recognised, it presents as chronic depression with a flat affect, cold extremities, reduced libido, infertility from cold in the lower jiao, indecisiveness with timidity, and the absence of any of

the fire / heat features. Treatment combines warming Liver / Kidney yang herbs (Wu Zhu Yu, Rou Gui, Fu Zi) with Liver-channel guides (Chai Hu, Bai Shao).

**Liver blood deficiency:** covered above. The combined yin/blood deficiency that produces dry, scanty menses, brittle nails, blurred vision and unsettled Hun.

**Liver blood stasis:** covered above. The terminal yin pattern, where the yin/blood has become congealed and immobile.

## Differentiating hot and cold patterns of the Liver

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The Liver tendency is toward heat (because Wood generates Fire, and because chronic Liver qi stagnation almost universally transforms into heat over time). Cold patterns of the Liver are less common but clinically important when they occur.

**Liver heat / Liver fire:** covered above (Liver Fire blazing, Liver Yang rising). Use bitter cold herbs.

**Damp-Heat in Liver and Gallbladder:** covered above. Combines heat-clearing with damp-resolving.

**Cold stagnating in the Liver channel:** covered above. Use warming pungent herbs (Wu Zhu Yu, Xiao Hui Xiang, Wu Yao) with moxibustion to LV 1 and CV 4.

**Hot above and cold below:** a critically important pattern in chronic Liver disease, particularly in perimenopausal women. The Liver yang or Liver fire is rising upward producing hot flushes, red face, irritability, dry eyes, headache; meanwhile the Kidney yang is deficient below producing cold lower abdomen, low back ache, cold extremities, urinary frequency and nocturia. The diagnosis is tongue-confirmed: red tip, pale base, often with a thin yellow coating that becomes white toward the back. The treatment is the famous Jiao Tai Wan principle (re-establishing communication between Heart and Kidney) extended to Liver and Kidney — combining Long Dan Xie Gan Tang or Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin to address the Liver yang above with a low dose of Jin Gui Shen Qi Wan or Er Xian Tang to warm the Kidney below. This is one of the most challenging patterns in clinical TCM and requires careful titration of the warming-below to the cooling-above.

## Differentiating excess and deficiency

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The Liver, more than perhaps any other organ, expresses both excess and deficiency patterns and most clinical disorders involve some mixture of both.

**Pure Liver excess** — Liver Qi stagnation transforming into heat, Liver Fire blazing, Damp-Heat in Liver-Gallbladder, Cold stagnating in the Liver channel, Liver Blood stasis. All treated by clearing, draining, moving or warming the relevant excess. Symptoms tend to be acute, dramatic and short-lived.

**Pure Liver deficiency** — Liver Blood deficiency, Liver Yin deficiency, Liver Yang deficiency (rare). All treated by nourishing or warming the relevant deficiency. Symptoms tend to be chronic, low-grade, and worsen with depletion (over-work, late period, late stage of febrile illness).

**Combined excess and deficiency** (the more common presentation) — Liver Qi stagnation with Spleen Qi deficiency (treated with Xiao Yao San — the Chai Hu / Bai Shao soothes the Liver while the Bai Zhu / Fu Ling / Dang Gui supports the Spleen and blood); Liver Yang rising on a deficient Yin base (treated with Tian Ma

Gou Teng Yin — the Tian Ma / Gou Teng subdues the yang while the Du Zhong / Sang Ji Sheng / Niu Xi tonifies the Kidney); Liver Blood stasis with Liver Blood deficiency (use Tao Hong Si Wu Tang — Si Wu Tang plus Tao Ren and Hong Hua, balancing the moving and the nourishing).

## Frequently asked questions about Liver and Gallbladder disorders

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### What does Liver Qi stagnation feel like, and how is it treated?

Liver Qi stagnation feels like irritability that comes and goes without obvious cause, a sense of internal pressure looking for a way out, frequent sighing, breast tenderness in the second half of the menstrual cycle, an emotional lid that gets pushed off easily, the “plum-stone” sensation of a lump in the throat that cannot be swallowed or coughed up, premenstrual mood changes, and digestive symptoms that worsen with stress. Treatment uses [Xiao Yao San](#) (Free and Easy Wanderer) as the foundational herbal formula and acupuncture at [LV 3 \(Taichong\)](#), [GB 34 \(Yanglingquan\)](#) and [LV 14 \(Qimen\)](#). Patients typically notice clearer affect, better sleep and improved digestive comfort within 4 weeks of consistent treatment.

### Can Chinese medicine treat gallstones?

Yes, with realistic caveats. Acute symptomatic gallstone disease (severe biliary colic, suspected cholecystitis, jaundice) requires conventional medical assessment and may require surgery. Chronic asymptomatic gallstones and biliary sludge respond well to TCM treatment with Damp-Heat-clearing formulas ([Da Chai Hu Tang](#), [Long Dan Xie Gan Tang](#)) and dietary modification (reducing greasy, fried and rich food). My clinical experience with stones < 1cm and biliary sludge is encouraging, with frequent stone passage and resolution of right hypochondriac symptoms over 8–16 weeks of integrated treatment. See my dedicated article on [gallstones in TCM](#) for the full clinical detail.

### Are migraines really a Liver problem in Chinese medicine?

Most of them, yes. The Gallbladder and Liver channels traverse the head, particularly the temporal and vertex regions. The classical migraine patterns in TCM are: Liver Yang rising (the throbbing temporal pulsating migraine with photophobia, treated with Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin); Liver Fire blazing (severe, acute, with red eyes and irritability, treated with Long Dan Xie Gan Tang); Liver Blood deficiency (chronic dull migraine in fatigued women, treated with Si Wu Tang plus wind-extinguishing herbs); Cold stagnating in the Liver channel (the Jue Yin vertex headache with vomiting of clear fluid, treated with Wu Zhu Yu Tang); and Phlegm-Damp obstructing (the sinus-pressure migraine with heaviness, treated with Ban Xia Bai Zhu Tian Ma Tang). Treatment is highly effective: a controlled trial published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* in 2017 found acupuncture significantly more effective than sham acupuncture for migraine prevention. The combination of acupuncture at [GB 20](#) + [LV 3](#) + [GB 34](#) + [Taiyang](#) with appropriate Chinese herbs typically reduces migraine frequency by 50–70% within 12 weeks.

### How does Chinese medicine treat premenstrual syndrome (PMS)?

PMS is the classical Liver Qi stagnation pattern in its menstrual form. The symptoms — irritability, breast tenderness, mood lability, bloating, headache, sleep disturbance, food cravings — appear during the second half of the cycle (when the Liver is most active) and resolve with menstruation (when the Liver releases blood and qi). Treatment uses Xiao Yao San as the foundational formula, modified to Jia Wei Xiao Yao San where

heat features are prominent (red face, irritability, breast tenderness with heat). Acupuncture is given weekly through the second half of the cycle until menstruation, focused on LV 3, SP 6, PC 6 and LV 14. Most patients experience meaningful improvement within 2–3 cycles.

### Can TCM help with eye floaters and blurred vision?

The eyes are the “office of the Liver” in TCM, and dry blurred vision with floaters is the classical Liver Blood / Liver Yin deficiency presentation. Treatment uses Qi Ju Di Huang Wan (Liu Wei Di Huang Wan with Gou Qi Zi and Ju Hua added) as the foundational formula, typically for 3–6 months. Acupuncture at BL 1 (Jingming), BL 2 (Zanzhu), GB 1 (Tongziliao), GB 20 and LV 3 is given weekly. Established floaters tend to reduce rather than disappear; pre-existing dry eye and recurrent conjunctivitis respond well; chronic blurred vision from accommodative spasm often improves within 8 weeks.

### Why does the Liver get blamed for anger in Chinese medicine?

The Liver-emotion-anger correspondence is one of the oldest in classical TCM theory, established in the *Su Wen*. It is not metaphorical. The clinical observation, sustained across two millennia, is that the symptoms of Liver disharmony (irritability, frustration, sudden outbursts, the wiry pulse) tend to co-occur with chronic suppressed or expressed anger, and that treatment of the Liver (with Xiao Yao San, with acupuncture at LV 3, with the resolution of Liver Qi stagnation) tends to settle the anger pattern. Whether the anger creates the Liver disturbance or the Liver disturbance creates the anger is, in TCM, a meaningless distinction: both feed each other. Effective treatment requires that the practitioner work with both the herbal and acupuncture intervention and the patient’s real-life stress and emotional patterns. Where chronic suppressed anger underlies the presentation, the prognosis for resolution depends heavily on the patient’s willingness to address the emotional source as well as accept the physical treatment.

## Conclusion

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The Liver and Gallbladder pair is the most clinically diverse organ system in Chinese medicine. From the gentle stress-driven IBS of Liver Qi stagnation invading the Spleen, through the dramatic acute presentations of Liver Fire blazing or internal Liver Wind producing stroke, to the chronic substance-depletion patterns of Liver Yin deficiency and Liver Blood deficiency, the Wood-element pair touches almost every aspect of clinical practice. The key clinical principles, summarised across the classical literature, are:

1. The Liver prefers to be soothed, not attacked — in chronic Liver disease, sour and sweet herbs that soften the Liver are more reliable than bitter cold herbs that drain it
2. Where Liver excess is found in clinical practice, search for Spleen deficiency or Kidney yin deficiency underneath; treating only the excess without supporting the underlying root produces relapse
3. Where Liver Qi stagnation has lasted more than 2–3 years, presume that some degree of Blood stasis is present and add at least small doses of blood-moving herbs to the qi-regulating formula
4. The Liver-Kidney yin axis underlies the great majority of perimenopausal, post-stroke, hypertensive and degenerative presentations; long-term yin nourishment is more durable than short-term yang subduing
5. In any disorder involving the Liver, the practitioner must engage with the patient’s emotional landscape — suppressed anger, chronic frustration, or unprocessed grief is frequently the unaddressed driver behind chronic Liver patterns

Pattern differentiation, the careful clinical reading of tongue and pulse, and the modification of classical formulas to each patient's individual presentation remain the foundation of effective TCM practice with the Liver and Gallbladder — as they have been since the time of Zhang Zhongjing in the second century CE.

## Further reading on this site

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Return to the [Zang-Fu organ overview](#). Read the related organ hub pages for the [Liver](#) and [Gallbladder](#). See also the companion deep-dive articles on [Disorders of the Spleen and Stomach](#) (Earth) and the deficiency pattern articles for [Yang deficiency](#) and [Yin deficiency](#). For specific conditions discussed in this article, see [gallstones](#), [migraines](#), [insomnia](#) and [Liver Yin deficiency](#).