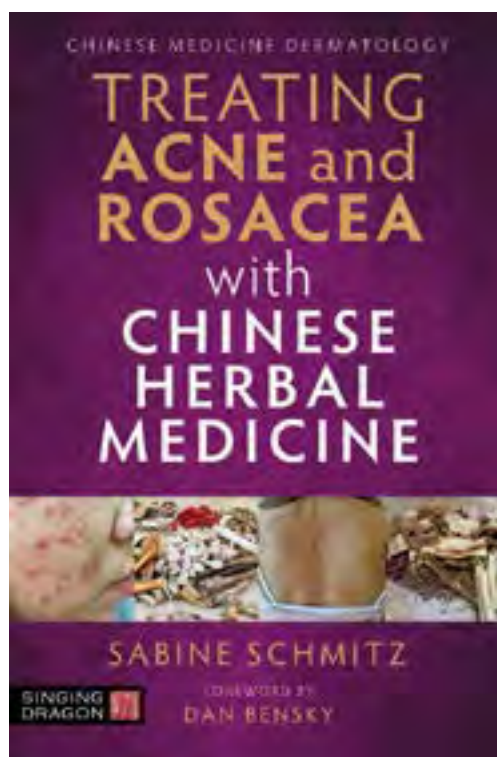




Sabine Schmitz

Treating Acne and Rosacea with Chinese Herbal Medicine



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Treating Acne and Rosacea with Chinese Herbal Medicine

A Practical Handbook

Sabine Schmitz

Foreword by Dan Bensky



SINGING DRAGON
LONDON AND PHILADELPHIA

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Acne Pustulosa

Pustules are inflamed pimples that are typically filled with white or yellow pus. Squeezing can lead to scars or dark spots on the skin.



Acne Nodosa

This is a severe form of acne that develops deep under the skin. The nodules are large, and generally do not contain pus, but are hard and often very painful.



Acne Nodulocystica

Nodulocystic acne, a severe form of acne, has multiple inflamed cysts and nodules due to bacteria invading the blocked pore. The lesions may turn deep red or purple and often leave scars. This form of acne is very difficult to treat, both in Western medicine and in TCM.

Overview and Basics of Chinese Dermatology

IT IS ASSUMED that the reader is familiar with the foundations of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). This chapter on the basics of TCM dermatology is primarily aimed at TCM students and beginners. Experts can, of course, skip this chapter. Nonetheless, the information in this chapter can be a valuable resource and refresher for everyone—TCM dermatologists, general TCM doctors, and students of TCM.

An Overview of the History of Chinese Medical Dermatology (*pí fū kē* 皮肤科)

Chinese medical dermatology draws on many centuries of experience, with detailed records of the effects of Chinese herbs and acupuncture on the condition of the skin. Comprehensive descriptions of the treatment of specific skin diseases were put down in writing by ancient scholars, and their clinical histories and notes offer a depth of experience that we still utilize in our practice today.

Yet time does not stand still. A great deal of research into Chinese medicine has been conducted both inside and outside China. In addition to clinical studies, official monographs about almost every Chinese medical plant are available at the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the World Health Organization (WHO). These monographs provide a detailed introduction and scientific overview of the safety, efficacy, and quality control of commonly used medicinal plants in Chinese dermatology. Moreover, gathered information about chemical composition, pharmacological effects, toxicology, clinical studies, and research has been incorporated into many *materia medica*, the herbal textbooks used by TCM doctors worldwide.¹



The Traditional Chinese Medicine Perspective on Acne

The History of Acne According to Traditional Chinese Medicine

Like many other diseases, acne has been treated with Chinese medicine for a very long time. Throughout the last two thousand years, from the early Qín to the late Qīng Dynasty, doctors explored and summarized their knowledge gained through long-term clinical observation and practice. The wealth of experience is therefore of great magnitude. TCM syndrome differentiation and understanding of the pathogenesis of acne has always been, and continues to be, refined and improved. Every day, we rely on this ancient knowledge in our practices, which helps us give our patients the best possible treatment. However, every TCM doctor should feel free to incorporate their own experiences in the treatment of acne patients. The treatment has to be adapted to many different circumstances. Hence, doctors also have to learn to be flexible.

Before we delve into detailed TCM syndrome differentiation, we will first take a look at the history of acne according to TCM in order to understand the development and changes in the treatment of this skin condition.

The Definition and History of Acne According to Traditional Chinese Medicine

Every culture and every generation has its own approach towards health—and life in general. The language of such a culture changes constantly, as does

all language. Therefore, it is no surprise that the understanding, treatment methods, and terminology for acne¹ has varied over time. Many different names can be found in ancient texts when describing acne, but today TCM refers to acne as *fèi fēng fěn cì* 肺风粉刺, also called “Lung-wind acne”, “lesion of Lung wind,” or “Lung-wind white thorns”—or, in short, “*fěn cì*” (acne). The name *fèi fēng fěn cì* is derived from the shape of the eruptions on the face, which look like rice grains or thorns (*cì* 刺) and its connection to the Lung (*fèi* 肺) and the invasion of wind (*fēng* 风).

According to TCM theory, the skin is closely related to the Lungs as they control the skin by spreading (diffusing) fluids towards the skin and into the space between the skin and the muscles. The Lungs receive these fluids from the Spleen. If this diffusion mechanism functions as it should, the skin is nourished and moistened, and looks lustrous and healthy. An impairment of this function leads to malnourishment and dehydration of the skin. The Lungs are also in charge of controlling the opening and closing of the pores. In a healthy state, the opening and closing of the pores is well regulated, sweating will be normal, and the person is resilient. If the function of the Lungs is impaired, the space between the skin and the muscles may be too open, in which case a person sweats too much and pathogenic factors from outside can penetrate the body easily. The body’s defenses drop and the person easily gets sick. The other option is that the pores are too tight. In this case, sweat cannot go out and pathogenic factors that have already invaded the body will usually cause strong reactions, such as high fever. All this shows how important the Lungs are for a healthy skin and immune defense.

As mentioned above, the understanding and description of acne has changed over time. The following lists an overview of acne and how it is described in classical TCM books and sources.²

Qín and Hàn Dynasties (221–206 BC) (206 BC–220 AD) ³	<i>Huáng Dì Nèi Jīng</i> (The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic), author unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Earliest reference to the term “<i>cuó</i> 瘡”⁴■ Earliest ancient description of acne as disease, its cause, and pathogenesis■ Pathogenesis: wind (<i>fēng</i> 风) attacks the body after sweating, and Lung <i>qì</i> (<i>fèi qì</i> 肺气) is constrained inside■ Points out that acne can be caused by dampness (<i>shī</i> 湿) attacking the skin when the interstitial space⁵ is loose, and sweat pores are open after sweating
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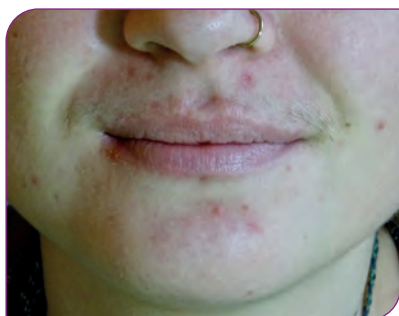
Cheeks



Chin



Around the Mouth





Syndrome Differentiation and Treatment of Acne According to Traditional Chinese Medicine

IT IS ESSENTIAL to note that acne does not present as one single appearance. Acne can present in different ways—with superficial or deep pimples, with or without inflammation. In a narrower sense, acne refers to the pimples that become inflamed. Precise differentiation is very important in order to develop a treatment approach exactly fitting each individual patient. Without this, the treatment will not be effective, as the same therapeutic principle is not suitable for each patient. And this is exactly what many of patients are looking for—an individual treatment approach, fitted to their needs. There is no standard treatment for this complex skin condition. This is why before looking at different treatment options, we need to review the differentiation of location and clinical presentation of acne.

Skin conditions are not as superficial as they may seem. All skin conditions are caused by pathogens, and at their root lies an internal imbalance. Precise syndrome differentiation is an essential requirement for effective treatment. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the process of syndrome differentiation is called *biàn zhèng* (辨证). All clinical information gained by the four main diagnostic TCM methods—inspection (observation), auscultation (listening), olfaction (smelling), and palpation—are analyzed. More data is gathered through questioning the patient, and details including the location, the clinical presentation, the duration, and the accompanying symptoms such as pain, discharge, and the color of the pimples are evaluated. Since a successful treatment relies on accurate diagnosis, the complex

process of making a correct diagnosis according to TCM is essential. Each patient presents with a different origin of the disease and suffers from different accompanying symptoms. Don't forget to have a look at the patient's back and perhaps the chest, as these are also very common locations for acne. It is very important to note the color of the pimples and if they are superficial or deep, at all locations. However, checking the tongue and pulse is another essential part of TCM diagnosis, and this can also provide direction for further questioning, leading us toward symptoms the patient forgot to mention. It is a common experience in clinical practice that patients often add essential information only when reminded of it in some way. Thus, checking the tongue and pulse is very important as a simple indicator for further enquiries and accurate syndrome differentiation.

The treatment of acne employs various treatment strategies and combines both internal and external treatments corresponding with the individual clinical manifestation on the skin. The most common Chinese medicine syndromes that present in my practice and the formulas that have proven to be most effective are explained in detail below, and are listed according to their frequency of occurrence in my practice. It should be emphasized, however, that the frequency of occurrence can vary for different practitioners, perhaps because of local environmental factors, differing seasons, or dietary habits in different cultures.

Characteristics of the skin, treatment principles according to TCM syndrome, and the ingredients, functions, and effects of the different formulas used in each individual TCM syndrome, as well as the first time it was referenced, are all explained in extensive detail. While this primarily serves to increase understanding for students and beginners, it can also serve as a useful refresher for advanced clinicians. Modifications to herbal formulas, skincare, and lifestyle and dietary advice will complete this section, providing a reference that is easy to read, use, and navigate in your day-to-day practice.

Practical Advice in the Use of Chinese Herbs

In acne, as for most other skin conditions, I have found decoctions of raw herbs to be the most effective form of treatment. Although herbal decoctions do not taste good, patients usually tolerate them once the benefits are explained. It has to be clearly explained that the herbs won't taste good in order to prevent the patient's illusion that a Chinese herbal decoction could resemble in any way a pleasant-tasting "wellness tea." Once prepared for the worst, they will come back to their next appointment and say, "You were so

right! That tea was the most horrible taste ever, but you know what, after just one week I got used to it and now I don't find it so bad anymore."

My practical hint for very bitter formulas as well as for taste-sensitive patients is to recommend the addition of honey to the decoction, which makes it taste a little less bitter and more tolerable. Patient satisfaction is very important for compliance with Chinese herbal medicine. It is better to drink a decoction with a little honey in it than drink nothing. You can advise the patient that a lukewarm or warm decoction will taste more tolerable than drinking it cold, especially when a formula contains a lot of very bitter herbs. Additionally, keep in mind that bitter decoctions should never be consumed cold, as the cold and bitter herbs will affect the Stomach and patients may feel uncomfortable after drinking it. One hint for making cold and bitter herbs more tolerable for patients with a weak digestion is to use *páo zhì* 炮制. This traditional preparation process, which changes and enhances the therapeutic effect of medicinal plants, has already been explained in detail in the section "Chinese Herbal Treatment Options in Chinese Medical Dermatology" in Chapter 3. However, dry frying (*chǎo*) can be used to minimize the bitter and cold nature of herbs that easily harm the Spleen and Stomach. This preparation method reduces their cold properties and makes them more tolerable for the digestive system, and any qualified TCM pharmacy will be able to prepare it. In conclusion: Raw herbs are always best; don't deviate from them!

Wind-Heat Stagnating in the Lungs (*Fēng Rè Fàn Fèi Zhèng* 风热犯肺证)

Characteristics

The most common pattern of acne is wind-heat stagnating in the Lungs. In this pattern, acne occurs soon after the wind-heat invasion. Skin conditions caused by wind-heat are characterized by rapid onset, often after an episode of common cold or flu, and are often quick to resolve. The skin lesions primarily appear on the face, mainly cheeks and forehead, and rarely on the back or chest. The skin is red, feels warm, and the acne usually manifests as bright-red, inflamed papules and pustules, which are painful and can itch. Accompanying symptoms may include constipation, dark-yellow urine, a dry mouth, thirst, restlessness and flushing of the face. If there has been a recent flu or common cold, then cough, breathlessness and a feeling of warmth may be present.

The tongue is red with a thin yellow coating. The pulse is rapid and floating, or rapid and slippery, depending on whether there is phlegm in the Lungs.



Clinical Cases of Acne and Rosacea

IN THIS SECTION, five case studies of acne and one case of rosacea are presented to showcase how Chinese herbal medicine is applied in clinical practice, and to demonstrate how the patient's skin improves over the course of treatment. This will give you a deeper understanding of the use of Chinese herbs, and increase your confidence in prescribing them to your patients in your own practice.

If you look closely at the individual herbal formulas, you will recognize that many of them are based on classical formulas, with the addition of several herbal combinations that are used again and again because of their known efficacy. The ability to prescribe the correct base formula and flexibly modify it to fit the individual case is one of the central skills of an experienced TCM practitioner and the key to selecting the right herbal prescription.

#1: Female Patient, 22 Years Old—Acne

First Visit

This young woman presented in the clinic with facial acne on her cheeks and around her nose that had been present for nearly one year. Her skin was red and felt warm. The acne manifested as bright-red, inflamed papules, occasionally pustules, which were painful and sometimes itchy. The skin on her upper arms showed the small bumps of “keratosis pilaris.”¹ She was a very stressed young woman, currently studying and under a lot of pressure, much of it self-directed. Sometimes she felt a sensation of internal heat, especially in times of strain and overload. She also complained of occasional constipation; otherwise, her eating patterns and digestion were normal. Her menstrual cycle was also normal, with no irregularity or pain.



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