Modified Si-Ni-San Decoction Ameliorates Central Fatigue by Improving Mitochondrial Biogenesis in the Rat Hippocampus

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Received 10 February 2018; Revised 20 May 2018; Accepted 24 June 2018; Published 29 July 2018

1. Introduction

Central fatigue (CF) is the failure to initiate and sustain attention and physical activities requiring self-motivation (as opposed to external stimulation) [1]. It has become a major complaint with the fast pace of modern life. Together with stress, it is an important predisposing and perpetuating factor in chronic fatigue [2]. Numerous studies have investigated skeletal muscle metabolism in CF, but few have investigated the changes in cerebral energy production and oxidative function that play vital roles in CF. Although the exact mechanism of CF is unclear, a feeling of low energy is always involved, which suggests that CF is closely related to energy metabolism and oxidative function in the central nervous system [3]. Since the brain relies on aerobic metabolism, cerebral oxygen tension is the basic guarantee of brain function and this process mainly relies on brain mitochondrial function [4].

CF is currently treated with pharmacological and nutritional interventions. The pharmacological interventions mainly involve serotonin reuptake inhibitors and excitatory transmitters [5], but accumulating evidence for a negative correlation between CF and serotonin levels has fostered interest in serotonin receptor antagonists as therapeutic candidates [6, 7]. Amphetamine is a close analogue of dopamine and noradrenaline that could also attenuate CF by enhancing motivation through increased dopaminergic and noradrenergic activity [8]. Nutritional supplements may also treat CF, but the clinical evidence for them is incomplete and relatively unpersuasive. For example, branched-chain amino acids may alleviate CF by competing with tryptophan for brain entry across the blood brain barrier, with a consequent reduction...
in serotonin receptor activation [9, 10]. Some clinical studies support this hypothesis [11], but others have obtained nonsignificant [12] or negative results [13, 14]. Tryptophan supplementation aggravated CF in animal [15, 16] and human trials [17]. A systematic review found that while some studies suggested that carbohydrates could attenuate CF, there is limited and mixed evidence for a direct effect [18]. Overall, we still lack an effective treatment for CF.

Mitochondria are basic organelles that produce adenosine triphosphate (ATP) through the oxidative phosphorylation (OxPhos) pathway and are much distributed in the brain. Their working efficiency directly affects energy metabolism and oxidative function in the brain, and this process plays an important role in CF. Mitochondrial biogenesis can be defined as the growth and division of pre-existing mitochondria, which is accompanied by variations in number, size, and mass [19]. This process could also be influenced by stress and fatigue. Sirtuin 1 (SIRT1) belongs to the family of nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide-dependent Sir2-encoded histone deacetylases, which can activate peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma coactivator-1α (PGC-1α). PGC-1α belongs to the PGC family of transcription coactivators. SIRT1 and PGC-1α are the “master regulators” of mitochondrial biogenesis because they co-activate the transcription factors and nuclear receptors that regulate mitochondrial protein expression [20]. Nuclear transcription factor I (NRF1) is a downstream SIRT1/PGC-1α effector and activates the expression of OxPhos components, mitochondrial transporters, and ribosomal proteins [21]. Mitochondrial biogenesis can be promoted through the activation of SIRT1, which activates PGC1α, which in turn activates NRF1. SIRT1, PGC-1α, and NRF1 then collectively activate and regulate the mitochondrial biogenesis process [22], which makes these proteins the key stimulators, regulators, and biomarkers of mitochondrial biogenesis. Furthermore, the hippocampus is the first brain region to sustain damage in cognitive and neurological diseases, and mitochondrial function alterations are more marked in the hippocampus than in other brain regions [23]. It is thus necessary to investigate the biomarkers of hippocampal mitochondrial biogenesis during CF.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) holds that CF can be attenuated with Si-Ni-San (SNS), an ancient Chinese decoction from the Tongrentang Drug Store (Beijing, China). The crude drugs were authenticated by Dr. Xiumei Wu, Professor of Pharmacology. The MSNS contents are listed in Table 2.

We aimed to evaluate the effects of MSNS by inducing a rat model of CF through sleep deprivation [26] and using it to test the effects of low-dose MSNS (LDM), medium-dose MSNS (MDM), and high-dose MSNS (HDM). The MDM group’s dose was twice that of the LDM group, and the HDM group’s dose was twice that of the MDM group. We compared the MSNS groups to the CF group consisting of rats that underwent CF induction but only received oral saline administration. For a positive control, we created a coenzyme Q10 (CQ) group that underwent CF induction and received CQ [27], which is an essential component in the ATP-producing mitochondrial electron transport chain and can relieve physical fatigue when orally consumed due to its antioxidant effects [28]. We also created a negative control (CON) group consisting of rats that did not undergo CF induction and received only oral saline administration. After treatment, we used behavioural tests to evaluate the rats for endurance, emotion, and cognitive function. We measured biomarkers for energy metabolism and oxidative stress in the blood and liver, inspected hippocampal mitochondrial ultrastructures, and measured mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) copy number. We also measured gene and protein expression levels of SIRT1, PGC-1α, and NRF1.

2. Methods

2.1. Drugs. We purchased the ingredients for the MSNS decoction from the Tongrentang Drug Store (Beijing, China). The crude drugs were authenticated by Dr. Xiumei Wu, Professor of Pharmacology. The MSNS contents are listed in Table 2.

The mixed ingredients were decocted with boiling distilled water for 30 min and then filtered. The solution was then freeze-dried under a vacuum, ground into powder (yield: 17.5%), and stored at 4°C. CQ was purchased from Eisai (Tokyo, Japan).

2.2. High-Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) and Ultra-Performance Liquid Chromatography Coupled to Electrospray Ionization Tandem Mass Spectrometry (UPLC-ESI-MS) Analysis of MSNS. The HPLC analysis method was modified based on previous study [29]. We analysed the MSNS preparation using an Agilent 1260 HPLC system (Agilent, Santa Clara, CA, USA) with an automatic sample injector, an oven, a diode array detector, and a Gemini chromatographic column (250 × 4.6 mm, 5 μm, 110 Å; Phenomenex, Torrance, CA). We dissolved MSNS powder samples weighing approximately 1 g in either water, 50% methanol, 30% ethanol, 50% ethanol, or 70% ethanol, each at 25 ml volumes. The resulting solutions were weighed, ultrasonicated for 1 h, cooled, and weighed again to determine the final volume as 25 ml with supplementing with solvent if necessary. They were then centrifuged at 3,000 g for 1 min. The supernatant was collected and filtered with a 0.45 μm filter membrane. The selected separation conditions of 30% ethanol as solvent based on extraction rates and correspondent HPLC spectral resolutions are listed in Table 3, and the overlap HPLC chromatograph of different sample preparation conditions is shown in Figure 9(a).

The UPLC-ESI-MS analysis was performed using an Ultimate3000 super high-performance liquid chromatograph (Dionex, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA USA), a Gemini chromatographic column (Agilent poroshell 120 EC-C18, 150 mm × 3.0 mm, 2.7 μm). The selected separation conditions are listed in Table 4, the mass spectrometric parameters are listed in Table 5, and the positive and negative
total ion chromatographs of UPLC-ESI-MS are shown in Figure 10. Furthermore, commercial available reference substances were adopted to elucidate the major components of MSNS, referring to Chinese pharmacopeia. The HPLC chromatograms of MSNS with reference substances as external standards were applied to cross-verify the structure determination based on UPLC-ESI-MS analysis and are shown in Figure 9(b).

2.3. Animals. Adult male (weight: 120–130 g) Wistar rats were purchased from Beijing Vital River Laboratory Animal Technology (Beijing, China). The experiments were approved by the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine's Institutional Animal Ethics Committee. All animal procedures were performed in accordance with Chinese legislation on the use and care of laboratory animals. All efforts were made to minimize both animal suffering and the number of animals used.

The animals were placed in a room with a 23 ± 1°C temperature, a 30–40% relative humidity level, 12 h of lighting from 06:00 to 18:00, and ad libitum food and purified water. One week of acclimation was permitted before the experiment.

We randomly divided 60 rats into six groups of ten. These groups included the CON group, which received daily oral gavage doses of saline solution (10 ml/kg); the CF group, which received the same treatment as the CON group; the LDM group, which received 0.5 g/kg of MSNS each day; the MSNS group, which received 1 g/kg of MSNS each day; the HDM group, which received 2 g/kg of MSNS each day; and the CQ group, which received 3 g/kg of CQ each day. The dose of intragastric administration depended on the bodyweight, 1 ml for 100 g bodyweight. All groups received their assigned administration for 21 days. The MSNS doses were set to approximate human doses.

2.4. CF Model Induction. We applied the modified multiple platform method to induce CF through sleep deprivation in all rats except those of the CON group. We placed 15 platforms inside each plastic tank (110 × 60 × 40 cm) and filled the tank with water at 22–25°C to a depth of 1 cm below the platform surfaces. We left each rat in its own tank with a supply of food and drinking water from 18:00 to 08:00 the next morning. We repeated this procedure over 21 consecutive days.

2.5. Bodyweight. We recorded each rat's bodyweight at 09:00 daily for 21 days.

2.6. Behavioural Tests. We performed all behavioural tests the day after the training ended. Each rat was brought to the testing room at 07:00 and allowed to acclimate to the room for 1 h. We then performed the behavioural tests in the following sequence, OFT, EPM, and WST with 2-h breaks between tests, in order to minimize the effect among the tests. All behavioural measurements were performed with EthoVision XT software (Noldus, Wageningen, the Netherlands). Each rat was only tested once. The test arenas were thoroughly cleaned with 75% ethanol between rats.

2.7. WST. The WST was performed with a previously published method [30]. In brief, the rats were forced to swim individually in a plastic pool filled with water at a temperature of 20–22°C and a depth of 60 cm. A tin wire weighing 10% of the rat's bodyweight was attached to the rat's tail base. We recorded the swimming time until the rat became exhausted, as indicated by a failure to rise to the surface to breathe within 10 s. The rats were then removed from the water, dried with a towel, and returned to their cages. The water was replaced between rats.

2.8. OFT. The OFT measures animal locomotion, exploration, and anxiety [31]. The open field arena (100 × 100 × 40 cm) was constructed of acrylic with grey walls and a black floor. It was divided into 25 equally sized squares. Each rat was placed in the arena for 5 min, during which we measured the time in the central square, number of square crossings, total distance travelled, longest continuous distance travelled, mean velocity, vertical activity, and grooming behaviours.

2.9. EPM. The EPM was constructed as previously described [32] with two open arms and two closed arms (all 30 × 5 × 15 cm) that extended from a central open square (5 × 5 cm). The maze was elevated to a height of 45 cm above the floor. We placed each rat in the EPM for 3 min, during which we measured the ratio of time spent in the open arms to total time spent in the arms, the ratio of open arm entries to the total entries, and the time spent in the central area.

2.10. Blood Serum Analysis. The rats were anaesthetised with an intraperitoneal injection of 10% pentobarbital sodium (4 ml/kg) and subsequently sacrificed by rapid decapitation. Blood was collected from the torso in a blood collection tube and subsequently centrifuged at 3,000 g for 20 min at 4°C to isolate the serum. We assessed CK and LDH activity levels with assay kits from Bioassay Systems (Hayward, CA) and BUN levels with an assay kit from Genmed Sciences (Shanghai, China). We performed colorimetric readings of these assays with a Multiskan GO microplate reader (Thermo Fisher, St. Louis, MO).

2.11. Liver Tissue Analysis. After collecting blood, we immediately dissected two liver pieces from each rat, homogenised them, centrifuged them at 14,000 g for 5 min at 4°C, and then collected the supernatant. We measured MDA levels and SOD activity with assay kits from BioVision (Milpitas, CA). We again performed colorimetric readings with the Multiskan GO microplate reader.

2.12. Transmission Electron Microscope (TEM). We used TEM to examine hippocampal mitochondria (n = 3 per group). After removing the hippocampus, we took three randomly selected 1-mm³ pieces from the CA1 region of each rat and immediately fixed them in 2.5% glutaraldehyde (pH = 7.4) for 4 h at 4°C. The samples were then dehydrated and fixed using previously published methods [33]. We examined and photographed the samples with a JEM-1230 device (JEOL, Tokyo, Japan).
2.13. Quantitative Reverse Transcription PCR (RT-PCR). We removed the hippocampus and immediately placed it in liquid nitrogen and then stored as −80°C until assay. We used RT-PCR to quantify the gene expression of cytochrome b, SIRT1, PPARGC1A, NRF1, and, as a control, ACTB. We extracted total RNA with the SV Total RNA Isolation System (Z3100, Promega, Madison, WI). We then reverse-transcribed 1 μg of total RNA to 50 μl of cDNA with the Reverse Transcription System (A3500, Promega). We designed primers with Primer-BLAST (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/tools/primer-blast/) according to the GenBank mRNA sequences for cytochrome b, ACTB, PPARGC1A, NRF1, and SIRT1. The PCR products were run through a 0.8% agarose electrophoresis gel to confirm the expected sizes, and the gel bands were visualised with a FluorChem M gel image analysis system (Alpha Innotech). All results were normalised to the ACTB expression. The primer sequences are listed in Table 7. RT-PCR experiments were performed with the CFX96 Touch system (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA).

The reaction involved initial activation at 95°C for 30 s, 40 cycles of denaturation at 95°C for 5 s and annealing at 60°C for 30 s, and melt curve determination at 65–95°C for 5 s. All measurements were performed in triplicate. The RT-PCR data were represented as Ct values. The relative mRNA expression levels for various genes were determined with the 2−ΔΔCt method [34].

2.14. Western Blotting. We collected hippocampal proteins in a radioimmunoprecipitation assay buffer containing phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride (100:1). Protein concentrations were determined with a bicinchoninic acid assay kit (Solarbio, Beijing, China). Proteins were treated with a sodium dodecyl sulfate- (SDS-) loading buffer after quantitative assessment, subjected to 12% SDS polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis, and then transferred onto polyvinylidene difluoride membranes (5 μl for each sample, 80 V, 100 min). After blocking with 5% dried skim milk for 1 h, the membranes were incubated with anti-SIRT1 (1:2400), anti-PGC-κ (1:2000), anti-NRF1 (1:3000), and anti-β actin (1:10,000) antibodies (Proteintech, Rosemont, IL) at room temperature for 1 h. They were then incubated with IRDye secondary antibodies (1:10,000; ZSGB-BIO, Beijing, China) for 1 h at room temperature. After the membranes were washed five times with tris-buffered saline-Tween 20 for 25 min, an ECL Prime western blotting detection reagent (GE Healthcare, Chicago, IL) was used to expose protein bands. Protein bands were visualised with a FluorChem M gel image analysis system (Alpha Innotech).

2.15. Statistical Analysis. The data were expressed as means ± standard errors. All data were initially tested for normality and homogeneity of variance and then analysed with one-way analysis of variance or the Kruskal–Wallis test. Turkey’s test or Mann–Whitney U test were used for group comparisons. All data were analysed in SPSS version 17.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY). We defined statistical significance as P < 0.05.

Bar graphs were produced with GraphPad Prism 5 (GraphPad, San Diego, CA), and graphs, TEM pictures, and cropped blots were combined in PowerPoint 2012 (Microsoft, Redmond, Washington).

3. Results

3.1. Effects on Growth. We observed significant between-group differences in bodyweight (F(5,120) = 2.722, P < 0.05). The bodyweights of the CF group were significantly lower than those of the CON group (P < 0.01) but not significantly different from those of any treatment group (P > 0.05). There were no significant between-group differences in bodyweight growth rates (Figure 1).

3.2. Weight-Loaded Swimming Test (WST). We found significant between-group differences in swimming endurance in the WST (F(5,54) = 26.364, P < 0.001). The CF group’s swimming endurance was significantly lower than that of the CON group (P < 0.001), and all treatments provided some significant recovery (P < 0.001), though no significant differences were observed between different treatment groups (P > 0.05) (Figure 2).

3.3. Open Field Test (OFT). Table 1 shows the different OFT parameters. We observed significant between-group differences in time spent in the centre (F(5,54) = 13.497, P < 0.001), which is the main indicator of depression-like behaviour, and other depression-indicating parameters including total travel distance (H(5) = 35.993, P < 0.001), the number of times the rats crossed between squares (H(5) = 31.226, P < 0.001), the longest distance continuously travelled (H(5) = 27.682, P < 0.001), mean velocity (H(5) = 33.902, P < 0.001), total vertical activity time (H(5) = 17.452, P < 0.01), the number of grooming episodes (H(5) = 15.222, P < 0.01), and total grooming time (H(5) = 11.14, P < 0.05). The CF group exhibited several significant differences from the CON group, including more time spent in the centre (P < 0.001), greater total travel distances (P < 0.001), more square crossings (P < 0.001), greater maximum continuous travel distances (P < 0.001), greater velocities (P < 0.001), reduced vertical activity time (P < 0.001), fewer grooming episodes (P < 0.05), and reduced grooming time (P < 0.05), all of which suggest depression. Relative to the CF group, all treatment groups spent significantly less time in the centre (P < 0.001), with least significant difference testing revealing that MDM was significantly more effective than the other treatments in reducing centre time (P < 0.05). LDM (P < 0.01) and MDM (P < 0.05) both significantly reversed the CF group’s increased total travel distances, with MDM being significantly more effective than MDM (P < 0.05). Only LDM significantly reversed increased square crossings (P < 0.05). LDM (P < 0.01) and HDM (P < 0.05) both significantly reversed the increased maximum continuous travel distances, with LDM being significantly more effective than HDM (P < 0.05).

3.4. Elevated Plus Maze (EPM). The EPM is a classic evaluation of anxiety in rodents. We observed significant between-group differences in the ratio of open arm entries to total

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Table 1: Assessment of open field test. All data were represented as the mean ± SEM (n=10), * refers to P < 0.05, ** refers to P < 0.01, and *** refers to P < 0.001 vs. CF group. △ refers to P < 0.05 vs. LDM group. # refers to P < 0.05 vs. MDM group. Abbreviations: CON: negative control; CQ: coenzyme Q10; HDM: high-dose modified Si-Ni-San; LDM: low-dose Si-Ni-San; MDM: medium-dose Si-Ni-San; CF: untreated central fatigue.

| Parameters/group | CON   | CF      | LDM    | MDM    | HDM    | CQ      |
|------------------|-------|---------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| Time spent in central area(s) | 16.34 ± 2.38 *** | 56.98 ± 6.38 *** | 32.88 ± 3.3 *** | 20.22 ± 3.39 *** | 34.5 ± 3.06 *** | 31.7 ± 3.49 *** |
| Total distance travelled(cm) | 1723.37 ± 74.97 *** | 3207.36 ± 137.62 | 2400.78 ± 140.16 *** | 2781.9 ± 80.26 *** | 2938.82 ± 114.8 | 3290.7 ± 183.31 |
| Number of crossing squares | 65 ± 5.51 *** | 147.2 ± 7.97 *** | 113.2 ± 8.42 *** | 114.7 ± 9.47 | 125.8 ± 7.08 | 147.9 ± 6.04 |
| Maximum continuous distance(cm) | 9.13 ± 0.37 *** | 12.9 ± 0.5 | 10.64 ± 0.34 *** | 11.91 ± 0.67 | 11.54 ± 0.16 * | 11.6 ± 0.35 |
| Mean velocity(cm/s) | 6.95 ± 0.22 *** | 10.7 ± 0.46 | 8.35 ± 0.36 *** | 9.67 ± 0.26 | 9.81 ± 0.39 | 10.48 ± 0.42 |
| Vertical activity(s) | 33.14 ± 2.08 *** | 19.09 ± 1.97 | 25.88 ± 2.61 | 25.92 ± 3.28 | 33.98 ± 2.97 ** | 29.94 ± 2.31 ** |
| Number of grooming behavior | 2.3 ± 0.54 * | 1 ± 0.26 | 2.5 ± 0.4 * | 2.6 ± 0.31 ** | 1.4 ± 0.34 | 2.5 ± 0.43 * |
| Time of grooming behavior(s) | 7.4 ± 2.36 * | 2.69 ± 1.05 | 6.91 ± 1.8 * | 8.15 ± 1.22 * | 4.71 ± 1.23 | 4.2 ± 1.31 |

Table 2: Contents of Modified Si-Ni-San. The components of MSNS, the general profile of each herb, and the ratio were presented in the table.

| Chinese name | Botanical name | Common name | Family | Weight(g) | Part used |
|--------------|----------------|-------------|--------|-----------|-----------|
| Chai Hu | Bupleurum Chinense DC | BUPLEURI RADIX | Umbelliferae | 12 | root |
| Bai Shao | Paeonia lactiflora Pall | PAEONIAE RADIX ALBA | Ranunculaceous | 10 | root |
| Zhi Qiao | Citrus aurantium L | AURANTII FRUCTUS | Rutaceae | 8 | Fruit |
| Gan Cao | Glycyrrhiza uralensis Fisch | GLYCYRRHIZAE RADIX ET RHIZOMA | Leguminosae | 8 | root and rhizome |
| Ci Wu Jia | Acanthopanax senticosus (Rupr.et Maxim.) Harms | ACANTHOPANACIS SENTICOSI RADIX ET RHIZOMA SEU CAULIS | Araliaceae | 10 | root and rhizome |
| Huang Qi | Astragalus membranaceus (Fisch.) Bge. var. mongholicus (Bge.) Hsiao or Astragalus membranaceus (Fisch.) Bge | ASTRAGALI RADIX | Leguminosae | 8 | root |
| Zhi Zi | Gardenia jasminoides Ellis | GARDENIAE FRUCTUS | Rubiaceae | 8 | fruit |

Table 3: Selected separation condition of HPLC. The sample of MSNS was analysed by HPLC; the selected separation condition was presented in the table.

| Mobile phase | Gradient condition | Flow rate | Capillary temperature | Injection volume | Detection wavelength |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| A: phosphate buffer (PH=2) | 0~5min: 5%~5%B; 5~30min:5%~15%B; 30~60min:15%~25%B; 60~70min:25%~40%B; 70~80min:40%~95%B; 80~95min:95%~95%B | 0.8ml/min | 35℃ | 10μL | 222nm |
| B: acetonitrile | | | | | |
arm entries ($H_{(5)} = 19.411, P < 0.01; \text{Figure 3(a)})$, with the CF group exhibiting significantly lower ratios than the CON group did ($P < 0.05$). All treatments significantly reversed this effect, with LDM ($P < 0.01$) and CQ ($P < 0.05$) both being significantly more effective than MDM. We also observed significant between-group differences in the ratio of time spent in the open arm to the total time spent in all arms ($H_{(5)} = 20.82, P < 0.01; \text{Figure 3(b)})$, but the CF group exhibited ratios that were nonsignificantly different ($P > 0.05$) from those of the CON group. However, LDM ($P < 0.01$) and CQ ($P < 0.01$) did significantly increase the time spent in the open arms. Time spent in the centre area is an indicator of capacity for analysis and judgment, and we again observed significant between-group differences ($H_{(5)} = 18.324, P < 0.01; \text{Figure 3(c)})$, but the CF group's time in the centre was only nonsignificantly less than that of the CON group ($P > 0.05$). However, all treatments significantly increased time spent in the centre.
Table 4: Selected separation condition of UPLC-ESI-MS. The sample of MSNS was analysed by UPLC-ESI-MS; the selected separation condition was presented in the table.

| Mobile phase  | Gradient condition                  | Flow rate  | Capillary temperature | Injection volume | Detection wavelength |
|--------------|------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| A: 0.05%formic acid-water | 0~4.5min: 5%~5%B; 4.5~10.42min: 5%~13%B; 10.42~21.42min: 13%~13%B; 21.42~53.42 min: 13%~29%B; 53.42~59.87 min: 29%~66%B; 59.87~63.87 min: 66%~95%B; 63.87~73 min: 95%~95%B | 0.3ml/min  | 35°C                  | 2.6µL            | 222nm                |
| B: acetonitrile |                                                     |            |                       |                  |                      |

Table 5: Mass spectrometric parameters of UPLC-ESI-MS.

| Source Type | Scan Range | Ion Polarity | Nebulizer Gas Pressure | Capillary Voltage | Dry Gas Flow Rate |
|-------------|------------|--------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| ESI         | 50-1500m/z | Positive     | 2.0Bar                 | 4500V             | 200°C            |
|             |            | Negative     |                        | 4500V             |                  |

3.5. Blood Serum Biomarkers. We detected significant between-group differences in creatine kinase (CK) activity ($F_{(5,54)} = 4.362$, $P < 0.01$; Figure 4(a)), blood urea nitrogen (BUN) levels ($F_{(5,54)} = 14.056$, $P < 0.001$; Figure 4(b)), and lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) activity ($H_{(5)} = 14.205$, $P < 0.05$; Figure 4(c)). Compared to the CON group, the CF group exhibited significantly elevated CK activity ($P < 0.001$) and BUN levels ($P < 0.001$). LDM, MDM, and HDM all significantly reversed the CF group's elevated CK activity, but CQ achieved only a nonsignificant reduction ($P > 0.05$). All treatments significantly reversed the CF group's elevated BUN levels ($P < 0.001$), with MDM being significantly more effective than any other treatment ($P < 0.001$). Least significance difference testing indicated that no two groups exhibited significantly different LDH activity levels, but the MSNS groups seemed to exhibit elevated LDH activity relative to the CON group, whereas the CQ group seemed to exhibit decreased activity.

3.6. Malondialdehyde (MDA) and Superoxide Dismutase (SOD) in Liver Tissues. We detected significant between-group differences in hepatic MDA levels ($F_{(5,50)} = 0.173$, $P < 0.001$) and hepatic SOD activity ($F_{(5,50)} = 5.907$, $P < 0.001$) (Figure 5). Compared to the CON group, the CF group exhibited significantly greater MDA levels ($P < 0.001$) and significantly lower SOD activity ($P < 0.001$), and all treatments significantly reversed these effects.

3.7. Ultrastructural Changes in the Hippocampal CA1 Region. Representative ultrastructural micrographs of hippocampal CA1 region mitochondria for each group are shown in Figure 6. The mitochondrial membrane was smooth and clear in the CON group, with mitochondrial cristae that were clearly visible and properly ordered. Compared to the CON group, the CF group exhibited fewer mitochondria and several degenerative changes including blurred external membranes of the intracellular mitochondria, swollen cristae, numerous irregular mitochondria, and the absence of part of the mitochondrial membrane. All treatments reversed these alterations.

3.8. mtDNA Copy Number and mRNA Gene Expression of SIRT1, PGC-1α, and NRF1. The mtDNA copy number was calculated from the cytochrome b ΔCT value relative to that of beta actin. We observed significant between-group differences in mtDNA copy number ($H_{(5)} = 14.777$, $P < 0.05$). The CF group exhibited significant reductions in mtDNA copy number relative to the CON group ($P < 0.01$). This reduction was significantly reversed by LDM ($P < 0.05$) and HDM ($P < 0.01$) and nonsignificantly reversed by MDM and CQ (Figure 7).

Real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR) revealed significant between-group differences in the hippocampal mRNA expression of SIRT1 ($H_{(5)} = 11.305$, $P < 0.05$), the PGC-1α–encoding PPARGC1A ($H_{(5)} = 12.305$, $P < 0.05$), and NRF1 ($H_{(5)} = 25.524$, $P < 0.001$). Relative to the CON group, the CF group exhibited significantly decreased mRNA expression of SIRT1 ($P < 0.05$), PPARGC1A ($P < 0.01$), and NRF1 ($P < 0.01$). No treatment provided significant recovery of SIRT1 expression ($P > 0.05$). Only LDM ($P < 0.01$) and CQ ($P < 0.01$) provided significant recovery of PPARGC1A expression. All treatments except for LDM provided significant recovery of NRF1 expression ($P < 0.05$) (Figure 8).

Western blotting revealed significant between-group differences in the protein expression levels of SIRT1 ($H_{(5)} = 23.578$, $P < 0.001$), PGC-1α ($F_{(5,50)} = 14.052$, $P < 0.001$), and NRF1 ($F_{(5,50)} = 4.865$, $P < 0.01$). Compared to the CON group, the CF group exhibited significantly lower levels of SIRT1, PGC-1α, and NRF1. All treatments provided significant recovery of SIRT1 expression ($P < 0.01$), with CQ being significantly more effective than LDM ($P < 0.05$). All treatments provided significant recovery of PGC-1α expression, with MDM and CQ being significantly more effective than LDM or HDM. All treatments provided significant recovery of NRF1 expression (Figure 8).

3.9. HPLC and UPLC-ESI-MS Analysis. We analysed the sample of MSNS using different conditions and found that the 30% ethanol ultrasonic preparation was the best condition.
4. Discussion

CF is a complex state that can be induced by strenuous physical or mental tasks and can result in cognitive dysfunction, decreased self-motivation, decreased physical endurance, negative emotions, and various metabolic disorders in both the central and the peripheral systems. Accumulating evidence suggests that the hippocampal mitochondrial function can directly influence CF by affecting energy metabolism and oxidative processes. We investigated the efficacy of MSNS for alleviating CF induced in rats through long-term intermittent sleep deprivation [35], which can damage physiological functions by affecting metabolic energy [36]. We found that inducing CF promotes negative emotions, physiological dysfunction, and cognitive dysfunction and that MSNS can reverse these effects. CF also caused morphological degeneration of hippocampal mitochondria and decreased expression levels of mitochondrial biogenesis biomarkers, but these effects can also be reversed by administering MSNS. In addition, low-dose and middle-dose MSNS were more effective than high-dose.

One of the most direct and evident consequences of CF is reduced physical activity, which presented as reduced swimming endurance in this study. The WST is frequently used to assess physical endurance in fatigue research, and our WST results indicated that MSNS and CQ enhanced swimming endurance. This is consistent with their antifatigue properties, especially in increasing muscular capacity for force and sustained activity. CF can slow bodyweight gains by reducing appetite and increasing energy consumption, but...
Table 6: The identification of main compounds in MSNS.

| peak | retention time/min | relative molecular mass | chemicals | cation $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$ | $[2\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$ | $[\text{M}-\text{NH}_3+\text{H}]^+$ | $[2\text{M}-\text{H}]^-$ | $[\text{M}-\text{H}]^-$ | $[\text{M}+\text{HCOOH}-\text{H}]^-$ | $[\text{M}-\text{NH}_3-\text{H}]^-$ |
|------|--------------------|------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1    | 13.6               | 354.31                 | Chlorogenic acid | 707.2299                      | 353.1308               |                                |                          |                          |                                |                          |
| 2    | 16.4               | 388.37                 | Geniposide     | 777.6093                      | 775.3155               | 387.1745                     | 433.1810                 |                          |                                |                          |
| 3    | 20.8               | 480.46                 | Paeoniflorin   |                                | 479.2033               | 525.2093                     |                          |                          |                                |                          |
| 4    | 29                 | 418.3                  | Liquiritin     | 837.7795                      | 417.1674               |                                |                          |                          |                                |                          |
| 5    | 38.2               | 580.54                 | Naringin       | 1189.4040                     | 579.2242               |                                |                          |                          |                                |                          |
| 6    | 60.3               | 839.96                 | monoammonium glycyrrhizinate (ammonium glycyrrhizinate) | 823.8823               | 821.4439                 |                                |                          |                          |                                |                          |
| 7    | 61.1               | 470.68                 | Glycyrrhetin   |                                | 469.2328               | 515.2390                     |                          |                          |                                |                          |
| 8    | 29.8               | 550                    | liquiritigenin-4’-apioyl-glucoisde/licuraside/genipin 1-gentiobioside | 1099.3811             | 549.2121               | 595.2191                     |                          |                          |                                |                          |
| 9    | 40.0               | 610                    | Hesperidin / neohesperidin / rutinum | 611.0467              | 1223.2159               | 1219.4282                     | 609.2350                 |                          |                                |                          |
| 10   | 41.8               | 610                    | Hesperidin / neohesperidin / rutinum | 611.0461              | 1223.2104               | 1219.4251                     | 609.2348                 |                          |                                |                          |
no treatment increased bodyweight in this study. Further research may be necessary to explain this result.

CF can directly reduce muscular strength and efficiency by slowing oxidative processes and the consumption of energy metabolism products. MSNS can improve these functions, and we observed changes in relevant biomarkers. BUN levels, LDH activity, and CK activity are three important parameters in body function evaluation. BUN levels reflect protein metabolism, whereas LDH and CK activity reflect muscular function and cellular damage [37]. CK and LDH are the main regulatory enzymes of the ATP-phosphocreatine system and sugar metabolism, respectively [38]. Catabolic
metabolism of proteins and amino acids increases when sugars and fats provide insufficient energy [39]. All treatments in our study decreased BUN levels, with MDM being notably more effective than the other treatments. All MSNS doses decreased CK activity, but CQ did not, which suggests that MSNS provides better protection and recovery of muscle function during CF than CQ does. However, no treatments were effective in restoring LDH activity, possibly because of sugar metabolism not fully participating in CF in this model. Elevated oxidant levels can weaken muscles and accelerate fatigue [40]. SOD is an important enzyme in antioxidant regulation, and growing evidence suggests that it protects against oxidative stress [41]. It can downregulate lipid peroxidation to maintain the balance of oxidation and antioxidants during strenuous work. MDA levels may reflect oxidative damage because MDA is a product of lipid peroxidation and prostaglandin biosynthesis [42]. Our CF group exhibited increased MDA levels and decreased SOD activity, which suggests oxidative damage during CF. MSNS and CQ both reversed these changes with equal efficacy and no apparent dose-dependency for MSNS. We therefore suggest that MSNS-induced CF alleviation may be related to antioxidant effects.

Negative emotions are another manifestation of CF [43]. The OFT is widely accepted as a reliable test of locomotor activity associated with negative emotions in rodents [44]. The CF group's increased time spent in the centre indicates damaged spatial cognitive function, but all treatments reversed this effect. The mental and physical states of rodents are reflected in such OFT parameters as total distance travelled, number of square crossings, longest continuous travel distance, and mean velocity. Several studies have observed reduction of these parameters in fatigued rats [45,46]. However, we observed increased locomotor activity in the CF

Figure 6: Representative transmission electron microscope photos of hippocampal CA1 region mitochondria. Each group was observed at 20,000× and 50,000× magnifications to detect changes in the hippocampal mitochondria. Abbreviations: CON: negative control; CQ: coenzyme Q10; HDM: high-dose modified Si-Ni-San; LDM: low-dose modified Si-Ni-San; MDM: medium-dose modified Si-Ni-San; CF: untreated central fatigue.

Figure 7: mtDNA. All data are represented as the mean ± standard error (n = 7 per group). **P < 0.01 vs. the CF group. Abbreviations: CON: negative control; CQ: coenzyme Q10; HDM: high-dose modified Si-Ni-San; LDM: low-dose modified Si-Ni-San; MDM: medium-dose modified Si-Ni-San; mtDNA: mitochondrial DNA; CF: untreated central fatigue.
Mitochondrial biogenesis directly affects mitochondrial function, which can be inferred from changes in mitochondrial structures. The morphological changes in the transmission electron microscopy pictures show mitochondrial dysfunction in the hippocampus, with the CF group's hippocampal CA1 regions exhibiting degenerative changes including mitochondrial swelling, broken membranes, and broken and disappearing cristae. These mitochondrial dysfunctions suggest a low efficiency of mitochondrial biogenesis, as does the decreased mtDNA copy number. Nuclear-encoded proteins are essential for mtDNA replication, so their expression is an effective index of mitochondrial biogenesis. All treatments increased mtDNA copy number, which suggests enhancement of mitochondrial biogenesis. Finally, the CF group exhibited decreased gene and protein expression levels of SIRT1, PGC-1α, and NRF1, while all treatments restored the expression levels, which suggests that MSNS can alleviate

Table 7: The primers for real-time RT-PCR. The primers of β-actin (as control), cytochrome b, PGC-1α, SIRT1, and NRF1 were presented in the table.

| genes   | forward                                      | reverse                                      |
|---------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| β-actin | 5′-CTTACGAGCTTGGGCGTGCCGATC-3′               | 5′-CTATGAGATGCGTTGCATCCGTCCGT-3′             |
| Cytochrome b | 5′-AAATTCCTGGCGCATCCGTCCTA-3′              | 5′-GGAGGATGGGAGATTTGCT-3′                   |
| PGC-1α  | 5′-GCGGACAGAATCTGAGAGACC-3′                 | 5′-CGACCTGGCTGAAATATATATACCA-3′            |
| SIRT1   | 5′-CCTGACTTCAGATCAAGATGGTGA-3′              | 5′-GTGATTTAACATTCGCCAGAG-3′                 |
| NRF1    | 5′-TTGGAGAGATGTGGTGGCTAAG-3′                | 5′-GAGAGGGCGACTTCTGAG-3′                   |

group, probably because while our model does generate physical weakness, it also promotes an anxious and excitable mental state, which is closely related to central rather than peripheral fatigue. Decreases in vertical activity and grooming both reflect anxiety in this test, and we observed evident decreases in the CF group, while all treatments alleviated these effects. Another important negative emotion is anxiety, for which the EPM is a classic test in rodents. The CF group exhibited signs of anxiety such as fewer visits to the open arms, and LDM and CQ reversed these effects. Another important EPM parameter is the time spent in the central area, which can also reflect the decision-making abilities and cognitive function that play a crucial role in CF [47]. Notably, all treatments increased the time spent in the central area. The OFT and EPM results generally suggest negative emotions and cognitive dysfunctions in the CF group that were alleviated by every treatment.
CF-associated hippocampal mitochondrial dysfunction by increasing the efficiency of mitochondrial biogenesis. Furthermore, CQ is an essential component in the mitochondrial electron transport chain and so can enhance mitochondrial function. Notably, MSNS increased expression levels for the proteins of interest with efficacy comparable to that of CQ, which serves as evidence that MSNS can improve mitochondrial function.

Our study therefore suggests that MSNS and CQ can alleviate CF in rats and LDM and MDM were more effective than HDM. The metabolic function and efficiency of MSNS in rats were different from human and vary in different decoction. In the current study, we found that the low dose and middle dose were both more effective than high dose; the reason may refer to the metabolic and absorb efficiency of the decoction in rats. The effects of MSNS manifest in several ways, such as decreasing the levels of energy metabolic products, exerting antioxidant effects, enhancing physical endurance, relieving negative emotions, improving cognitive function, mitigating ultrastructural degenerative changes in mitochondria, and
promoting mitochondrial biogenesis in the hippocampus. According to the previous study, alkaloids, flavonoids and triterpenoids comprised majority of compounds in SNS [44]. The MSNS was a modified decoction of SNS, with other 3 herbs added, Eleutherococcus senticosus, Astragalus spp., and Gardenia jasminoides, to enhance the effect of antifatigue. Combined with the effect of SNS, the MSNS could be used as a decoction to relieve central fatigue. The components of MSNS include chlorogenic acid, geniposide, paeoniflorin, liquiritin, naringin, monoammonium glycyrrhizinate (ammonium glycyrrhizinate), glycyrrhetinic acid, etc. The main effective components of MSNS still need further research. Together, these results indicate that the MSNS decoction can alleviate CF by balancing energy metabolism in CNS and providing antioxidant effects. The mechanism appears to be enhancement of hippocampal mitochondrial biogenesis. Our results provide a rationale for human trials of MSNS for treating CF. Further studies are needed to elucidate the underlying mitochondrial molecular mechanism.

**Data Availability**

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

**Ethical Approval**

The experiments were approved by the Institutional Animal Ethics Committee of Beijing University of Chinese Medicine. All animals were maintained in accordance with the guidelines outlined by the Chinese legislation on the ethical use and care of laboratory animals. All efforts were made to minimize both animal suffering and the number of animals used to produce reliable data.

**Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest related to this article.
Authors’ Contributions
All authors have reviewed the manuscript and agreed to publication.

Acknowledgments
The authors wish to thank Dr Xiumei Wu, Mr. Zhi-bin Yang, and Professor Huai Xiaofrom the Institute of Entomocutical Research, Dali University, for their work on HPLC and UPLC-ESI-MS analysis. This work was supported by the Collaborative Innovation Project of the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine: “Nautical Traditional Chinese Medicine” Collaborative Innovation Center (no.522/0100604299).

Supplementary Materials
The full-length picture of western blot. (Supplementary Materials)

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