

Mongolian traditional style blood-letting therapy: A brief introduction

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ABSTRACT

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Mongolian traditional style blood-letting therapy (MTSBLT) has been one of the most widely used traditional medicinal treatment modalities in Mongolia. Currently, the practice is widely used for hypertension, neck pain, headache, chronic hepatitis, ophthalmic or skin diseases and infectious diseases in Mongolia and China. Further studies concerning the mechanism and clinical application of the MTSBLT are needed for TCM practitioners to apply it in their own clinical practice and in order to expand the scope of TCM. MTSBLT is methodologically very different from the traditional Chinese-style blood-letting or wet-cupping. Although MTSBLT may be used as part of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) treatment, this paper offers an introduction to MTSBLT.

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1. Introduction

Mongolian traditional medicine (MTM) consists of four typical methods, referred to as the ‘four counter poisons’. These include food therapy, life style modification, drug therapy and external treatment methods.¹ External treatment methods include Mongolian-style moxibustion, heat iron application,² hydropathy and cupping³ and Mongolian traditional style blood-letting therapy (MTSBLT).

MTSBLT is a blood-letting intervention to relieve symptoms through the removal of small amounts of blood from a patient.¹ This process is different to wet-cupping and blood-letting used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), due to differences in point selection, procedure and disease targets.⁴ MTSBLT may have its origins in the Neolithic age, however the development of the basic principles of this approach appear to have been established after *The Four Medical Tantras* were imported from Tibet in the 16th century.⁵ Currently, MTSBLT is widely used as a treatment for various kinds of diseases in the Republic of Mongolia, Inner Mongolia and China.⁶

Interestingly, little has been written about the use of this therapy in the literature. This paper seeks to introduce the general concepts of MTSBLT and its methodology. In addition, the authors

have investigated the possible clinical evidence of MTSBLT through a literature review of relevant journals and textbooks.

2. Basic concepts

The three elements theory refers to the three components of the body in MTM: *khii* (wind), *shar* (bile) and *badgan* (phlegm). These elements are said to make up the human body and in healthy individuals the elements are in a state of equilibrium (Fig. 1). If there is an imbalance in these elements, the human body is said to have been driven into a pathologic condition. In addition, *Shar uc* (serous fluid) is perceived as an important concept and regarded as a body essence originating from bile juice subsequently distributed to the whole body, particularly the skin and articular joints. Its function is to supply water and to lubricate joints.⁷ These principles form the basis for diagnosis and treatment in MTM.⁸

An excess of *shar* and blood are seen to be the primary causes of febrile disease in MTM. If *shar uc* changes in relation to *shar* and blood, febrile diseases can increase.⁹ MTSBLT is thus a major treatment method for febrile diseases with *shar*, blood or *shar uc*.

From this perspective febrile diseases, such as cold damage, infectious diseases, joint disorders, tuberculosis, erysipelas, leprosy, aphasia, specific eye and mouth problems, hypertension and headache are commonly suitable for MTSBLT treatment.¹⁰ Apart from identifying *shar* symptoms such as fever or facial flushing, urine examination and pulse examination is also considered before treatment. Symptoms such as steam, odor and dark yellow coloring in urine are perceived as significant depictions of imbalance. As time goes by, referred to as ‘cooling down’, urine is again examined

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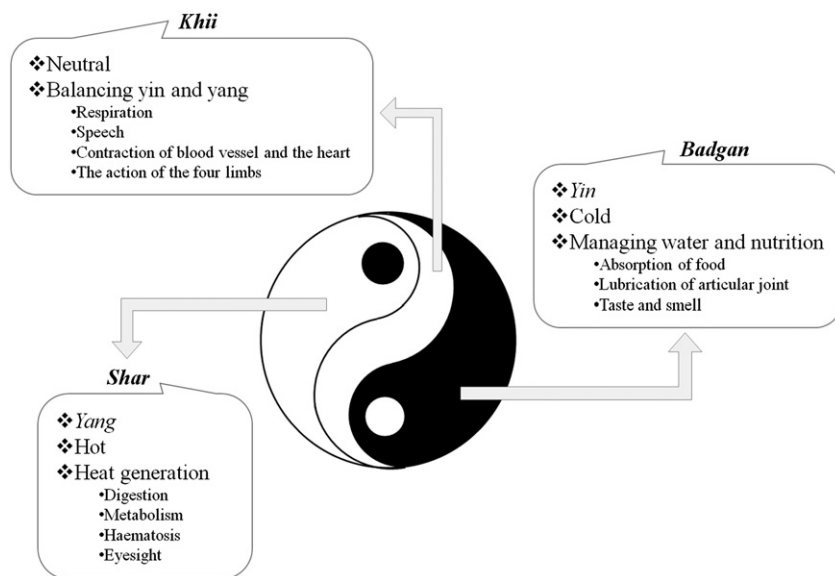


Fig. 1. Three elements theory.

and may contain sludge and floating particles. Patients should have a rapid, floating or surging pulse.¹¹

According to *The Four Medical Tantras*, MTSBLT can be applied at three stages of a disease: during early onset, at the middle stage and during late stages of the disease. When the progression of the febrile disease is very rapid, MTSBLT can be used during the early stages of the disease. During the febrile disease progress, if there is no Cold syndrome and only Heat syndrome, pathologic blood should be removed by MTSBLT. At the end stages of the disease, MTSBLT can be performed in order to get rid of remaining *shar* or pathologic blood to recover body from sustained fever.¹²

3. General procedure for MTSBLT

MTSBLT is a three-step procedure that includes preparation, blood-letting and recuperation (Fig. 2). During preparation, discriminating formulas are always used. Medicines can vary according to disease status, but are almost always made up of herbs with a bitter, sour and astringent taste or cold in nature. *Shar tang* (a three-fruit decoction) is one of the most widely used discriminating formulas and is composed of the fruits of *Gardenia jasminoides* Ellis, *Terminalia chebula* Retz and *Melia toosendan* Sieb. Et Zucc made in a ratio of 2:2:1, respectively. The formula is boiled and cooled down. The tincture is administered two times daily at a dosage of 3 to 5 g. Preparation of patients prior to an operation is also meant to help reduce patient fears concerning bleeding, to make sure patients eat properly and to facilitate mental stability. It is important to report any adverse events to the doctor, such as vertigo or dizziness during the treatment process.¹¹

The amount of blood-letting varies according to the patients' age, progress of the disease and strength or weakness of the body. However, the most important factor in deciding when to stop blood-letting related to is the color of the drained blood. Blood-letting is maintained until dark red or purple colored blood turns into bright red¹³ with the volume of drained blood ranging from a few drops to 100–200 ml.¹⁰

The Four Medical Tantras refers to 90 potential blood-letting points on the human body; however, according to other sources, there are more points.¹⁰ Treatment points are selected according to the affected region of Viscera and Bowels, the nature of the disease

and presenting symptoms (Table 1).¹² In general, only a few points are chosen to be treated in one procedure.

4. Tools

There are several tools used in MTSBLT. These include a straight knife, a spade shaped knife, a lancet shaped knife, etc. A straight knife has a straight blade and a heavy thick non-burr plate on the

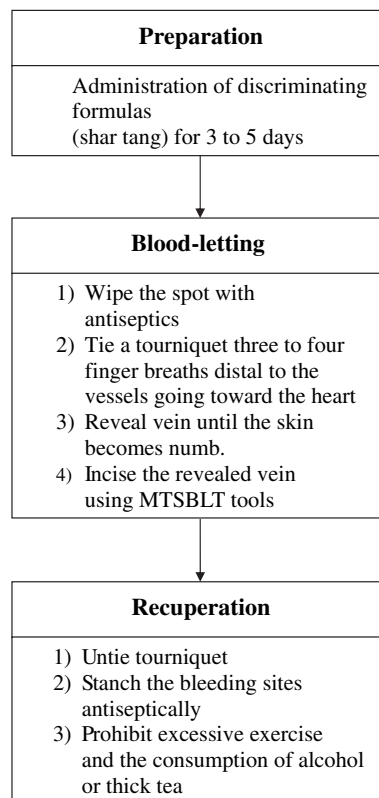


Fig. 2. Three steps of Mongolian traditional style blood-letting therapy.

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