

Emotions, Desires and Physiological Fire in Chinese Medicine, Part Two: The Minister Fire

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ABSTRACT

Chinese medicine's concept of qi mediates between a person's mental-emotional life and the physiological processes producing and maintaining the body form. The pathogenic potential of human emotions and desires figured prominently in China's ancient medical and philosophical texts, and more than any other type of qi, the sovereign and minister fire embody the influences and relationships between mental, emotional, sensory and physiological activities. When level and calm, the minister fire transmits the lifegate's original *yang qi* influences from the lower *jiao*; the liver, *sanjiao* and gall bladder (the *jueyin* and *shaoyang*) manage its dissemination through the body interior, and its movement between the interior and surface of the body. Contemporary traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) textbooks however rarely mention the minister fire, except as an illness mechanism that is identified with liver and gall bladder yang repletion patterns. The preferred term for its physiological influences today is the kidney *yang qi*.

The two parts of this paper examine the physiological and clinical implications of the minister fire. Part One began with the heart and kidney (*shaoyin*) relationship, as reflected in the pericardium and lifegate's association with the minister fire and their role in communicating the orders of the sovereign fire. In Part Two, the discussion turns to the minister fire's physiological influences, and the pathogenic stirring of minister fire due to emotions and desires.

KEYWORDS Chinese medicine, psychology, mind, mental health, medical body, morality

Introduction

The *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (*Huangdi Neijing* c. 100 BCE) recommended the cultivation of an even temperament. An even temperament benefitted one's health and longevity because unchecked emotions and sensory desires were observed to disrupt orderly qi movements and damage one's body and person. The scholar physicians from the Song to the end of the Qing (960–1911 CE) took up this area of the ancient medical classics and extended Chinese medicine's response to the pathogenic effects of emotions and desires.

Song dynasty (960–1278 CE) neo-Confucianism merged certain basic elements from Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, and in the words of Charlotte Furth¹, the concept of fire became 'a symbolically charged metaphor in representations of the medical body'. For example, conscious awareness (the *shen*-spirit/mind) had been localised within the heart from ancient times and in the Song, the Buddhist association of physical heat with consciousness² influenced medical conceptions of the heart zang and its 'sovereign fire' (*junhuo*). The neo-Confucian association of physiological fire with the *shen*-spirit/mind informed Song notions of morality.

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These changes led scholar physicians to focus on ‘internal causes’ and to counsel their patients to moderate their behaviours and emotional responses.³

Although TCM textbooks today rarely mention the concept of ‘minister fire’ (*xianghuo*), premodern sources discuss the minister fire as a distinct system of qi-influences. The minister fire’s physiological role was very similar to contemporary representations of the kidney yang, the basis of the whole body’s *yang qi*-functions. In today’s TCM literature, the occasional mention of minister fire mainly consists of references to pathogenic repletion patterns such as ‘liver fire’. Depending on the individual case, the ‘stirring of minister fire’ can account for insomnia, irritability, frequent erection, ringing in the ears or blurred vision. However contemporary clinicians are more likely to interpret these manifestations as a ‘hyperactivity of liver yang’ or ‘liver fire’ pattern.

This paper will explore the concept of minister fire and its importance for Chinese medical conceptions of the body and clinical practice. The paper follows the examination of the pericardium and lifegate begun in Part One. Together, Parts One and Two clarify the nature of minister fire influences to complement the practitioner’s image of the medical body – the image that guides diagnostic and therapeutic decision-making.

The minister fire

In the *Inner Canon*, the *Plain Questions* Treatise Five differentiated between physiological fire and pathogenic fire: ‘Strong fire (壮火 *zhuanghuo*) consumes qi, and mild fire (少火 *shaohuo*) strengthens and warms the qi’.⁴ Whereas ‘strong’ pathogenic fire damages yin-fluids and disrupts qi influences, ‘mild’ physiological fire promotes *zangfu* functional activities. The sovereign and minister fire were considered mild fire.

Minister fire originates from the kidney-lifegate area and rather than consume or injure kidney-water, minister fire actually produces it.⁵⁻⁶ The term characterises its relationship with the heart’s sovereign fire, and with the heart’s role in lodging the spirit/mind. Together, the minister and sovereign fire strengthened one another, they warmed the interior visceral systems (*zangfu*) and powered the body’s life activities.⁷

Zhang Zhongjing’s (c. 142–220 CE) *Treatise on Cold Damage* and its subsequent commentaries allocated the governance of minister fire to the *shaoyang* (*sanjiao*-gall bladder), and held that minister fire inhabited the liver. In the *Treatise on Cold Damage* (originally c. 200 CE), the *shaoyang* is the hinge between the *taiyang* (bladder-small intestine) and the *yangming* (stomach-large intestine), that is, between the body surface and interior.

Zhang’s analysis of injury by external cold was complimented in the Song-Jin-Yuan (960–1368 CE) by the analysis of injury by internal heat. Liu Wansu (1110–1200 CE) had observed how the qi of extreme or prolonged emotions transformed into pathogenic heat (*wuzhi hua re*), and how internal pathogenic heat disturbed the heart-spirit/mind (*xinshen*), consumed the body fluids, the source qi (*yuan qi*) and the organs themselves.⁸ His explanations were very influential for Li Dongyuan (1180–1251 CE) and Zhu Danxi (1281–1358 CE).

The patterns of dysfunction described by Li Dongyuan involve several interior qi-systems. He described how the body’s source of physiological heat, the kidney-lifegate in the lower *jiao*, leaves its correct place when it becomes agitated. It then accumulates in the upper *jiao* where it disturbs the heart-spirit/mind, and the lower *jiao* becomes depleted and cold. If the spleen qi was depleted, the resulting dampness and heat poured downward damaging the liver, kidneys and large intestine, and further contributed to the upward stirring of minister fire. Li Dongyuan observed that the tranquillity of minister fire was easily disrupted if the spleen was already depleted, and that the ensuing hyperactivity of minister fire further consumed spleen qi. Furthermore, when minister fire stirs and flares upward, it consumes the stomach yin-fluids and the source qi, and ‘essence (*jing*) flows away’.⁹

These relationships and dynamics are the basis of Li Dongyuan’s ‘yin fire’ theory.¹⁰ Li’s account of ‘yin fire’ rests on his analysis of the pathogenic ‘stirring’ of minister fire and highlights the role of the *shaoyang* – encompassing the liver as well the *sanjiao*-gall bladder – in distributing the ‘clear yang’ throughout the body. In fact, Li’s analysis gives as much importance to the *shaoyang* (the liver, gall bladder and *sanjiao*’s management and distribution of the lifegate’s physiological fire) as he does to the spleen and stomach.¹¹

Zhu Danxi’s discussion of minister fire began with the Han medical classics and incorporated Liu Wansu and Li Dongyuan’s concepts of ‘pathogenic heat’ and ‘yin fire’.¹² He took up the *Inner Canon*’s explanation of ‘mild’ and ‘strong’ fire, and confirmed that the *Inner Canon*’s mild fire and the Tang dynasty’s (618–907 CE) minister fire were the physiological fire of the lifegate. More specifically, the lifegate’s clear *yang qi* was the source of minister fire, and it was minister fire that moved through the body driving *zangfu* transformations and life functions.

Zhu Danxi’s interpretations elaborated on minister fire’s physiological role as well as its potential for disruption and disharmony. The minister fire was the envoy and protector of the sovereign, and if sovereign fire did not stir frenetically, minister fire could not ‘but take orders and keep to its position’.¹³ Yet, the sovereign and minister fires were easily affected by things and tended to hyperactivity. The pathogenic effect of emotions

and desires was yang in nature, and any excessive mental, emotional, physical or sexual activity was thought to 'stir' or agitate physiological fire and disrupt its correct nature. Zhu Danxi concluded that 'Once the heart stirs, ministerial fire stirs too. When ministerial fire stirs, essence escapes on its own'.¹³ Sovereign and minister fire thus became not only the source of *zangfu* functions, but the bodily vitality that drove human emotions, cravings and desires.¹

Physiological fire

Premodern Chinese medicine texts consider minister fire physiology from two broad perspectives, namely the herbal (*zangfu*) and acupuncture (channel and five phase) perspectives. From the *zangfu* perspective, the kidney stores the inherited essence, and together, the kidney and lifegate embody the 'original' yin and yang. Lifegate fire is the postnatal form of the prenatal (original) yang influences: as these influences leave their source in the kidney-lifegate area they become 'minister fire'. From the channel perspective, the fire phase comprises the heart-small intestine and the pericardium-*sanjiao*. The 'split' that created two types of five phase fire defines the relationship between the sovereign (heart) and its executive expression in the upper *jiao*, where it is the minister fire of the pericardium-*sanjiao* that convey the heart-sovereign fire influences.

Three points will serve to sum up minister fire physiology so far (from Parts One and Two) and connect the two perspectives. First, in the lower *jiao* minister fire arises from the kidney-lifegate area, and the movement of minister fire influences through the *sanjiao* (the *shaoyang*) is managed by the liver and gall bladder. Second, minister fire is the yang-fire that warms and moves source qi through the *sanjiao*'s network of cavities, spaces and textures. Third, in the upper *jiao* minister fire is associated with the heart protector that envelopes the heart and conveys the radiance (*shenming*) of the sovereign fire.

The first point accounts for the importance of the kidney and liver *zang* for the physiology of the yang-fire. Together, the kidney and liver secure and manage one's inborn resources, the original yin and yang of the inherited essence. Once the minister fire leaves the kidney-lifegate area it is regulated by wood (the liver and gall bladder) and its qualities of emanation, emergence, spreading and flourishing.

The second point draws in Chinese medicine's concepts of the 'source' of life. Source qi, the origin of the living body's qi transformations, arises from the primary movement (*dong qi*) of the lifegate, and minister fire's warming and dynamic influence is derived from the original yang stored in the kidney-lifegate. Minister fire mobilises the constitutional influences of the essence (the original yin) that guide all postnatal qi functions.

The *shaoyin* (kidneys) is the origin of source qi, and the *shaoyang* (*sanjiao*) regulates the movement and dissemination of source qi.

Because the *sanjiao* arises from the moving qi and lifegate fire between the two kidneys, the *shaoyang* takes on two important characteristics for qi physiology: it is the intermediary between the source of life 'and the unfolding of life'¹⁴; and its 'pivot mechanism' administers the movement of minister fire between the body surface (*taiyang*) and the interior (*yangming*). The minister fire thus warms and nourishes the gall bladder, and the gall bladder assists liver coursing and draining (*shuxie*) to maintain smooth and uninhibited qi-movement. In this way 'minister fire warms the *couli* and envelops the entire body'.¹⁵⁻¹⁶ When the gall bladder and liver are coursed and discharging normally, the minister fire is 'unseen': it moves freely 'warming the organs and powering activity'.⁷

The third point is supported by Chinese medicine's channel system: its role connecting the *zangfu*, the sequence of qi-movement through the main channels, and the sequence of the five phase transformation and movement of qi. The sequence of qi-movement through the twelve channels shows the transformation of qi from the kidney to the pericardium (from water to minister fire), then to the *sanjiao*, gall bladder and liver. The 'executive' influences of the pericardium-*sanjiao* thus arise from the kidneys and transmit minister fire influences to the *shaoyang* (including the liver).

The five phase engendering (生 *sheng*) cycle shows how physiological fire influences are transmitted from the envoy, the pericardium-*sanjiao*, to engender earth (the spleen-stomach). The postnatal qi transformations of the spleen and stomach in turn, transform to engender the metal phase (lungs-large intestine). The five phase engendering sequence also shows the movement of qi from the kidney-bladder to the liver-gall bladder (water to wood) – the water phase engenders physiological fire, whose movement is then managed by the liver, gall bladder (*shuxie* functions) and *sanjiao* (the *shaoyang*).

The movement and management of minister fire by the *sanjiao*, gall bladder and liver allow contemporary acupuncture texts (such as 17) to incorporate the yin partner of *sanjiao*, the pericardium. The inclusion of the pericardium completes the *shaoyang* (*sanjiao*-gall bladder) and *jueyin* (pericardium-liver) 'coat and lining' (*biaoli*) channel relationships.

Chinese medicine's models of qi movement and transformation explain the living body's systemic and functional relationships, and are mapped on the body surface by its acupoint locations and channel pathways. Physiological fire can be strengthened and regulated, and pathogenic fire can be cleared using premodern conceptions and qi models. The qi emerges from its source in the lower *jiao* and follows the governing vessel (GV) upwards along

the midline of the back. The GV is the 'sea of yang', and the activities of physiological fire can be adjusted using its acupoints. GV4 (*mingmen*) lies on the midline of the back, between the second and third lumbar vertebrae and level with the interior location of the lifegate. Acu-moxa stimulation at GV4 strengthens depleted physiological fire – the kidney-lifegate yang qi, the minister fire that promotes *zangfu* functions.

The bladder channel surface pathway travels bilaterally alongside the GV to distribute *yang qi* to the *zangfu*, and the bladder *shu*-transport points strengthen and regulate their *yang qi* influences. Level with GV4 are the two kidney *shu*-transport points (BL 23): the 'mild fire' of the lifegate produces kidney water. Above BL 23 and bi-lateral to the first and second lumbar vertebral joint are the *sanjiao*'s *shu*-transport points (BL 22). *Sanjiao* arises from the lifegate-kidney area to disseminate the source qi influences, starting with postnatal qi formation in the stomach and spleen (BL21 and BL20). The *sanjiao*'s yin partner, the pericardium, is represented on the surface by BL 14 (bilateral to the fourth and fifth thoracic vertebrae), which lies between the heart and lung *shu*-transport points (BL 15 and BL 13), just as the fine membranes of the heart protector connected it with the heart and lungs in the upper *jiao*.

Pathogenic fire

When pathogenic, minister fire stirs and flares upwards: it scorches the fluids, consumes the qi and damages the essence. It harasses the heart resulting in mental restlessness, agitation, anxiety and insomnia.^{6,9} Other clinical manifestations include headaches and dizziness, a bitter taste in the mouth, dry throat, blurring vision, tinnitus, deafness, excessive libido, frequent erection, premature ejaculation, irritability, excess dreaming, and heat in the palms, soles and chest.

Pathogenic fire has a number of internal and external causes but the 'stirring of minister fire' is always due to internal causes. The stirring of minister fire can occur when any of the *zangfu* become overheated, and is usually precipitated by mental, emotional and physical agitation, including sexual arousal, and by any habitual or obsessive desire for the sensual stimulation of external objects. Emotions and desires such as anger and lust disturb the liver and kidney systems in particular.^{18–19} Especially since the Song-Jin-Yuan period (960–1368), Chinese medicine's scholar physicians specifically mention overindulgence in sexual activities as a factor contributing to pathogenic fire, as well as mental-emotional stress and sexual frustration.

Mental-emotional stresses were observed to destabilise minister fire and to 'constrain' liver *shuxie*.⁹ The notion of constraint (*yu*) was first discussed in the *Plain Questions* (Treatise 71) in

relation to the wood phase (liver and gall bladder), and later texts identified its effects with a pattern of signs and symptoms – the 'constraint pattern' (*yu Zheng*).^{20–1} In the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368 CE), it was Zhu Danxi who linked disordered liver *shuxie* to the constraint pattern.⁸ Since then, *yu Zheng* tends to be specific to the liver, especially when emotional factors are involved.

Yu-constraint is a major factor instigating or complicating all kinds of pathogenic changes, and may be identified in individuals who present with anger problems, agitation, anxiety, cystitis or irritable bowel syndrome.^{8,22–4} Because the liver *zang* itself, and emotions such as anger and frustration, are yang in nature, liver qi constraint destabilises minister fire and easily transforms into pathogenic fire. Because the liver channel runs through the sexual and reproductive organs, the digestive organs, chest, throat and eyes, the constraint pattern will often affect these areas. Thus, clinical manifestations can include stomach, chest and/or rib-side distention and pain, the sensation of plum-stone throat, tinnitus, anger, despondency, inability to eat, erectile dysfunction and blurred vision.²⁵

Zhu Danxi's analysis identified two main categories of internal pathogenic fire, and TCM today recognises the same two categories. The first is a repletion fire pattern from liver qi constraint transforming into fire. Constrained heat patterns are sometimes called 'hyperactive minister fire' or 'internal blazing of minister fire', but more frequently, contemporary TCM textbooks identify the pattern as 'liver and gall bladder fire blazing'.^{17,26} The second is an 'empty' fire pattern from depleted liver and kidney yin – the depleted yin cannot restrain the yang. The pattern is called 'liver and kidney yin depletion with yang hyperactivity', 'yang hyperactivity', 'vacuity fire flaming upward', or sometimes 'ascendant hyperactivity of minister fire'. The treatment strategy for the repletion pattern is to clear pathogenic fire using cool and cold natured herbs; for the depletion fire pattern, the treatment strategy is to clear heat and nourish the yin.

To prevent upward stirring of minister fire, Li Dongyuan's strategy was to focus on strengthening spleen qi. When the spleen is strong, dampness cannot pour downward and damage the kidneys and lifegate. Li Dongyuan also used stir-fried Cortex Phellodendri (黄柏 *huangbai*) as one of the ruling medicinals for pathogenic minister fire because of its known ability to drain the fire within water, and to return minister fire to its proper place. Li Dongyuan particularly noted that although it is cold in nature, *huangbai* does not injure the stomach qi or the true yang.^{13,15,27}

One of Zhu Danxi's major contributions was to develop the 'nourish yin-fluids and lower fire' strategy for the hyperactive yang and depleted yin pattern. In addition, Zhu maintained that nourishment of yin-fluids should be combined with mental tranquillity, and the 'proper control of sexual activities'.¹²

Confucianists have established the teachings of putting the heart right, restraining the heart, and nurturing the heart. All this is for the purpose of preventing fire from stirring due to frenzy (i.e., madness over personal desires). Physicians instruct (people) to keep unperturbed and indifferent (to fame or gain), to take (everything) as empty, and to hold the essence spirit [*jingshen*] in the interior¹³.

Summary

From earliest times, Chinese medicine noted the qi-influences of a tranquil mind and quiet self-possession. TCM today still identifies the emotions as factors that can damage the yin-interior. 'Excess' emotions disrupt orderly qi movement, transform into heat, and injure the interior. Pathogenic heart fire harasses the heart-spirit/mind causing agitation and insomnia; the 'fire' of the angry liver ascends and disrupts the liver and heart relationship; the 'fire' of sensual and sexual desires turns the sexual and reproductive qi of kidney yang and lifegate fire into disorderly and self-destructive forces. 'As a moral psychology of emotions, this was not a dualism of reason and passion but a complex mode of embodiment'.¹

When physiological fire is level and calm, it warms the body and powers qi transformations. The sovereign and minister fire animate the body, forming and directing its life processes and transformations. Chinese medicine's channel system links the heart with the kidneys, and the qi of the minister (kidney) and sovereign (heart) fire strengthen one another. More specifically, the minister fire energises the body's physiological activities, including the sexual and reproductive functions of the liver and kidney *zang*; sovereign fire enlivens postnatal conscious awareness, including its reception and analysis of sensory perceptions, and its mental-emotional activities.

Song-Jin-Yuan medicine retained early notions of physiological and pathogenic fire and explored their internal dynamics in detail. Song medicine explained the beneficial influence of emotional stability for the sovereign and minister fires, as well as their destructiveness when agitated, driven by desires or displaced by depletions.¹ Since the Song, Chinese medicine has linked the qi-influences of emotions and desires with interior patterns of repletion involving heat, stagnation, and the constraint of liver qi; with depletion of the kidney yin, the essence, source qi and middle qi (spleen and stomach functions); and with the displacement or inappropriate movement of minister fire.

Although minister fire is required for the healthy state of life processes and transformations, it is rarely a topic of basic theory or normal 'qi physiology' in contemporary TCM texts. To explain the functional processes related to minister fire, today's texts have reassigned minister fire's physiological qi-influences to the kidney *yang qi*. The 'stirring of minister fire', a pathological movement of internal heat, is not a major diagnostic category but is very nearly the only referent to minister fire in the literature today.

As a medical concept, qi unifies the physical body and its mental and emotional influences. It connects a person's mental and emotional life with the physiological processes and structures that produce and maintain the body form and sense of self. Moreover, qi connects human life generally, and one's self specifically, with the qi movements and transformations of our social, cultural and natural environments. Minister fire is a category of qi-influences that we may identify with the active yang qi of the kidney, and as envoy of the radiance of the sovereign heart-spirit/mind.

Clinical Commentary

Clinical decision-making is determined to a large extent by how the medical body is conceived. The two parts of this paper draw out the physiological and medical implications of the minister fire – a type of *yang qi* influence that mediates between the body's physical, mental, emotional and sensory activities. The papers explore the dynamics of physiological and pathogenic minister fire and show how premodern conceptions of minister fire's qi influences are mapped onto the medical body. They offer an account of how contemporary clinicians can utilise traditional notions of minister fire to interpret disorder and select appropriate treatment strategies.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<i>biaoli</i>	表里	exterior-interior; the channels' 'coat and lining' relationships
<i>couli</i>	腠理	the interstices, the <i>sanjiao</i> 's network of spaces and textures
<i>dong qi</i>	动气	the moving qi between the kidneys; an alternative term for the lifegate
<i>du mai</i>	督脉	governing vessel (GV)
<i>huangbai</i>	黄柏	Cortex Phellodendri
<i>Huangdi Neijing</i>	黄帝内经	<i>Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon</i> (originally c. 100 BCE)
<i>jing</i>	精	essence
<i>jingshen</i>	精神	essence and spirit/mind
<i>jueryin</i>	厥阴	the reverting yin (one of the <i>liujing</i> /six channels), the pericardium-liver
<i>junhuo</i>	君火	sovereign fire
Li Dongyuan	李东垣	1180–1251, author of the <i>Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach</i> , 1249
Liu Wansu	刘完素	1110–1200
<i>mingmen</i>	命门	the lifegate, the gate of orders
<i>sanjiao</i>	三焦	triple burner, triple energiser (one of Chinese medicine's yang or fu organ systems)
<i>sanjiao shu</i>	三焦俞	the <i>sanjiao</i> 's <i>shu</i> -transport points (BL22)
<i>Shanghan Lun</i>	伤寒论	<i>Treatise On Cold Damage</i> (originally c. 200 CE)
<i>shaohuo</i>	少火	mild fire; the <i>Inner Canon</i> 's mild physiological fire
<i>shaoyang</i>	少阳	the lesser yang (one of the <i>liujing</i> /six channels), the <i>sanjiao</i> -gall bladder
<i>shaoyin</i>	少阴	the lesser yin (one of the <i>liujing</i> /six channels), the heart-kidney axis
<i>shen</i>	神	spirit/mind
<i>shenming</i>	神明	the radiance of the <i>shen</i> -spirit/mind; brightness; intelligence
<i>shenshu</i>	肾俞	the kidney <i>shu</i> -transport points (BL23)

GLOSSARY OF TERMS (continued)

<i>sheng</i>	生	engender; life
<i>shuxie</i>	疏泄	coursing and discharge; the liver qi-functions that maintain the smooth flow of qi
<i>wuxing</i>	五行	five phases
<i>wuzhi</i>	五志	the five minds (also, five dispositions or emotions)
<i>wuzhi hua re</i>	五志化热	the five emotions transform into heat
<i>xiang</i>	相	the minister (who transmits the emperor's orders)
<i>xianghuo</i>	相火	minister fire
<i>xin</i>	心	heart; heart-mind
<i>xinshen</i>	心神	heart-spirit/mind
<i>yang qi</i>	阳气	physiological fire
<i>yuan qi</i>	原气	source qi
<i>zangfu</i>	脏腑	the internal visceral systems; the yin and yang organ systems
<i>zhuanghuo</i>	壮火	strong fire; the <i>Inner Canon</i> 's pathogenic fire
Zhang Zhongjing	張仲景	c. 142–220 CE, author of the <i>Treatise on Cold Damage and Miscellaneous Disorders</i> c. 200 CE
Zhu Danxi	朱丹溪	1281–1358, author of the <i>Extra Treatises Based On Investigation and Inquiry</i> , 1347

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