

The 'Three Golden Opportunities': Key Times Women Can Improve or Damage their Health

Abstract

There are three times during a woman's life when she has the opportunity to either improve, or else risk damaging her health. These are menstruation, postpartum and menopause. This theory has historically been used by practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), and has more recently been popularised by Dr. Zhuang Shuqi, a Taiwanese doctor of TCM specialising in women's health. This article expounds on this theory and explores its relevance to modern Western society, presenting a comprehensive description of the main pathologies, practices, prohibitions, dietary approaches and lifestyle choices that practitioners should be aware of in order to help women recover and optimise their health during these life transitions.

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Introduction

Traditional Chinese culture has a rich history of menstrual, postpartum and menopausal healthcare. Even with modern medical advancements, these practices - particularly postpartum care - remain part of traditional medical and lay practice in modern Taiwan and China. These times are considered the 'Three Golden Opportunities',¹ when proper care can greatly improve health, whereas lack of care can cause illness. Although these concepts are not new, this article is based on the relatively recent work of Dr. Zhuang Shuqi, who has successfully translated such traditional knowledge into modern culture.²

cycles and enjoyed vitality and reproductive ability beyond 100 years.³ Thus from its beginning, traditional Chinese medicine offered the possibility of more than just treating or even preventing illness - it mapped out how to optimise health.

The quest for balance

Traditional Chinese medicine, and the Daoist and other philosophies upon which it is based, teaches that in an uncultivated state human beings do not necessarily always strive towards balance and vitality. We are a composite of drives, emotions and thoughts that may either clash with - or move us towards - health and vitality. While TCM theory states that balance manifests as vitality whilst imbalance manifests as disease and death, it does not state that we will automatically remain balanced without conscious effort. The purpose of self-cultivation, food therapy and other therapeutic practices are to harmonise the opposing forces within ourselves and maintain balance. Qigong and meditation, for example, serve to calm emotions that otherwise tend to disturb balance, and to keep the acupuncture channels open that can otherwise easily become blocked through the challenges of life.

Of all our basic drives, the biological imperative to continue the species has always been viewed in TCM as a powerful force that can be harnessed to increase our wellbeing, or else bring us to ruin. The first chapter of the *Nei Jing* states explicitly that the procreative drive can lead individuals to deplete their reserves prematurely. It also tells us that this can be remedied through conscious choice. Women's bodies treat every ovulation as a potential offspring, putting out resources every month in the form of qi, blood, body

"If there is conception, a woman's body will give preference to nurturing the foetus, even if she loses a tooth or two in the process ..."

Although our society has changed in the past 2500 years, the natural cycles that govern our bodies have not. A foundational principle of traditional Chinese medicine is that by understanding natural cycles - and adapting behaviour accordingly - people can increase their vitality and avoid disease. The corollary of this is that much disease is essentially caused by ignorance. The first chapter of the *Huangdi Neijing* (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon) described the cycles of jing (seven year cycles for women and eight year cycles for men), which reads as a rather grim description of how the average person loses vitality far before their natural lifespan is over. It also describes sages and advanced beings who lived according to the natural

fluids and jing (essence). Their bodies will provide even further resources in the event of conception and a viable pregnancy. Most of the time fertilisation does not occur, and the amassed resources are flushed from the uterus as the body starts over in preparation for the next opportunity to conceive. If there is conception, a woman's body will give preference to nurturing the foetus, even if she loses a tooth or two in the process.⁴ A woman's biology does not care that she only has plans for two children after finishing her schooling - her body will treat every ovulation as potentially the last chance to continue her genetic material into future generations. This process goes on until the woman's reserves run out and she is no longer fertile. Knowing this state of affairs, it becomes our choice to turn periods of potential depletion into opportunities for renewal.

Jing and life transitions

Menarche (and to a lesser extent the monthly menses), pregnancy and menopause are times of great transition. This upheaval of homeostasis - changes in hormones, the buildup and discharge of blood, and the change in a woman's social role - create a potentially vulnerable physiological state. Signs of disharmony during these transitions can be received as helpful messages or else repressed and ignored. Chinese medicine seeks first to understand natural cycles, and then take advantage of them in order to optimise health and longevity - thereby avoiding future imbalances and making it easier to treat any that do occur. To understand why menstruation, postpartum and menopause are so key in terms of health preservation (and why virtually all traditional cultures have had restorative rituals that are performed during these times) it is necessary to understand the concept of jing. Jing, like qi, is a fundamental Chinese medical concept that can be challenging to translate into English, but is often translated as 'essence'. It encompasses our genetic inheritance, the strength of our constitution and our procreative ability. Jing is stored in the Kidney and sexual organs and circulated throughout the body by the Po (the corporeal, yin aspect of the soul).⁵ The jing of both parents is said to come together to form a child. Thus a key way to conserve jing is to limit the amount of energy spent on reproduction.

Jing is closely associated with menstruation. According to the aetiology of disease patterns, bleeding during menstruation easily causes blood deficiency which, if longstanding, leads to yin deficiency, and eventually jing deficiency. The speed of this progression depends on the constitution of the individual, their lifestyle and dietary choices, and environmental factors. The uterus is categorised as an extraordinary yang organ and its function in terms of menstruation and pregnancy is dependent upon the health of the Chong mai (Penetrating vessel) and Ren mai (Directing vessel). The Chong and Ren mai rely on Kidney essence to function.⁶ According to the inner alchemical tradition (neidan) there is a direct association

between menstruation, loss of jing and wasted reproductive energy.⁷ The first task for women alchemists historically has been to use practices such as breast massage to lessen or even halt menstruation, thereby increasing youthfulness and longevity and freeing up physical resources to use towards spiritual advancement.

Preserving jing is critical to enhancing the quality and length of our lives.

Pregnancy is an even greater strain on the jing than menstruation and taxes the Kidney qi directly. Childbirth strains qi and depletes blood and yin, while the postpartum period often includes significant blood and fluid loss.⁸ Breastfeeding further depletes blood.⁹ Menopause, by definition, involves the decline of jing. How a woman cares for her health at this time prepares her for her later years. Imbalances manifesting at this time tend to accurately convey the state of the woman's health and act as a prognosis for health in old age.

Preserving jing is critical to enhancing the quality and length of our lives. Strong jing means we ward off disease, recover from life's challenges on a physical and emotional level, and remain generally strong. Chinese medicine sees menstruation, postpartum and menopause as times when jing can either be conserved or depleted. Traditional practices focus on minimising this loss in order to protect the body and optimise health.

Common aetiologies, common patterns

Chinese medical diagnosis and treatment are based on identifying patterns of disharmony that describe the individual patient's condition and constitution as affected by other variables such as climate and lifestyle. At the same time there are stages of life and events that have a common effect on humans, and being aware of this can help practitioners make an accurate prognosis and adjust their treatments accordingly. Many practitioners bristle at the idea of any single pattern affecting all patients. However, this paradoxical approach - seeing both the commonality and uniqueness of our patients - is already common practice. For example, significant physical trauma causes blood stagnation. The degree will vary depending on the constitution of the patient, and there may of course be other patterns presenting. Another example is seen in children under the age of six, whose Spleens are not fully developed; Although children may present with other patterns of disharmony, practitioners frequently add rice or other qi-tonifying ingredients to their formulas to protect children's Spleens.¹⁰ Similarly, menses and pregnancy put a strain on qi and blood, and menopause comes as a result of jing exhaustion. There is historic precedent for acknowledging these influences. Famed Qing dynasty gynaecologist Fu

Qingzhu quoted Zhu Danxi (founder of the Enriching Yin School) as 'Giving priority to greatly supplementing the qi and blood and treating other problems only subsidiarily' during the postpartum month.¹¹ Fu Qingzhu also cautions regarding the vulnerability of women to cold invasion during their menses, saying 'The Liver pertains to Wood, it stores Blood and it hates wind and cold most of all. During menstruation the space between skin and muscles (cou li) is wide open. When this is invaded by wind and cold, Liver-Qi stagnates and the passage of the menses become obstructed.'¹² Accepting such common causes and patterns does not prevent us from seeing patients as individuals, rather it guides us to protect against common deficiencies when treating unique imbalances. Perhaps more importantly, it helps us advise our patients on lifestyle and diet to prevent common complications during these times.

The 'Three Golden Opportunities'

The following review of the three life transitions is intended to provide general guidelines for education and treatment; practitioners should use their expertise to modify them for individual patients.

Menstrual renewal

In Chinese medicine a woman's menstrual cycle is used diagnostically to assess the general state of her health. A healthy menstrual cycle requires that a woman's qi, yang, blood and yin are adequate, and that there is sufficient movement of qi and blood at the appropriate times, unimpeded by stagnation or other excess. In terms of jing conservation, menstrual care practices focus on the first seven days of the cycle. This includes four to five days of menstrual bleeding, as well as the two to three days after bleeding has ceased. During menstruation the body must discharge the accumulation of blood from the uterus. After bleeding ends the body must then quickly regenerate blood (as well as yin and body fluids). Women's bodies are relatively qi and blood deficient¹³ and improper lifestyle and diet at this time easily exacerbate such deficiency and generate blood stasis. Days one through seven of the menstrual cycle mimic the postpartum month (see below) in terms of the physiological action of the uterus and its subsequent vulnerability, and the associated care practices are therefore similar, but shorter and less restrictive.

Pathology: Qi and blood deficiency with concurrent blood stasis.

Practices: The most important practice is rest. Specifically, women should get an additional hour of sleep each night. They should also keep warm. Traditionally this meant keeping the feet and legs covered at all times and wrapping the lower abdomen and back to protect it from cold. Although this practice can be relaxed in warmer weather or for women who 'run warm', they should nevertheless

dress warmer than usual. Wrapping the lower abdomen is particularly helpful during cold weather, for women who 'run cold', or for those suffering from cold in the uterus. Moxibustion on the lower abdomen and back is also helpful in such cases.

Prohibitions: These largely centre around the avoidance of behaviours that allow invasion of cold into the uterus. Women should avoid cold in any form. Specific prohibitions include no swimming or exposure to drafts (including air conditioning), and no cold¹⁴ foods or drinks such as raw foods, iced drinks and ice cream. Additionally, women are advised not to wash their hair, and use an alcohol mixture to cleanse the scalp instead.¹⁵ This last prohibition is unlikely to receive compliance in modern Western culture, but women should at least ensure that they wash their hair in a warm bathroom using warm water, and dry it immediately.

The other main restriction is to avoid over-taxing the body, both physically and mentally. This includes no heavy lifting or other strenuous physical exertion, including weightlifting, spin classes, running and hot-room or other strenuous yoga. Women should avoid working or studying as hard as usual (especially on the computer which depletes Liver blood). They should also avoid staying out late or drinking excessively. A good general rule is to try to avoid fatigue altogether.

Diet: There are three main ingredients that are used in most of the indicated recipes to warm, move and tonify during menstruation. These are ginger, black sesame oil and rice wine. Fresh mature¹⁶ ginger is fried until it becomes fragrant and darkens slightly, but is not charred.¹⁷ Ginger browned in this way warms and moves the blood in the uterus. Black sesame oil is used to nourish blood and yin. Rice wine can be added to recipes to enhance their warming and moving function, although it should be omitted if there are any heat signs. Eggs are also popular during menstrual care in order to nourish blood and yin.

Menstrual care is typically divided into three distinct stages.¹⁸ These are the same stages of care used in the postpartum protocol, only here they are shorter and less restrictive. Stage one comprises the first two days of bleeding. The focus is on gently moving stagnant blood. Organic liver should be eaten twice daily to replenish and move stagnant blood.²⁰ Stage two comprises the third and fourth days of menstruation. The focus is on strengthening the Kidney, and organic kidney should be eaten daily. Stage three comprises the fifth through the seventh days of the cycle. In a normal period by this point women typically have a light flow or else have ceased bleeding altogether. The body can now handle stronger tonification and the focus is on rebuilding qi, blood and yin. Chicken - particularly black-bone chicken (also known as silkie) - is eaten daily to tonify qi and blood. Variations of the recipe Dang Gui chicken soup, a soup made of Dang Gui (*Radix Angelicae*

Sinensis) and other tonics with black-bone chicken, are recommended.²¹

Herbs: *Tao Hong Si Wu Tang* (Four-Substance Decoction with Safflower and Peach Pit) is perhaps the most popular base formula used during the menses to move and protect the blood. The postpartum formula, *Sheng Hua Tang* (Generating and Transforming Decoction),²² can also be used during the first four days to clear out the uterus. Once bleeding has ceased, tonification can be applied with a formula such as *Gui Pi Tang* (Restore the Spleen Decoction) to quickly rebuild qi and blood, or *Gui Shao Di Huang Wan* (Dang Gui and Peony Rehmannia Pills) if there is blood and yin deficiency. Patients can also be given packets of herbs to cook with (as in Dang Gui chicken soup above).

Practical application: In my experience, women's needs in terms of food and herbs during menstruation are more variable than during postpartum. That is, menstruation is not as depleting as childbirth, and thus not all women will require as much tonification. Some women will present with excess patterns throughout their entire cycle. In such cases clearing treatments and formulas can be used during most of the cycle, then adjusted to be more harmonising during and immediately after the menses have stopped (when women are at their weakest in terms of qi and blood). The practices of rest, refraining from intense exercise and avoiding cold environments and foods are applicable to all women, even if they appear balanced or present with excess patterns. Women should view their menstruation as a special time when they should take extra care of themselves.

It is my personal clinical observation that women benefit from eating animal protein when they are menstruating, even if they avoid it otherwise. Organic liver is a potent food that quickly recuperates blood loss. If a woman refuses to eat liver, then steak can be used instead. Vegetarian and vegan patients will need to rely more on tonic herbs. My experience of applying these practices with Western patients is that the diet should include more vegetables and fruits than is traditionally recommended. This protects patients from overheating. Women who have more excess or mixed conditions can add greater amounts of Yi Yi Ren (Coicis Semen), Chi Xiao Dou (Phaseoli Semen - red adzuki bean), Lu Dou (Semen Phaseoli Radiati - mung bean) and a higher proportion of vegetables to their diet in order to balance the heat- and damp-promoting properties of increased protein intake.

Postpartum recovery

Pregnancy and delivery are taxing on a woman's body. Additionally, the passage of lochia and breastfeeding will further deplete her reserves. Postpartum recovery comprises practices, prohibitions and dietary guidelines designed to protect and help the mother recover, and thus also increase

the vitality of the newborn. These practices cover the first four to five weeks after giving birth. Postpartum care is stricter and more extended than menstrual care due to the increased severity of the depletion. In addition to this immediate care, Chinese medicine advocates limiting and spacing out pregnancies three years apart to allow mothers to fully recover between births.

This means mothers should get ten hours of sleep a night and not leave home for the full four to five-week period.

Pathology: Qi and blood deficiency with concurrent blood stasis.

Practices: Rest and isolation for both mother and infant are the most important aspects of postpartum recovery. This means mothers should get ten hours of sleep a night and not leave home for the full four to five-week period. This level of rest requires assistance. Traditionally, new mothers would stay with family members who would oversee their care. In modern Taiwan, China and areas with large Taiwanese and Chinese communities this has largely been replaced by postpartum care centres that offer a sliding scale of support, ranging from in-facility round-the-clock care to meal delivery services. The traditional method of communal assistance served to increase bonding within the family unit, and therefore if possible modern women should try to get support from family and friends, hiring help if required and if they can afford it. They can also prepare meals ahead of time and freeze them, thus minimising the postpartum workload.

Another key practice is abdominal binding (now often substituted with a postpartum girdle). Abdominal binding serves to return the waist to its former state, both for cosmetic purposes and to prevent prolapse. The postpartum woman lies supine with her hips elevated and massages her abdomen, working from the pubic bone to the rib cage. Two or three compression bandages are then used to wrap the entire abdomen.²³ Abdominal binding requires skilled assistance, and the binding must be removed for meals and bathing, which is why many women opt for a postpartum girdle. Postpartum girdles are widely available online and at some maternity shops. If a girdle is used it should be adjustable and cover the entire abdomen.

Prohibitions: Prohibitions are largely concerned with limiting exposure to cold. When the body is qi and blood deficient the person's immunity is lower, the digestion is weaker and the joints and abdomen are more susceptible to invasion of cold. Traditionally, women are advised to wear socks, gloves and scarves at all times. This may seem

excessive to most Westerners, but nevertheless they are advised to wear more clothes than usual and avoid getting chilled or being exposed to draughts and air conditioning. Bathing restrictions may also seem severe: women are traditionally prohibited from being in contact with virtually any water at all. For the first two weeks they should take sponge baths using a rubbing alcohol and warm water mixture (at a 50:50 ratio) in place of showering (which can be resumed by the third week). Bathing in a tub is prohibited for the full postpartum recovery due to the vulnerability of the genital region. Women should avoid washing their hair for the entire 30 to 40 day period, and instead cleanse their scalp with the same alcohol and warm water mixture. As a less restrictive modification of this, women can shower quickly with warm water in a warm bathroom, but should be thoroughly covered and dry (including their hair) before leaving the bathroom. Water is also restricted internally. Traditionally, water was forbidden for the first month and replaced with rice wine, which was used to make all beverages, soups and medicinal decoctions. Currently, rice wine is specially processed to remove the majority of the alcohol content and is called yue zi water (postpartum water). As a modification of this, women can drink only warm drinks and add rice wine to their cooking.

Postpartum women are also severely restricted from lifting (including carrying or bathing their infant) and going up and down stairs. This is to prevent prolapse of the internal organs. Additional restrictions include limiting reading and watching television to 15 minutes at a stretch to protect the eyes, and avoiding crying to conserve body fluids. This last admonition is perhaps a vestige of traditional Chinese culture and does not translate well into modern Western culture. Postpartum women should, however, be shielded from bad news or conflict.

These imbalances likely showed themselves as a whisper during the menses, and perhaps a stern voice during postpartum - but then become a howling scream during menopause ...

Diet: The postpartum diet should be warming, tonifying and gently moving. The three main ingredients in postpartum dishes are again fresh mature ginger, black sesame seed oil and rice wine (or its modern version, yue zi water). As described above, in traditional Taiwanese and Chinese care, yue zi water is substituted for all water in the diet. However, in my experience even non-alcoholic rice wine can be excessively warming for the majority of Western women. Instead women can sip warm water or hot tea. They can add rice wine to recipes as long as they do not display heat signs such as feeling hot, yellow leucorrhoea or mastitis.

Zuo yue zi (postpartum recovery practices) are divided

into three stages of care and practised for the first four to five weeks after childbirth.²⁴ Stage one, the first week after childbirth, focuses on discharging the lochia and gently detoxifying the body. Organic liver should be eaten daily to quickly rebuild new blood and move stagnant blood.²⁵ Dible herbs such as Yi Yi Ren (Coicis Semen), Chi Xiao Dou (Phaseoli Semen) and Lu Dou (Semen Phaseoli Radiati) are used to drain oedema and detoxify without damaging the qi. Stage two comprises the second week postpartum, when organic kidney should be eaten daily to strengthen the Kidney and lower back. Stage three focuses on tonifying qi and blood directly and covers the third, fourth and sometimes fifth week postpartum. The body is finally strong enough to digest stronger tonics and chicken should be eaten daily. Organ meats and fish are eaten during the first two weeks rather than meat or chicken as they are easier to digest. Meat and chicken require more energy to break down and are thus reserved for the final weeks when the qi is stronger. Eggs are also favoured at this time. Vegetables and fruits are traditionally prohibited during the first two weeks, as they are considered too cooling and clearing. In my experience the restriction on vegetables can cause imbalance in Western patients. Instead women can introduce cooked vegetables and fruits immediately, particularly tonifying vegetables such as carrots and beets. If women begin to exhibit heat signs, increasing vegetable intake is perhaps the gentlest way to cool heat and balance the excess that can develop from a tonifying diet. I theorise that it might be appropriate to adhere to the more traditional postpartum diet when patients live in a colder climate or suffer from yang deficiency.²⁶

Herbs: *Sheng Hua Tang* (Generating and Transforming Decoction), with appropriate modifications, is taken for two weeks postpartum. This formula was first recorded in the *Fu Qingzhu Nü Ke* (Fu Qingzhu's Gynaecology), and has since become the most popular base formula for postpartum care. After the first two weeks the lochia should be largely discharged, any oedema drained, and the qi recovered enough to allow for direct tonification, and a customised - often more tonifying - herbal formula can be given.

Practical application: I have treated many women who have experienced drastic adverse changes to their health after giving birth. From their stories I am convinced this is largely due to inadequate postpartum care. In the U.S. a postpartum woman may leave the hospital just hours after a standard vaginal delivery. If she has had a caesarean section she may stay a few days longer. After this most women are expected to resume their lives - caring for the newborn, performing household duties and cooking and caring for existing children. This is a crucial area where acupuncturists can instigate widespread change. If women can at least rest for the full postpartum month, consume

appropriate food and drink, and use a postpartum girdle, this would prevent many of the common maladies such as postpartum depression, organ prolapse, joint pain and permanent decrease in libido.

Menopausal care

Women should begin preparing for menopause at the age of 35. According to women's seven year jing cycles, the fifth cycle beginning at age 35 marks the start of the decline of jing.²⁷ At this point women's self-care becomes increasingly important. Tonics, such as Ren Shen (Ginseng Radix) and Ling Zhi (Ganoderma), should be taken regularly. Women should practise menstrual renewal with great care. If a woman has children after age 35, as is the trend today, postpartum recovery should be practised for a full five weeks. Women who undergo in vitro fertilisation or other medical interventions in order to fall pregnant should receive regular treatment and herbal medicine in order to recover their vitality. This will delay the decline of jing and make for an easier transition through menopause.

Care immediately before and during menopause centres on strengthening the Kidney jing. In my clinical experience I have observed women pushing their bodies their whole lives: overworking and neglecting themselves during menstruation and postpartum. Then, at menopause, their jing is no longer sufficient to carry them through. The problem then becomes not only the decline in jing, but the opportunity that this creates for other imbalances to manifest. Much of the turmoil experienced by menopausal women is due to other imbalances that surface at this time. These imbalances likely showed themselves as a whisper during the menses, and perhaps a stern voice during postpartum - but then become a howling scream during menopause.

Pathology: Jing deficiency.

Practices: Women should practise restorative exercises such as daoyin and yin yoga, which focus on maintaining joint mobility and improving circulation. They should continue weight-bearing and cardiovascular exercise, but should aim to finish feeling energised rather than depleted. Equally, they should take time for daily relaxation such as meditation or qigong. They should also keep to an optimal sleeping schedule and go to bed by ten o'clock pm. Physical and mental work must be balanced with rest. I recommend rejuvenation practices such as cosmetic acupuncture to all women. Cosmetic acupuncture utilises acupoints on the body to strengthen the vitality and balance the hormones, with local points to beautify the face. These treatments should start prior to final cessation of menses, as such rejuvenation requires reserves of energy. After menopause these reserves are lower and it takes longer to achieve results.

Prohibitions: Jing deficiency can include symptoms of both yin and yang deficiency, although in most women during perimenopause protecting the yin and body fluids takes precedence. Specific prohibitions include: no hot-room yoga, only taking mild saunas and avoiding extreme or prolonged endurance exercise. Women should avoid overstimulation, particularly at night, and overworking must be avoided whenever possible. Weight gain often becomes an issue during this stage, although great care must be taken when removing dampness from the body so as not to aggravate yin deficiency.

Diet: Protein and dark leafy vegetables are the key to nourishing blood and yin. Perimenopausal and menopausal women should increase the percentage of vegetables in their diet in order to clear heat and Liver excess, and help regulate body-weight. They should also emphasise jing- and yin-nourishing foods such as bone marrow-based soups, kidney, pork, Bai Mu Er (Tremella), black beans, black sesame oil and seeds, soy products, seaweed, micro-algae, walnuts, Gou Ji Zi (Lycii Fructus), Sang Shen Zi (Mori Fructus), yams, dairy, nuts and seeds.²⁸ Leading up to, and during the first years after menopause, most women experience heat symptoms, and should therefore restrict or omit heating foods such as alcohol (especially red wine), coffee (and sometimes black and oolong tea), garlic, lamb and spicy foods.²⁹ Women can adjust this restriction based on the severity of their heat symptoms.

Herbs: Women should take yin and jing tonics regularly, as well as herbs to strengthen tendons, ligaments and bones to guard against bi syndrome and osteoporosis.³⁰ Many women require frequent acupuncture treatment and formula modification during this period in order to treat additional imbalances that arise. It is important to convey to patients the value of such treatment, as it will set them on a healthy course for older age.

Practical Application: In a clinical setting, unless a woman has hormonal or fertility issues, perimenopause is often the first time she will seek help from a Chinese medicine physician concerning her menstrual cycle. As practitioners we must take every opportunity to educate patients on healthy lifestyle and dietary practices.

Conclusion

The focus of the Western medical model of healthcare is the treatment of disease, and more recently due to the popularity of alternative care, disease prevention. Chinese medicine takes this one step further. As practitioners the greatest service we can provide is to educate patients on what they can do to increase their vitality and longevity, rather than just treating them when they are ill. Modern life tends to produce people who are frazzled, over-worked

and over-stimulated. Such extremes of behaviour tend to be idealised in our society. There is widespread belief - amongst Americans at least - that if we are not producing something or engaged with gadgets, then we have lost our relevance. Periods of quiet restoration are becoming increasingly limited. Women in particular seem to have lost connection with their menstrual cycles and life transitions. The lack of knowledge of proper self-care during postpartum, menstruation and menopause is responsible for much unnecessary suffering and ill health. If women are educated properly, beginning with menstruation when they are young, then this can be averted. Part of our job

as practitioners is to empower our patients to take charge of their own health. Although the recommendations presented here may need to be modified for modern Western women, such traditional Chinese knowledge and practices are still relevant today, and have much to teach us about the importance of rest and recovery for maintaining life-long vitality.

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- Dr. Zhuang has done much to popularise traditional menstrual, postpartum and menopausal care and educate the public on this subject. Dr. Zhuang was born in 1920, and was one of the first female Chinese medicine doctors in Taiwan. After losing her father and husband to cancer, she focused her career on teaching diet and lifestyle to build vitality and prevent cancer. [see Zhuang, Shuqi (2001). *Zhuang Shuqi Memoirs* (莊淑旂回憶錄). Taiwan: Yuan Liu Chu Ban Shi Ye Gong Si] She has written numerous books on cancer prevention and women's health, teaches seminars and offers postpartum care services. Dr Zhuang is a leading light of a movement that provides postpartum care centres and meal delivery services across modern Taiwan, China and immigrant communities abroad, offering modern women the same rest and support that was previously provided by extended family. Such services might serve as an example of how Western women could be educated about optimum self-care practices during menses, postpartum and menopause.
- 'Huang Di asked, "If a wise one who follows the Tao is over one hundred years of age, can he or she still retain the ability to procreate?" Qi Bo answered, "Yes it is possible. If one knows how to live a correct way of life, conserve one's energy, and follow the Tao, yes, it is possible.'" [Ni, Maoshing (1995). *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine; A New Translation of the Neijing Suwen with Commentary*. Boston: Shambhala, pp.3-4]
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- 'If Kidney-Essence is abundant, the Directing and Penetrating Vessels are strong and the Uterus is therefore adequately supplied with Qi and Blood, so that there will be normal menstruation and pregnancy. If Kidney-Essence is weak, the Directing and Penetrating Vessels will be empty, and the Uterus will be inadequately supplied with Qi and Blood, so that there may be irregular menstruation, amenorrhoea or infertility.' [Maciocia, G. (1989). *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine; A Comprehensive Text for Acupuncturists and Herbalists*. London: Churchill Livingstone, p.123]
- The uterus in women corresponds with the lower dantian (cinnabar field or 'room of essence') in men - see Maciocia, G. (1989). *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine; A Comprehensive Text for Acupuncturists and Herbalists*. London: Churchill Livingstone, p.124; and Valussi, E. "Female Alchemy: An Introduction." in Kohn, L. & Wang, R. eds. (2009). *Internal Alchemy; Self, Society, and the Quest for Immortality*. Magdalena (New Mexico): Three Pines Press
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- '... downward movement of Qi and Blood [in the Chong and Ren mai] produces the menses while upward movement produces milk.' [Maciocia, G. (1998). *Obstetrics and Gynecology in Chinese Medicine*. London: Churchill Livingstone p.660]
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- Fu Qingzhu, cited in Maciocia, G. (1998). *Obstetrics and Gynecology in Chinese Medicine*. London: Churchill Livingstone, p. 236
- I use the term 'relatively' because this is a time in the cycle where all women experience blood loss and increased demands on qi for blood production. Although not all women will exhibit deficiency signs, there will be an increased vulnerability to conditions such as cold invasion, which is why all women should follow the menstrual renewal guidelines as a preventive measure. In Western medicine this time correlates to the point when oestrogen and progesterone are at their lowest (days 1-5), which occurs in all women as part of the natural cycle but will cause symptoms in women who are deficient in these hormones.
- Both in terms of physical and 'energetic' temperature.
- A mixture of rubbing alcohol and warm water at a 50:50 ratio is used to cleanse the scalp. The rubbing alcohol astringes the pores and protects against wind invasion.
- Fresh mature ginger is typically the only option in Western supermarkets. It is harvested at full maturity. It has a tough brown skin, the meat is fibrous and hard, and it is pungent and spicy. Young ginger (also known as baby or spring ginger) is harvested before it reaches full maturity. It has a thin, pale skin, the meat is much easier to cut, and the smell and taste are more delicate. Young ginger is often used for pickling and in salads. Chinese and Taiwanese texts emphasise using mature ginger in postpartum recovery and menstrual renewal recipes.
- Gingerroot (Rhizoma Zingiberis) is used in different forms for different effects. Sheng Jiang is fresh ginger and targets the upper and middle jiaos to treat exterior conditions and nausea. Gan Jiang is dried ginger; drying increases its warming qualities and it is usually used to treat the middle jiao. Pao Jiang is dried ginger that has been quick-fried and charred; it targets the middle and lower jiao and both warms and arrests bleeding. Pao Jiang is sometimes used interchangeably with Pao Jiang Tan (Hei Jiang), which is dried ginger that has been charred or blackened on the outside in order to astringe bleeding. Yang Shouzhong translates Fu Qingzhu as using, in his various modifications of *Sheng Hua Tang*: Gan Jiang (p.155) to eliminate vacuity fire, Hei Jiang (p. 204) when diarrhoea is present, and Pao Jiang (p. 204) when cold is present. Dan Bensky lists Pao Jiang as the ingredient list for *Sheng Hua Tang* [Bensky, D. & Barolet, R. (1990). *Chinese Herbal Medicine; Formulas and Strategies*. Seattle: Eastland Press]. Modern proponents of postpartum care emphasise using fresh ginger. In her recipes,

- Dr. Shuqi Zhuang lists ginger as 帶皮老薑 Dai Pi Lao Jiang, or mature ginger with the skin left on. This differentiates it as mature fresh ginger instead of fresh young ginger root (also known as 'spring ginger'). The skin is presumably left on for the added diuretic function. She then describes the process of browning the ginger in black sesame oil over high heat until it is fragrant and wrinkled on both sides, but not blackened. Dr. Zheng Jiang, a professor at Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in San Diego specialising in TCM gynaecology, refers to the ginger used in postpartum treatment as Pao Lao Jiang, or fried fresh mature ginger.
18. Zhuang, Shoumei (2004). *Your Friend Every Month*. Taiwan: Zhuang Shou Mei Publishing House
19. Pork is traditionally used, perhaps because it has a neutral thermal property, an increased detoxifying effect or is more readily available. However, it is easier to get compliance with beef or chicken liver, which taste less bitter. Similarly pork kidneys, though traditionally preferred, are stronger tasting than lamb or beef kidneys.
20. Dr. Shuqi Zhuang claims that liver has the dual function of tonifying and moving blood [Shuqi (2005). *Postpartum Recovery Program; a Manual of Rules and Recipes for the Postpartum Woman*. Taiwan: Guang He Chu Ban She]
21. **Dang Gui Chicken Soup Recipe** (from the author):
Ingredients
1 small silkie (black-boned chicken)
1500ml bottle of black glutinous rice wine (such as Shaoxing brand)
15g Dang Gui (Angelicae sinensis Radix)
20g Huang Qi (Astragali Radix)
15g Du Zhong (Eucommiae Cortex)
10g Fu Ling (Poria, crumbled)
6g Long Yan Rou (Longan Arillus)
6g Gou Qi Zi (Lycii Fructus)
6g Chen Pi (Citri reticulatae Pericarpium, broken into tiny pieces or powdered)
a few slices of fresh ginger
[N.B.: In cases of yin deficiency omit Huang Qi and Fu Ling and substitute with 20g of Dang Shen (Codonopsis Radix) and 10g of Shan Yao (Dioscoreae Rhizoma)]
- Directions**
1. Bring a pot of water to the boil. Blanche chicken for five minutes.
 2. Drain and rinse. Add to a crock pot (or other large pot).
 3. Rinse the herbs. Add to the crock pot.
 4. Add the rice wine and enough water to cover the chicken and herbs.
5. Cook on a low setting for eight hours or overnight.
6. Remove inedible herbs (Huang Qi, Du Zhong). Remove the bones from the chicken and shred the meat. Place the meat back into the soup.
7. Serve and conserve the rest.
22. *Sheng Hua Tang*: whole Dang Gui (Angelicae sinensis Radix) 24g, Chuan Xiong (Chuanxiong Rhizoma) 18g, Tao Ren (Persicae Semen) 1.5g, Pao Lao Jiang (Rhizoma Zingiberis, browned on both sides) 1.5g, Zhi Gan Cao (honey-fried Glycyrrhizae Radix) 1.5g [Zheng, Jiang (2007) "TCM Gynecology". Lecture, Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, San Diego, January 20]
23. Zhuang, Shuqi (2005). *Postpartum Recovery Program; A Manual of Rules and Recipes for the Postpartum Woman*. Taiwan: Guang He Chu Ban She
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Interestingly, Taiwanese postpartum dietary plans tend to be the most warming, even though Taiwan has a warmer, more humid climate than most of China (and more so than Southern California). Yet postpartum women there apparently do well with the more heating regimen, perhaps due to constitution, lifestyle or other factors.
27. Ni, Maoshing (trans.) (1995). *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine; A New Translation of the Neijing Suwen with Commentary*. Boston: Shambhala, p.2
28. Ni, Maoshing (1987). *The Tao of Nutrition*. Santa Monica: Seven Star Communications Group Inc.
29. Zhuang, Shoumei (2005). *Menopause, Food and Drink*. Taiwan: Zhuang Shou Mei Publishing House
30. With perimenopausal and older patients I like to use the combination *San Xian Tang (Three Immortals Decoction)*: Xian Mao (Curculiginis Rhizoma), Ba Ji Tian (Morindae officinalis Radix) and Yin Yang Huo (Epimedii Herba). This combination tonifies jing, boosts hormones and treats bi syndrome. There are many other herbs that strengthen the joints and bones including: Lu Rong (Cornu Cervi Parvum), Du Zhong (Eucommiae Cortex), Gu Sui Bu (Rhizoma Gusuibu), Xu Duan (Dipsaci Radix), Gui Ban (Plastrum Testudinis) and Sang Ji Sheng (Taxilli Herba). Apart from Gui Ban and Sang Ji Sheng, the herbs are warming and drying, and must therefore be balanced with cooling and yin-nourishing medicinals.