

Review

Traditional Chinese Medicine and Depression: Making a Bridge Between Eastern and Western Theories.

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Abstract: Depression presents a significant global health burden, affecting individuals across societal strata and carrying profound implications for public health. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) offers a unique perspective on mental health, rooted in millennia of philosophical principles and observations of human nature. This narrative review explores essential TCM concepts regarding mental health and depression, comparing and contrasting them with conventional Western medicine perspectives. Central to TCM is the concept of Shen, representing the spiritual and mental aspect of the human being, which plays a fundamental role in regulating cognitive and emotional functions. The review examines the interplay of Shen with the mind, emotions, and spirit, highlighting its importance in promoting emotional balance and preventing mental disorders like depression. Furthermore, the review elucidates TCM's holistic treatment approach, which aims to restore Shen balance through therapeutic modalities such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, diet, and self-care practices. Scientific evidence, including meta-analyses, supports the efficacy of acupuncture in alleviating depressive symptoms, offering a promising complementary therapeutic option. By bridging concepts from East and West, this review underscores the importance of a comprehensive and personalized approach to depression treatment, ultimately aiming to improve outcomes and promote holistic well-being.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Medicine, Acupuncture, Shen, Mental Health, Depression.

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1. Introduction

In the modern fast-paced society, numerous challenges are encountered which can adversely affect mental health, consequently leading to negative impacts on social, economic, and family dimensions ¹⁻⁷.

The World Health Organization ^{8,9} reports that over 50% of the population in middle and high-income countries will experience at least one mental disorder in their lifetime. As mental illness affects individuals across all social strata, it must be recognized as a public health concern with significant repercussions for society.

Therefore, depression, a common result of societal stress, manifests in various ways and can impact individuals globally. The National Institute of Mental Health ¹⁰ describes depression as a serious mood disorder that can significantly alter behavior, hinder cognitive processes, and disrupt daily functioning such as work, eating, and sleeping. Symptoms include persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, pessimism, irritability, and overall loss of interest and pleasure in activities. Depression is a leading cause of disability worldwide, affecting an estimated 300 million people and increasing in incidence by 18.4% from 2005 to 2015 ¹¹. It is also a major contributor to suicide, with approximately 800,000 deaths annually ⁹.

For all these reasons, it is important to keep an eye out regarding new forms of treatment and interventions for depression. Monitoring advancements in mental health care

and ensuring access to effective therapies can help improve outcomes for individuals struggling with this pervasive and debilitating condition.

TCM, which is rooted in a rich history spanning millennia, is based on philosophical principles and meticulous observations of nature and the human body¹²⁻¹⁶. These principles, essential for understanding the system, include the theory of the five elements, the theory of Yin and Yang, the circulation of Qi and Blood, and the importance of Zang Fu (organs and viscera).

The interconnection of these principles forms a comprehensive framework that considers the human body as a microcosm, reflecting patterns observed in nature¹². TCM acknowledges the influence of seasons, daily cycles, and emotions on the body's energy balance, providing a unique perspective on health and disease. This understanding is crucial in TCM practice, where the pursuit of energy balance is fundamental to maintaining health and preventing illness.

TCM therapy may include acupuncture, herbal medicine, dietary changes, and practices like Qi Gong^{14,16,17}. Furthermore, TCM often incorporates attention to emotions, recognizing the close connection between emotional state and physical health¹³. This approach in TCM reflects not only a view on disease healing but also a philosophy of health maintenance and promotion over time. By considering the individual as a whole, TCM seeks to restore harmonious balance among body, mind, and spirit, promoting lasting health and resilience to illness. This unique perspective makes TCM a valuable source of wisdom and practice for holistic health.

This narrative review delves into essential TCM concepts concerning mental health and depression. We compare and contrast the understanding of depression from both conventional and Chinese medicine perspectives. Additionally, we examine the fundamental treatment approach and provide insights into recent scientific findings on the effectiveness of acupuncture in treating depression.

2. The meaning of Shen

In TCM, the concept of Shen plays a central role, representing a vital dimension that transcends mere physical function. The term "Shen" refers to the spiritual and mental aspect of the human being, being considered the dwelling place of consciousness, emotions, and spirit.

According to Ferreira and Luz¹², Shen is often described as the "spiritual essence" that inhabits the body. It is a subtle yet profoundly meaningful energy that influences not only mental health but also the overall health of the body. In TCM, Shen is considered one of the Three Treasures, alongside Jing (vital essence) and Qi (vital energy), representing the spiritual and mental dimension of existence.

Its direct association with the mind, emotions, and spirit evidences the importance of Shen in TCM. Smith, Armour¹⁸ assert that the balance of Shen is crucial for achieving holistic health, reflecting the harmony between body and mind. Shen plays a fundamental role in regulating cognitive, emotional, and spiritual functions, being considered the source of consciousness and moral awareness¹⁴. When Shen is balanced, the mind is clear, calm, and able to function effectively, contributing to emotional stability and overall well-being of the individual^{12,19}.

The connection between Shen and mental health is fundamental in TCM, as it recognizes that emotions play a crucial role in the body's energy balance. When Shen is in harmony, emotions are balanced and expressed in a healthy manner, contributing to emotional stability and overall well-being of the individual¹⁸. Therefore, understanding and nurturing Shen is essential for preventing mental disorders, including depression, and promoting a balanced and fulfilling life.

2.1. Relationship of Shen with the mind, emotions and spirit

Mind: As highlighted by Ferreira and Luz ¹², Shen is considered the manifestation of the mind in the body. This profound interconnection between Shen and the mind is crucial for psychological and cognitive balance. A clear, focused, and tranquil mind is indicative of a balanced Shen. When Shen is in harmony, the mind is able to function effectively, positively influencing cognition and decision-making ¹⁸.

Emotions: The work of Santos, Amorim ²⁰ states that Shen plays a crucial role in regulating emotions. When in balance, it contributes to healthy emotional expression, allowing for a balanced response to emotionally charged situations. However, imbalances in Shen can result in excessive emotional manifestations, such as anxiety, sadness, or agitation. For this, understanding the relation of Shen to emotions is essential for the TCM approach to mental health management ²¹.

Spirit: Ferreira and Luz ¹² assert that, from the perspective of TCM, Shen is intrinsically linked to the spirit, representing the unique spark that animates each individual. When Shen is nourished and balanced, the spirit flourishes, manifesting vitality, mental clarity, and connection to something greater than the physical. Thus, the health of Shen is reflected in spiritual vitality, providing a solid foundation for overall mental health ²².

Therefore, understanding Shen in TCM is to recognize the intimate connection between body and mind, understanding that holistic health is achieved when all dimensions of the being are in harmony ¹². By exploring the relationships between Shen and various types of mental illnesses, the aim is to unveil how spiritual and mental vitality directly affects the emotional state, promoting a comprehensive approach to understanding and treating mental health conditions.

2.2. The role of Shen in depression

As we have discussed, Shen is a key component of mental health, playing a crucial role in emotional and mental balance ¹². Shen is often translated as "spirit" or "mind" and described as a bright light that sparkles in the eyes when a person is emotionally balanced, clear, and serene ¹².

The relationship between a balanced Shen and the prevention of mental disorders, including depression, is discussed by authors such as Ferreira and Luz ¹². A balanced Shen is capable of positively influencing emotions, providing emotional stability and resilience to stress. When Shen is nurtured and reinforced, a solid foundation for mental health is created, preventing the onset of imbalances that could lead to depression. The balance of Shen is also intrinsically linked to connection with something greater than the physical ¹². A person with a balanced Shen is more likely to experience a sense of purpose, meaning, and spiritual connection, factors that play a vital role in preventing mental disorders.

Authors such as Santos, Amorim ²⁰ and Silva ²³ enrich this perspective by highlighting Shen as a crucial component in the prevention of mental disorders, including depression. According to these authors, a balanced Shen is reflected in a serene, clear mind capable of effectively managing emotions. This balance is not only reflected in emotional stability but also in the ability to confront stress and adversity with resilience ²⁰.

The perspective of Ferreira and Luz ¹² expands this connection, stating that a nurtured Shen goes beyond emotional stability, positively influencing cognition and decision-making abilities. The clear and focused mind associated with a balanced Shen creates a solid foundation for lasting mental health. Additionally, authors like Röscke, Wolf ²⁴ and Dong, Chen ²² add that therapeutic interventions, such as acupuncture, can play a vital role in promoting Shen balance. Acupuncture is viewed as a practice that not only treats the symptoms but also strengthens the energetic systems, thereby contributing to spiritual and mental vitality.

Therefore, understanding the role of Shen in mental health is recognizing its importance in promoting emotional balance and preventing conditions such as depression. The approach of TCM focuses on nurturing and balancing Shen, recognizing it as a vital component to the holistic health of the human being.

3. Depression - Bridging east and west

When comparing TCM to Western medicine (WM), it becomes evident that both approaches have distinct merits. While WM often stands out for direct interventions and precise diagnoses, TCM brings a complementary perspective by considering health as a dynamic state of balance and constant evolution ²⁵.

WM is notable for its effectiveness in acute treatments, with interventions often directly targeting specific disease symptoms ²⁵. It is undeniable that the technological and pharmaceutical advancements in WM have provided precise diagnoses and highly specialized therapeutic approaches, particularly effective in emergencies and critical health conditions. However, TCM offers a complementary and often more comprehensive approach ¹⁴.

WM, while effective in treating acute conditions, is often perceived as more reactive than preventive. Thus, integrating TCM and WM approaches can offer a more comprehensive and complementary model for healthcare, combining the diagnostic precision and rapid interventions of WM with the broad and preventive perspective of TCM ^{17,25-28}. This integrative approach can result in more holistic and personalized care, benefiting patients more comprehensively over time.

However, to make this possible, it is important to link theories and provide a definitive bridge between the concepts.

3.1. Where both meets

According to Silva ²³ and Ferreira and Luz ¹², TCM understands depression as an imbalance in the flow of Qi (vital energy) and Blood, directly affecting organs such as the liver and the heart. This imbalance can result in both physical and emotional symptoms, making it crucial to understand the connection between these aspects. It is also important to understand that in WM, psychiatry is a very complex topic and mental illnesses usually have greater comorbidity with other mental and physical illnesses ²⁹. Below, it is presented a possible interconnection between concepts according to common differential symptoms.

TCM: Depression due to Qi Stagnation: In this pattern, Qi (vital energy) does not flow freely, resulting in symptoms such as chest tightness, irritability, and abdominal distension. The therapeutic approach may involve practices aimed at promoting the free flow of Qi, such as acupuncture and breathing techniques ¹².

WM: Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder, which is characterized by irritability and bloating. As well, Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder (usually manifested in children and adolescents), which is markedly linked to severe recurrent temper outbursts manifested verbally and/or behaviourally that are out of proportion in intensity or duration to the situation or cause ²⁹.

TCM: Depression due to Heart Fire: This pattern is associated with symptoms such as insomnia, mental agitation, and intense emotional manifestations. Treatment may involve techniques that calm the Heart, such as specific acupuncture and meditation practices ²³.

WM: Major Depressive Disorder shows characteristics of emotional manifestations that can be observed by others, as well as Insomnia and psychomotor agitation. Also possibly related, Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder is characterized by noticeable affective lability, anxiety and feeling of being “on the edge”, as well as insomnia and a sense of being overwhelmed or out of control ²⁹.

TCM: Depression due to Qi and Blood Deficiency: This pattern emphasizes the importance of adequate nourishment for the body and mind, as mentioned by Ferreira and Luz ¹². This type may be associated with symptoms of fatigue, weakness, and lack of concentration. The therapeutic approach will include strategies to strengthen both Qi and Blood, such as herbal medicine and dietary recommendations.

WM: Major Depressive Disorder usually demonstrates symptoms of fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day, as well as diminished ability to think or concentrate ²⁹. On the other hand, Persistent Depressive Disorder also shares these symptoms.

TCM: Depression due to Dampness and Cold Accumulation: This pattern emphasizes the importance of cleansing and purification, as discussed by Silva ²³. This type may manifest in symptoms such as lethargy, mental fog, and a feeling of heaviness in the body. Interventions may include practices that eliminate dampness and cold, such as acupuncture and dietary changes.

WM: Major Depressive Disorder best relates to this TCM Syndrome. This is due to the possible presence of constant psychomotor retardation, fatigue or loss of energy and diminished ability to think ²⁹.

TCM: Depression due to Kidney Deficiency: is related to an imbalance in the kidneys, and its influence on mental health is highlighted by authors such as Ferreira and Luz ¹². This type of depression may manifest in symptoms such as chronic fatigue, lack of motivation, and difficulties in concentration, emphasizing the importance of renal health in emotional stability.

WM: Major Depressive Disorder is much related to this TCM syndrome as it shares traits such as highly diminished interest or pleasure in all/almost all activities, constant fatigue or loss of energy, and diminished ability to think or concentrate. Meanwhile, similarly, Persistent Depressive Disorder may also be deeply related as it commonly displays signs of low energy or fatigue, as well as poor concentration or difficulty making decisions. However, Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder may also be associated with TCM kidney deficiency, manifesting as decreased interest in usual activities, subjective difficulty in concentration, lethargy, easy fatigability or marked lack of energy ²⁹.

TCM: Depression due to Interior Wind Upward Disturbance is addressed by Silva ²³ as a contributing factor to mental disorders. This type of depression is associated with symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, irritability, and mental agitation, indicating the need for techniques that calm the Interior Wind, usually associated with the liver.

WM: Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder shows the most commonalities as it is characterized by a certain degree of irritability or increased interpersonal conflicts, marked depressed mood, feelings of hopelessness, or self-deprecating thoughts, high levels of anxiety and tension ²⁹. Persistent and Major Depressive Disorder may also show some common symptoms but not directly associated (Low self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt, recurrent thoughts of death ²⁹).

TCM: Depression due to Attack of Wind-Cold: The invasion of external pathogenic factors, such as wind and cold, in the etiology of depression, is highlighted in works such as of Ferreira and Luz ¹². Symptoms such as aversion to cold, lethargy, and body aches are associated with this type of depression, requiring interventions that expel these pathogenic factors and strengthen defensive energy.

WM: No depression type could be associated to this TCM syndrome. Due to the acute nature of it, it can only be theorized that it may potentiate Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (lethargy and pain in muscles or joints ²⁹).

TCM: Depression due to Blood Stagnation, as explored by Silva ²³, is a kind of depression associated with blockages in blood flow, manifesting in symptoms such as persistent pain, obsessive thoughts, and a sense of emotional heaviness. Therapeutic strategies may include practices that promote blood circulation, such as acupuncture and specific herbs.

WM: Persistent and Major Depressive Disorder may display common symptoms with the TCM pattern. Those may be low self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt, as well as possible recurrent thoughts of death ²⁹.

It is important to exercise caution as Substance/Medication-Induced Depressive Disorder may present with common depression symptoms. However, it possibly emerges during or shortly after substance intoxication or withdrawal, or following exposure to or discontinuation of medication ²⁹.

4. The fundamentals of a TCM treatment approach to depression

In TCM, the fundamental therapeutic approach aims to restore the balance of Shen, recognizing the connection between body, mind, and spirit ¹². Various therapeutic methods can be used, each with its own purpose to address specific aspects of the energetic imbalance.

- Acupuncture: as highlighted by authors such as Smith, Armour ¹⁸ and Röschke, Wolf ²⁴, it is a central practice in restoring Shen balance. The insertion of needles in specific points of the body seeks to unblock the flow of Qi, promoting energetic harmony and alleviating depressive symptoms. Acupuncture not only treats the symptoms but also strengthens Shen, contributing to a clear and balanced mind.
- Herbal Medicine: The use of medicinal herbs, as discussed by Ferreira and Luz ¹², plays a vital role in Chinese herbal therapy to balance Shen. Specific formulas are prescribed to address underlying energetic imbalances. For example, herbs that calm Shen may be incorporated to treat the mental agitation associated with certain types of depression. Mattos ¹⁴ also emphasizes the importance of herbal medicine in the TCM therapeutic approach.
- Diet: as mentioned by Santos, Amorim ²⁰, diet is considered a therapeutic tool in TCM. Foods are selected based on their energetic properties and impact on the organs. A balanced diet tailored to individual energy needs helps nourish Shen and sustain mental health. Chen ³⁰ also discusses the principles of diet in promoting energy balance.
- Self-care Practices: practices like Qi Gong and meditation, are noted by Dong, Chen ²² as complementary to treatment. These practices aim to balance energy, calm the mind, and strengthen Shen. Regular incorporation of these techniques into lifestyle maintains energetic balance. Vieira and Dzung ¹³ also highlight the importance of self-care in maintaining health from the TCM perspective.

By correlating each therapeutic method with the restoration of Shen balance, the therapeutic approach in TCM seeks to alleviate symptoms, strengthen vital essence, and promote lasting mental health. This integration reflects the unique view of TCM on the dynamic interaction between Shen and overall well-being.

By restoring the capacity to regulate emotions, the basis of the imbalance is therefore corrected. The treatment approach should then be accordingly to the specific imbalance detected in the patient as discussed before in this article.

5. Evidence of acupuncture for the treatment of depression

The theory behind using acupuncture to treat depression is based on TCM principles. According to TCM, depression is seen as an imbalance in the flow of Qi and Blood, affecting organs such as the liver and heart. Acupuncture seeks to restore this energetic balance by stimulating specific points along the body's meridians to promote the free flow of Qi and Blood.

Scientifically, acupuncture has diverse actions in the human body. When an acupoint is stimulated, it can trigger a response in the nervous system, releasing neurotransmitters and hormones ^{26,27,31}. This response can help to reduce pain, inflammation, and stress, and promote overall wellbeing ²⁷. Acupuncture is thought to help restore balance and harmony in the body's physiological processes.

In the meta-analysis carried out by Armour, Smith ³², the authors gathered data from various clinical studies. These studies involved patients diagnosed with depression who underwent acupuncture sessions or a control treatment, such as placebo or no additional treatment. The results indicated that acupuncture had a significant positive effect on reducing depressive symptoms compared to the control group. This suggests that acupuncture may be an effective therapeutic option for patients with depression. The observed benefits may be related to acupuncture's ability to promote the body's energy balance, relieve stress and tension, and stimulate the release of neurotransmitters associated with emotional well-being, such as serotonin and dopamine.

The study conducted by Chan, Lo ²¹ consisted of a meta-analysis with the aim of investigating the benefits of combining acupuncture and antidepressant medication in the treatment of depression. To conduct the meta-analysis, the authors selected clinical studies comparing the effectiveness of the combination of acupuncture and antidepressants with the use of antidepressants alone in patients with depression. The results of the meta-analysis demonstrated that the combination of acupuncture and antidepressants was more effective than treatment with antidepressants alone. This suggests that adding acupuncture to the standard therapeutic regimen can provide additional benefits in relieving depressive symptoms. The synergistic effect observed between these therapeutic approaches can be attributed to their ability to act on different aspects of the body's homeostasis, providing a more comprehensive and integrated approach to treating depression.

As well, the study conducted by Wang, Qi ³³ analyzed randomized controlled trials and found that acupuncture can significantly decrease the severity of depression, although it does not have an impact on achieving total remission compared to a placebo control.

In a recent study by Smith, Armour ³⁴, a meta-analysis of 64 studies was carried out, focusing on acupuncture as an intervention for depression. The findings suggested that acupuncture might have beneficial effects on depression. When used in conjunction with medication, acupuncture showed to be more effective in reducing depression severity and side effects compared to medication alone. However, the combination of acupuncture and medication did not show positive effects on achieving remission from depression or improving emotional quality of life. In comparison to psychological therapy, acupuncture demonstrated better outcomes after treatment and fewer side effects; nonetheless, the results indicated lower improvements in depression severity at 6 or 12 month follow-up.

Overall, acupuncture shows a promising complementary applicability in reducing depression. However, further research is needed.

6. Final Remarks

In this review, we have analysed the importance of Shen, as according to TCM is crucial for mental health. TCM needs a personalized approach to treating depression, recognizing the uniqueness of each individual by analysing individual symptoms to identify specific imbalances and develop targeted treatment plans.

Various therapeutic modalities in TCM, such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, diet, and self-care practices, are used to restore Shen balance and alleviate depressive symptoms, offering a comprehensive strategy for treatment. Specifically, scientific studies, including meta-analyses, show increasing evidence of the effectiveness of acupuncture in treating depression, making it a valid complementary therapeutic option.

As well, identifying common symptoms and concepts between TCM and WM is key to improve collaboration between the health professionals of both areas, achieving the best outcomes for patients.

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