

THE SUBSTITUTION OF REN SHEN BY DANG SHEN

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It is a common occurrence in Chinese herbal practice to substitute Ren Shen (Radix Ginseng) with Dang Shen (Radix Codonopsis Pilosulae), but unfortunately none of the textbooks on Chinese herbal medicine written in either the English or Chinese language provide a standardised model explaining how to correctly achieve this substitution. For this reason, it can often be challenging for TCM practitioners to make an educated decision on this substitution, and incorrect substitution can yield unwanted and ineffective treatment results. Therefore, it is the aim of this article to provide a standardised model for clarifying and correcting the information on how to use Dang Shen to substitute for Ren Shen.

The textbook *Chinese Herbal Medicine: Formulas & Strategies*¹ contains forty-five principal formulas in which Ren Shen is used. The book discusses the possibility of substituting Ren Shen with Dang Shen in twenty-eight out of these forty-five formulas. Nevertheless, it is not clear whether the substitution can take place in the remaining seventeen formulas that also contain Ren Shen. Furthermore, it is not stated that there are any specific reasons as to whether Ren Shen can or cannot be substituted by Dang Shen.

On the other hand, the textbook *Chinese Herbal Medicine: Materia Medica*² provides reasons when and why Dang Shen can substitute for Ren Shen. According to its contents Dang Shen usually substitutes Ren Shen because of its lower price and its similar functions to Ren Shen. When a patient has Spleen or Lung qi deficiency it is common to substitute Ren Shen by Dang Shen. In contrast, if a patient has a yang collapse pattern, Ren Shen should not be substituted at all. This information is useful and accurate but unfortunately it is not complete. Questions arise as to what happens when a patient has a Heart or Kidney deficiency pattern: is the substitution still appropriate? Are the substitution methods suggested in the twenty-eight principal formulas the best approach, or can the substitution still take place in the remaining seventeen formulas where no suggestion was given? Since the information is not complete and standardised it is hard to know if Dang Shen can be used instead of Ren Shen to treat any other patterns except the Spleen and Lung qi deficiency patterns. The only way to standardise the substitution method is to

achieve a clear understanding of the functions and indications of both Ren Shen and Dang Shen. This will facilitate a correct substitution of these two herbs in any kind of formula containing Ren Shen.

I. Basic functions and indications of Dang Shen and Ren Shen

Generally speaking, Dang Shen has two main functions: one is to tonify the Spleen and Lung qi in the patterns of Spleen qi deficiency, Lung qi deficiency, or a combination of both. The main symptoms include tiredness, shortness of breath, loose stools, spontaneous sweating, chronic cough, low appetite etc. The second function is to generate fluids and relieve thirst in the pattern of deficiency of fluids and qi. The main symptoms include thirst, tiredness, etc.

Ren Shen has similar functions and indications to Dang Shen, except that it has a stronger potency. In addition, Ren Shen has other important functions that Dang Shen does not have and they are:

- i. Ren Shen strongly tonifies the source (yuan) qi: for severe source qi deficiency conditions that manifest as shallow respiration, shortness of breath, profuse sweating, cold limbs, minute pulse etc.
- ii. Ren Shen tonifies the Heart qi and calms the spirit and is used in Heart qi or Heart yang deficiency and shen disturbance. The main symptoms include palpitations, insomnia, forgetfulness etc.
- iii. Ren Shen tonifies Kidney qi or Kidney yang. This particular function is usually not known or is simply overlooked. The textbooks usually only mention that Ren Shen is used for impotence caused by Kidney deficiency but it is important to mention that Ren Shen has a very strong effect on tonifying the Kidney. As noted above, Ren Shen can strongly tonify the source qi, which implies that it will also tonify the Kidney qi. In the classical text *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing*, it was explained that Ren Shen has the function of tonifying all five yin organs. Besides tonifying the Spleen and Lung qi, Ren Shen also tonifies the Heart qi and Kidney qi. It can be assumed that Ren Shen is used to tonify any kind of qi deficiency in the body.

In summary, Dang Shen can substitute for Ren Shen when a patient is Spleen or Lung qi deficient. If a condition involves Heart or Kidney deficiency (with or without Spleen or Lung deficiency) it is better not to substitute Ren Shen with Dang Shen. Furthermore, if a patient is experiencing severe source qi deficiency or yang collapse it is mandatory to use Ren Shen. This set of rules can be used as a standardised model that will facilitate the process of substituting Ren Shen with Dang Shen.

II. Formula examples

1. Formulas where it is not advisable to use Dang Shen to substitute Ren Shen include:

*Zhi Gan Cao Tang*³ (Honey-Fried Licorice Decoction)

Function: Tonifies the Heart qi and blood (or yin and yang).

Indications: Palpitations, irregular pulse etc. Here, Ren Shen is used to tonify the Heart qi and support the Heart yang. Dang Shen does not have this function so it is better not to use it to substitute Ren Shen as the textbook suggests.

*Gui Pi Tang*⁴ (Restore the Spleen Decoction)

Function: Tonifies the Heart and Spleen, nourishes the qi and blood. *Indications:* Tiredness, palpitations, insomnia, bleeding etc. In this formula, Ren Shen is used to tonify the Spleen and Heart qi and to calm the Heart spirit. Dang Shen tonifies the Spleen qi but it does not tonify the Heart qi or calm the spirit, so the suggestion given in the textbook to use Dang Shen to substitute for Ren Shen in this case would not be the best approach.

*Tian Wang Bu Xin Dan*⁵ (Emperor of Heaven's Special Pill to Tonify the Heart). *Function:* Nourishes yin and blood and calms the spirit. *Indications:* Palpitations, insomnia, agitation, irritability etc. In this formula, Ren Shen is used to nourish the Heart and calm the spirit, but since Dang Shen does not have this function it is better to use Ren Shen. Again the suggestion given in the textbook would not be the best approach.

*Ding Zhi Wan*⁶ (Settle the Emotions Pill)

Function: Tonifies the Heart qi and calms the spirit. *Indications:* Palpitations, insomnia, fearfulness etc. Here, Ren Shen tonifies the Heart qi and calms the Heart spirit, and as Dang Shen does not have this function the suggestion of substitution in the textbook is not advisable.

*Sang Piao Xiao San*⁷ (Mantis Egg-Case Powder)

Functions: Regulates and tonifies the Heart and Kidneys, stabilises the essence, and stops leakage. *Indications:* Frequent urination or incontinence, spermatorrhoea, disorientation, forgetfulness etc. Here, Ren Shen is used to tonify the source qi and the Heart qi. Dang Shen does not have this function, so the substitution suggested in the textbook is not advisable.

2. Formulas that require the use of Ren Shen

*Shen Fu Tang*⁸ (Ginseng and Prepared Aconite Decoction)

Functions: Restores the yang, tonifies the source qi, rescues the qi from collapse due to devastated yang. *Indications:* Cold extremities, sweating, weak breathing and shortness

of breath, minute pulse etc. In this formula, Ren Shen is required because it can strongly tonify the source qi and rescue the qi from collapse due to devastated yang. Dang Shen cannot be used in this particular pattern so the textbook is accurate.

Other formulas such as *Du Shen Tang* (Unaccompanied Ginseng Decoction),⁹ *Si Ni Jia Ren Shen Tang* (Frigid Extremities Decoction plus Ginseng),¹⁰ with similar patterns to *Shen Fu Tang*, also require the use of Ren Shen.

3. Formulas that permit substitution

In the formulas that treat Spleen and Lung qi deficiency it is viable to use Dang Shen in place of Ren Shen. Examples of formulas that tonify the Spleen qi include: *Si Jun Zi Tang* (Four-Gentleman Decoction),¹¹ *Shen Ling Bai Zhu San* (Ginseng, Poria and Atractylodes Macrocephala Powder),¹² *Bu Zhong Yi Qi Tang* (Tonify the Middle and Augment the Qi Decoction),¹³ etc. *Bu Fei Tang* (Tonify the Lungs Decoction),¹⁴ is an example of formulas that tonify Lung qi. However, if a patient shows any signs of the Kidney or Heart deficiency, it is better not to use Dang Shen in place of Ren Shen no matter what the basic or predominant pattern.

In conclusion, there are three basic guiding principles that can be helpful when deciding whether to use Dang Shen instead of Ren Shen. These principles are: i. use Dang Shen for Spleen qi or Lung qi deficiency only; ii. use Ren Shen when Kidney or Heart deficiency conditions are involved; iii. When there is yang collapse pattern or severe source qi deficiency, Ren Shen must be used and no substitution is acceptable. We believe these principles can cover all the formulas that contain Ren Shen, and they can assist TCM practitioners in making the right decisions in herb substitutions and at the same time achieve excellent clinical outcomes.

We hope that this article can benefit Chinese herbal studies and clinical practice.

References

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