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Biologic basis of TCM syndromes and the standardization of syndrome classification

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Abstract Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) syndrome is an integral and essential component of TCM theory, and goes beyond philosophic concepts. This article reviews the concept of TCM syndromes and summarizes research findings on the biologic foundation of syndromes. In addition, insight is provided into the promotion of standardization of syndrome classification by enforcing uniformity of TCM terminology, applying standardized diagnostic criteria and operating procedures to minimize subjective effects. Also incorporating interdisciplinary approaches such as data mining and structure modeling, as well as integrating findings on biomarker research are discussed. Consideration is made of the fundamental TCM aspects of syndrome elements, symptoms, phenotypic features, as well as diseases, to form an integral process in the diagnostic path. We believe that better understanding of the biologic basis of the TCM syndrome and standardization of syndrome classification will improve diagnosis, which in turn will enhance therapeutic efficacy and disease prognosis.

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Introduction

With a history of more than 3 000 years, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has been widely accepted as an effective folk medical practice by Asian medical systems and is gaining position over the world. Syndrome (*zheng*) classification is an essential component of TCM theory. Although traditionally considered to rely primarily on experiential

Abbreviations: TCM, traditional Chinese medicine; RA, rheumatoid arthritis.

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and phenotypic-enriched insights, as summarized in this review article, considerable advancement has been made in elucidating the biologic foundation of the TCM syndrome and to move toward standardization of syndrome classification.

What is TCM syndrome

A syndrome, or pattern, is an integral and essential part of TCM theory. A syndrome is an outcome of analysis of TCM information by the TCM practitioner, as well as what TCM treatments rely on.

A syndrome can be defined as a categorised pattern of symptoms and signs in a patient at a specific stage during the course of a disease. In TCM it is said 'different syndromes for one disease'. Each disease has a natural course of development for a certain period from occurrence, initial, intermediate, and advanced stages, to recovery, relapse, or deterioration. TCM syndrome classification may change as the disease goes through each stage.

A syndrome may be affected by various factors including gender, age, constitution, climate, weather, living and working conditions. The syndrome is classified based on categorization of TCM signs and symptoms under the guidance of TCM theory, while considering disease diagnosis, environment and patient profile (Fig. 1). For example, in a study,¹ of menopausal women in Germany and China, TCM diagnosis was performed by the same investigator. Syndrome differentiation demonstrated that German women experienced more from kidney-yang deficiency, whereas Chinese women were more prone to kidney-yin deficiency syndrome. Thus, factors of climate, constitution, and living conditions may have contributed to the differences in syndromes between the German and Chinese women.

How is a TCM syndrome identified? In brief, a TCM syndrome is a combination of signs and symptoms with internal relationships. First, information on presenting signs and symptoms is gathered through the TCM diagnostic methods of inspection, auscultation and olfaction, inquiry, and palpation. Next, the information is analyzed by the TCM doctor using the TCM theory of pathogenesis, or etiology. Signs and symptoms closely linked to the current state of illness are extracted, correlations among them are analyzed and conclusions are drawn. Eventually, diagnostic results can be made in terms of the TCM syndrome. Thus,

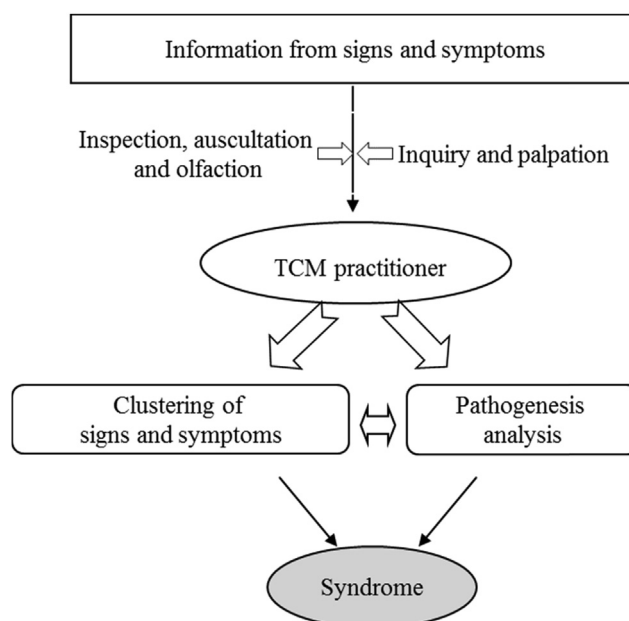


Figure 2 Key information used for TCM pattern classification.

syndrome identification is performed by finding a group of inner-linked signs and symptoms and their internal relationships, based on TCM theories. Signs and symptoms are the key information used for TCM pattern classification. They are gathered through the diagnostic methods of inspection, auscultation and olfaction, inquiry, and palpation. These factors are later classified and defined as a syndrome (Fig. 2).

The practice of TCM depends on accurate diagnosis and procedures known as treatment based on syndrome differentiation (*bian zheng lun zhi*) (Fig. 3). Fundamental TCM theories, including yin-yang, five elements, visceral manifestation, and channels have generated several syndrome differentiation criteria, such as syndrome differentiation according to eight principles, visceral manifestation, and six-channel. Through these differentiation methods, basic TCM theories are thus linked to the syndromes.

Syndrome differentiation is also used to guide the prescribing of herbal medicine, acupuncture/moxibustion, and massage therapies. Thus, syndrome differentiation is the key process for integrating basic theories and clinical

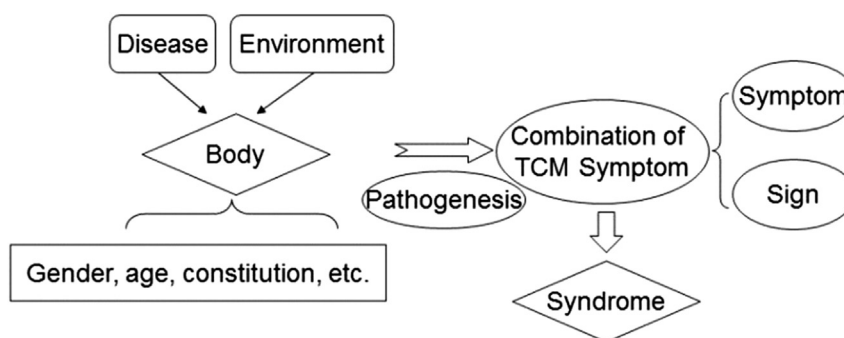


Figure 1 Concept of a TCM syndrome.

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