

Trauma Medicine in Traditional Chinese Herbalism: A Clinical Guide

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April 2025

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1. Introduction: The Wisdom of Trauma Formulas

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), trauma care is an art rooted in observing nature's rhythms. Whether treating a fresh sprain, a deep bruise, or lingering stiffness, TCM practitioners use herbal medicine to move Qi and Blood, clear Heat and Dampness, and support the body's innate healing intelligence. Among the most time-honored formulas are Die Da Jiao and San Huang San—each serving a specific function at different phases of recovery.

2. Die Da Jiao: Invigorating Circulation and Alleviating Pain

TCM Theory: Die Da Jiao formulas are warming and invigorating. They activate Qi and Blood circulation, resolve stasis, and relieve pain. Commonly used after the acute phase of injury, they accelerate healing and prevent the formation of adhesions, nodules, and chronic stiffness.

Western Pharmacology: Die Da Jiao herbs contain compounds that reduce inflammation, modulate immune response, support microcirculation, and enhance tissue regeneration. They often replace NSAIDs and steroids in integrative care.

Key Herbs:

- **San Qi (Notoginseng):** Stops bleeding and moves Blood. Rich in saponins with fibrinolytic and hemostatic duality.
- **Mo Yao (Myrrh):** Disperses stasis and promotes regeneration. Contains sesquiterpenes and anti-inflammatory compounds.
- **Ru Xiang (Frankincense):** Moves Qi, relieves pain, and relaxes sinews. Contains boswellic acids with COX-2 inhibition.
- **Hong Hua (Safflower):** Invigorates Blood and opens channels. Contains flavonoids that enhance microcirculation.

Applications:

- **Internal:** For lingering pain, deep bruises, post-concussive stagnation
- **Topical:** Liniments, oils, compresses for muscle trauma, contusions, and fascia restriction

Historical Context: Shaolin monks developed trauma formulas to self-treat injuries from intensive training. Hsu Hong Chi emphasized circulation over cold therapy—"Ice is for dead people"—favoring warming liniments for active recovery.

3. San Huang San: Herbal Ice for Inflammation and Swelling

TCM Theory: San Huang San clears heat, reduces swelling, drains fire toxins, and cools the Blood. It's applied topically during the acute phase (0–72 hours) of injury when inflammation and heat signs are prominent.

Western Pharmacology: The herbs contain alkaloids, flavonoids, and anthraquinones with anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and detoxifying properties. They modulate inflammatory pathways and support skin-level resolution of trauma.

Key Herbs:

- **Da Huang (Rhubarb):** Clears heat, resolves blood stasis. Contains emodin, rhein with COX-2 inhibition.
- **Huang Bai (Phellodendron):** Drains Damp-Heat, antimicrobial. Contains berberine, phellodendrine.
- **Huang Qin (Baikal Skullcap):** Cools Blood, detoxifies. Rich in baicalin, wogonin.

Variants:

- **Huang Lian (Coptis):** Stronger antimicrobial detoxifier
- **Zi Cao (Arnebia):** Nourishes Blood, promotes skin regeneration

Applications:

- **Topical Poultice:** Mixed with alcohol, egg white, or water
- **Indications:** Acute sprains, tendonitis, swollen joints, hot abscesses
- **Contraindications:** Cold-type injuries, chronic conditions, internal use

4. San Huang San vs. Die Da Jiao: A Staged Approach to Injury

Comparison Table:

Formula	Type	Temperature	Function	Use Phase
San Huang San	External	Cold	Clears heat, reduces swelling	Acute (0–72 hrs)
Die Da Jiao Die Da Jiao	Int/Ext	Warm	Moves blood, relieves pain	Subacute, Chronic

Use by Phase:

- **Acute (Day 0–3):** San Huang San to cool and reduce inflammation
- **Subacute (Day 3–7):** Transition to Die Da Jiao to clear stasis
- **Recovery (Week 2+):** Continue Die Da Jiao or move to tonifying therapies

Modern Insights: San Huang San parallels modern anti-inflammatories without vasoconstriction. Die Da Jiao improves circulation akin to active rehab. TCM recognized inflammatory, proliferative, and remodeling phases centuries before Western histology.

5. Conclusion: A Dynamic Model for Healing

Trauma recovery is not static—it's a dance of opposites. First we cool, then we move. First we control chaos, then we restore flow. By following the logic of the body and the rhythm of the injury, TCM offers a timeless roadmap for healing—from martial arts halls to modern clinics. San Huang San and Die Da Jiao remain trusted allies in that journey.

Sources for purchasing herbal formulas:

www.kamwoherbs.com

www.modernherbshop.com

Books on herbal medicine and treating injuries:

Bensky, D., Clavey, S., Stöger, E., Gamble, A., & Bensky, L. L. (2004). *Chinese herbal medicine: Materia medica*. Eastland Press.

Bisio, T. (2020). *A tooth from the tiger's mouth: How to treat your injuries with powerful healing secrets of the Great Chinese Warriors*. Atria Paperback, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.