Herbal Monograph for Xiao Chai Hu Tang

By John Chen, PhD, PharmD, OMD, LAc

*Xiao chai hu tang* (Minor Bupleurum Decoction) is one of the most commonly used herbal formulas today. Historically, it was used to treat *shaoyang* syndrome. Today, it is used to successfully treat many disorders including hepatitis, liver fibrosis, liver cancer, jaundice, cholecystitis, cholelithiasis, pancreatitis, nephritis, acute tonsillitis, parotitis, stomatitis and many more.

To achieve optimal therapeutic outcome, it is of critical importance to learn beyond the traditional aspect of this formula. Understanding of topics such as pharmacological effect, clinical studies and research, toxicology and herb-drug interactions will greatly empower the practitioners to properly select the best herbal formula for treatment. Listed below is the herbal monograph on *Xiao chai hu tang* (Minor Bupleurum Decoction), an excerpt from *Chinese Herbal Formulas and Applications* by John and Tina Chen, to be published by Art of Medicine Press in fall, 2007.

*Xiao Chai Hu Tang* (Minor Bupleurum Decoction)

Pinyin Name: *Xiao Chai Hu Tang*

Literal Name: Minor Bupleurum Decoction

Alternate Names: *Hsiao Tsai Hu Tang*, Minor Bupleurum Combination

Original Source: *Shang Han Lun* (Discussion of Cold-Induced Disorders) by Zhang Zhong-Jing in the Eastern Han Dynasty

**Composition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Chai Hu</em> (Radix bupleuri)</td>
<td>24g [12g]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Huang Qin</em> (Radix scutellariae)</td>
<td>9g [9g]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ban Xia</em> (Rhizoma pinelliae), <em>xi</em> (washed)</td>
<td>0.5 cup [9g]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sheng Jiang</em> (Rhizoma zingiberis recens), <em>qie</em> (sliced “Slicing”)</td>
<td>9g [9g]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ren Shen</em> (Radix et rhizoma ginseng)</td>
<td>9g [6g]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Zhi Gan Cao</em> (Radix et rhizoma glycyrrhizae praeparata cum melle)</td>
<td>9g [5g]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Da Zao</em> (Fructus jujubae), <em>bo</em> (opened)</td>
<td>12 pieces [4 pieces]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Dosage/Preparation/Administration**

The source text specifies to cook the ingredients in 12 cups [2400 mL] of water until 6 cups [1200 mL] of the liquid remain. Discard the residue and cook the strained decoction again until it is reduced to 3 cups [600 mL]. Take 1 cup [200 mL] of warm decoction per dose, three times daily. Today, the decoction may be prepared using the dosages suggested in brackets.

**Chinese Therapeutic Actions**

Harmonizes *shaoyang*

**Clinical Manifestations**

1. *Shaoyang* syndrome: alternating spells of fever and chills, chest and hypochondriac fullness and discomfort, irritability, a bitter taste in the mouth, lack of appetite, nausea, vomiting, vertigo, a dry throat, a thin, white tongue coating and a wiry pulse.

2. Any of the following disorders with *shaoyang* characteristics: gynecological disorders with heat in the uterus, liver or *chong* (thoroughfare) channel; malaria; jaundice; or any internal injury characterized by *shaoyang* syndrome.

**Clinical Applications**

Hepatitis, viral hepatitis, chronic hepatitis, hepatic fibrosis and carcinoma, hepatocellular carcinomas, jaundice, cholecystitis, cholelithiasis, pancreatitis, fever, fever in cancer, nephritis, chronic renal insufficiency, acute tonsillitis, infectious parotitis, stomatitis, common cold, influenza, measles, bronchitis, pneumonia, pulmonary tuberculosis, cough, allergic rhinitis, bronchial asthma, reflux esophagitis, antral gastritis, gastritis, gastric pain, gastric prolapse, constipation, Meniere’s syndrome, dizziness, seizures, migraine, angina, depression, chronic fatigue syndrome, morning sickness, postpartum infection, postpartum fever, dysmenorrhea, premenstrual syndrome and malaria.

**Explanation**

*Xiao chai hu tang* (Minor Bupleurum Decoction) is the main formula for harmonizing *shaoyang* syndrome, one of the six stages of disease progression described in *Shang Han Lun* (discussion of cold-induced disorders). The *shaoyang* is situated between yang and yin, or between the exterior and interior; therefore,
alternating spells of fever and chills may occur in shaoyang syndrome if the body is fighting both the pathogens outside and the disharmony inside.

Disorders in the shaoyang might cause qi stagnation and eventual heat formation in the gallbladder channel (a shaoyang channel), giving rise to chest and hypochondriac fullness and discomfort, a bitter taste in the mouth, vertigo, a dry throat and irritability. Lack of appetite, nausea and vomiting are the results of gallbladder heat invading the stomach. The tongue coating is thin and white because the pathogenic factors have not yet transformed into internal heat. The wiry pulse is the result of qi stagnation in the shaoyang channel.

Because the disease resides between the exterior and the interior, it is not suitable to use only exterior-releasing herbs or only purgative herbs. Use of only exterior-releasing herbs will not treat the interior condition, and use of only heat-clearing or downward-draining herbs will bring the pathogens from the exterior into the interior. Therefore, the harmonizing method is the most appropriate treatment approach in this condition.

*Chai hu* (Radix bupleuri) is the main herb for treating shaoyang disorders. The light quality of *chai hu* (Radix bupleuri) lifts and disperses stagnation, as well as releases to the exterior. *Huang qin* (Radix scutellariae), a bitter and cold herb that enters the gallbladder channel, is ideal for clearing shaoyang heat. Together, *chai hu* (Radix bupleuri) disperses the exterior while *huang qin* (Radix scutellariae) clears the interior to achieve the harmonizing effect. *Ban xia* (Rhizoma pinelliae), besides harmonizing the stomach to relieve nausea and vomiting, disperses stagnation in the body. *Sheng jiang* (Rhizoma zingiberis recens) helps *ban xia* (Rhizoma pinelliae) harmonize the middle *jiao*. It also reduces the toxicity of *ban xia* (Rhizoma pinelliae). *Ren shen* (Radix et rhizoma ginseng), *zhi gan cao* (Radix et rhizoma glycyrrhizae praeparata cum melle), and *da zao* (Fructus jujubae) tonify stomach *qi*, nourish body fluids and harmonize the *ying* (nutritive) and *wei* (defensive) levels. The combination of *chai hu* (Radix bupleuri) and *ren shen* (Radix et rhizoma ginseng) also provides a mutual check and balance for each other: *chai hu* (Radix bupleuri) prevents the tonic effect of *ren shen* (Radix et rhizoma ginseng) from retaining the pathogens in the body, while *ren shen* (Radix et rhizoma ginseng) prevents the dispersing effect of *chai hu* (Radix bupleuri) from damaging *qi*. Combined, these herbs expel the pathogens and strengthen bodily constitution.

Because the shaoyang stage is unstable and often short and transient, the symptoms listed above may not be clinically present all at the same time. Therefore, as suggested in *shang han lun* (discussion of cold-induced
disorders), this formula can be applied even if there is only one shaoyang symptom clinically present.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Signs and Symptoms</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Herbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaoyang syndrome</td>
<td>Alternating spells of fever and chills: the location of the illness between exterior and interior.</td>
<td>Harmonizes shaoyang</td>
<td>• Chai hu (Radix bupleuri) releases the exterior, and huang qin (Radix scutellariae) clears the interior. Together, they harmonize shaoyang disorders.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chest and hypochondriac fullness and discomfort: qi stagnation.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ban xia (Rhizoma pinelliae) harmonizes the stomach to relieve nausea and vomiting, and disperses stagnation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A bitter taste in the mouth, a dry throat, and irritability: heat in the shaoyang gallbladder channel.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sheng jiang (Rhizoma zingiberis Recens) harmonizes the middle jiao.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of appetite, nausea, and vomiting: gallbladder heat invading the stomach.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ren shen (Radix et rhizoma ginseng), zhi gan cao (Radix et rhizoma glycyrrhizae praeparata cum melle), and da zao (Fructus jujubae) tonify Stomach qi, nourish body fluids, and harmonize the ying (nutritive) and weí (defensive) levels.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thin, white tongue coating: exterior condition.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wiry pulse: qi stagnation.</td>
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</table>

**Modifications**

**General Signs and Symptoms:**

- If accompanied by headache, add chuan xiong (Rhizoma chuanxiong).
- If there is thirst, remove ban xia (Rhizoma pinelliae) and add tian hua fen (Radix trichosanthis).
- With thirst and irritability from deficiency in heat, add mai dong (Radix ophiopogonis) and wu wei zi (Fructus schisandrae chinensis).
- If there is no thirst but a slight fever and exterior symptoms are present, remove ren shen (Radix et rhizoma ginseng) and add gui zhi (Ramulus cinnamomí).
- With irritability, add dan zhu ye (Herba lophatheri) and geng mi (Semen oryzae).
With more irritability but absence of nausea or vomiting, remove ban xia (Rhizoma pinelliae) and ren shen (Radix et rhizoma ginseng) and add gua lou (Fructus trichosanthis).

With abdominal pain, remove huang qin (Radix scutellariae) and add bai shao (Radix paeoniae alba).

With more vomiting or nausea, add sheng jiang (Rhizoma zingiberis recens) and chen pi (Pericarpium citri reticulatae).

When there is indigestion in children, add bai zhu (Rhizoma atractylodis macrocephalae), chen pi (Pericarpium citri reticulatae), fu ling (Poria) and shan zha (Fructus crataegi).

If there is gum pain caused by yin deficiency, add shi gao (Gypsum fibrosum).

With palpitations and dysuria, remove huang qin (Radix scutellariae) and add fu ling (Poria).

With distention and hardness of the hypochondriac area caused by phlegm accumulation, remove da zao (Fructus jujubae) and add mu li (Concha ostreae).

If the hypochondriac pain is severe, add qing pi (Pericarpium citri reticulatae viride), bai shao (Radix paeoniae alba) and xiang fu (Rhizoma cyperi).

With a stifling sensation in the chest, add zhi shi (Fructus aurantii immaturus) and qing pi (Pericarpium citri reticulatae viride).

Infectious Disorders:

For common colds, add jing jie (Herba schizonepetae), fang feng (Radix saposhnikoviae) and ge gen (Radix puerariae lobatae).

For influenza, add jin yin hua (Flos lonicerae japonicae), lian qiao (Fructus forsythiae) and ban lan gen (Radix isatidis).

For acute bronchitis, add jie geng (Radix platycodonis), zhi qiao (Fructus aurantii), ku xing ren (Semen armeniaceae amarum) and bai bu (Radix stemonae).

For chronic bronchitis, add fu ling (Poria), chen pi (Pericarpium citri reticulatae), zi wan (Radix et rhizoma asteris) and kuan dong hua (Flos farfarae).

For acute otitis media, add long dan (Radix et rhizoma gentianae) and zhi zi (Fructus gardeniae).

For urinary tract infection, add bian xu (Herba polygoni avicularis), che qian cao (Herba plantaginis) and hai jin sha (Spora lygodii).

For malaria, add chang shan (Radix dichroae), bing lang (Semen arecae) and wu mei (Fructus mume).
Liver and Gallbladder Disorders:

- For icteric jaundice and hepatitis, add *zhì shí* (Fructus aurantii immaturus), *yīn chén* (Herba artemisiae scopariae), *bài shào* (Radix paeoniae alba) and *jīn qian cáo* (Herba lysimachiae).
- For damp-heat jaundice, add *yīn chén* (Herba artemisiae scopariae), *zhì *zi* (Fructus gardeniae) and *bàn lán géng* (Radix isatidis).
- For jaundice with more heat, add *zhí *zi* (Fructus gardeniae) and *huáng bó* (Cortex phellodendri chinensis).
- For jaundice resulting from hepatitis or cholecystitis, add *zhì shí* (Fructus aurantii immaturus), *yīn chén* (Herba artemisiae scopariae), *bài shào* (Radix paeoniae alba) and *jīn qian cáo* (Herba lysimachiae).

Gynecological Disorders:

- For postpartum wind invasion with perspiration, remove *chái hu* (Radix bupleuri).
- For postpartum wind invasion without fever, remove *huáng qín* (Radix scutellariae).
- For postpartum wind invasion with increased vomiting or nausea, increase the dosage of *shèng jiāng* (Rhizoma zingiberis recens).
- For postpartum wind invasion with marked deficiency, increase the dosage of *rén shén* (Radix et rhizoma ginseng).
- When there is wind invasion during the menstrual period, add *niú xi* (Radix achyranthis bidentatae), *táo rén* (Semen persicae) and *mu dān pí* (Cortex moutan).

Cautions/Contraindications

- *Xiao chái hu tang* should be used with caution in patients of yin and/or blood deficiencies, in patients of upper excess and lower deficiency, or in patients of liver fire. Inappropriate use of this formula may result in headache, dizziness or bleeding gums.
- In general, there is no sweating associated with relief of symptoms following the administration of *Xiao chái hu tang*, since it harmonizes, rather than releases the exterior. However, some patients do show sweating prior to recovery. They should be monitored closely to prevent excessive sweating from injuring yin.
- Avoid cold, raw, pungent and spicy foods while taking this formula.¹
References


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Editor’s Note: Part 2 of this article will appear in the August 2007 issue of Acupuncture Today.

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