

Returning Our Focus to the Flavour and Nature of Herbs

Abstract

The foundational theories of Chinese herbal medicine originate in the *Nei Jing (Inner Classic)*, which states that it is the flavour and nature of herbs that govern how they interact with the human body. However, this theory has more recently become superseded by theories of herbal actions, disease indications and modern research, which are invariably used in textbooks and by practitioners to inform prescription of herbal medicines. This article explains why these approaches to the practice of herbal medicine are incorrect, and how such approaches can easily damage the health of patients taking herbal medicines. The correct method of prescribing herbs based on the *Nei Jing* is described, and illustrated with various case examples.

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Introduction

The foundations and tenets of herbal theory that have guided the great doctors of Chinese medicine through history originate in the *Nei Jing (Inner Classic)*. However, the application of *Nei Jing* herbal medicine theory seems largely forgotten in today's Chinese medicine education. It is in the *Nei Jing* that flavour and nature are defined as the primary principles that govern how herbs interact with the human body. The *Nei Jing* puts forth that the flavour and nature of herbs affect the qi in specific ways, which in turn affects the organs and physiological systems, and can thus either restore them to health if prescribed correctly or damage them if used incorrectly.¹ In contrast, the current herbal paradigm tends to focus on herbal actions, disease names and modern research. Prior to the development of this modern perspective, every classical herbalist referred to the following words from the *Nei Jing* as their source of understanding for how herbs affect qi in the body, and put these words into action with every formula they wrote:

辛能散、能行。Xin neng san, neng xing.
Acrid can disperse, can [make things] move.

甘能補、能緩、能和。Gan neng bu, neng huan, neng he.
Sweet can build, can slow, can harmonise.

苦能泄、能燥、能堅。Ku neng xie, neng zao, neng jian.
Bitter can drain, can dry, can make firm.

酸能收、能澀。Suan neng shou, neng se.
Sour can gather, can astringe.

鹹能下、能軟。Xian neng xia, neng ruan.
Salty can descend, can soften.

淡能滲、能利。Dan neng shen, neng li.
Bland can leach, can benefit [create flow].

Understanding that these words lie behind the herb choices in every classical formula can immediately improve our effectiveness and safety in the clinic. Conversely, if we do not understand the importance of these words, we may be tempted to prescribe herbs according to their documented actions, chemical components or performance in scientific research. Such approaches to prescribing herbs can potentially harm our patients.

The modern paradigm: focus on herb action

Today's predominant herbal paradigm tends to involve studying herbs according to their actions and indications. For example, substances are labeled as 'tonify qi' herbs, 'clear heat' herbs or 'dispel wind-damp' herbs. Herbal medicines are also designated according to modern scientific research as being 'anti-bacterial' or 'anti-viral', being able to treat or prevent cancer, or having the capacity of boosting the immune system. While it is not wrong to state that herbs may have qi-tonifying or heat-clearing effects, or that they may even be able to successfully treat cancer, stating the potential effect of a particular herb is not the same as understanding why it will affect the body in a specific way. For example, understanding how a herb alleviates a headache and the type of headache it may treat is considerably different from having the simplistic belief that it has the function of 'treating headache'.

The *Ben Cao Bei Yao* (本草備要, *Complete Essentials of Materia Medica*) written by Wang An in the Qing Dynasty highlights the danger of an action- and indication-focused perspective:

‘如治痰之藥，有治燥痰者，有治濕痰者，諸書第以除痰概之。頭痛之藥，有治內傷頭痛者，有治外感頭痛者，諸書唯言治頭痛而已。此皆相反之證，未可混施。’

‘If a herb treats phlegm, there are those that treat dry phlegm, there are those that treat damp phlegm. All books only generalise [these herbs] as phlegm eliminating. Headache medicines: there are [those] that treat internal injury headache and [those] that treat external influence headache. Books only speak of [a herb with the action of] ‘treat headache’. All of these contradicting illnesses, it is not appropriate to confuse or muddle the application.’

It is easy to understand that the treatment for a headache caused by cold pernicious is considerably different than the treatment for a headache from internal injury. However, if we memorise herbs according to their actions and indications, it becomes easy to overlook this important distinction and prescribe herbs according to the disease label or symptom name. Furthermore, it is important to understand that herb actions and indications – such as ‘clearing heat’ or ‘treating headache’ – merely represent the historical documentation of the successful application of herbs or herbal formulas. Stated more clearly, it is not that any herb ‘treats headache’, but rather that specific herbs or formulas have been shown to treat headache. This distinction may seem purely semantic, but it is imperative to understand in order to use herbs correctly. Herbs do not actually ‘do’ things in the body like turning on a light switch. A herb does not enter the body and ‘turn off’ a headache, or ‘turn on’ the immune system. Rather, herbs affect the qi. If the way they affect the qi is beneficial to the condition being treated, then the result will be the resolution of symptoms. On the other hand, the same herb used in a different (i.e. ‘wrong’) situation may affect the qi in such a way as to aggravate the condition, and even create other symptoms.

A fundamental principle of Chinese herbal medicine involves diagnosis of the individual patient and identification of a clear strategy of treatment, before choosing a formula and considering the appropriateness of each constituent herb therein. However, diagnosing a patient with a pattern of blood deficiency and selecting the treatment methods of warming, moving and building the blood (using warm, acrid and sweet herbs) is not the same as deciding to use *Si Wu Tang* (Four Substance Decoction) based on the fact that it is the formula traditionally believed to ‘nourish blood’. While Bai Shao (Paeoniae Radix alba) – a constituent herb of *Si Wu Tang* – is indeed said to nourish the blood and regulate the menses, it is a cool, sour herb that is included in this formula to treat yin deficient heat due to lack of blood. Thus patients with blood deficiency and secondary symptoms of dry lips, mouth ulcers and other empty heat signs would benefit from having Bai Shao (Paeoniae Radix alba) in the formula, whereas it would be inappropriate for patients with blood deficiency accompanied by cold hands

(showing poor circulation or qi reversal) or painful/scanty menses (showing cold, blood stasis or lack of blood and qi movement). In these examples, warming, building and moving the qi and blood are appropriate, while cooling and gathering are not. Therefore, using *Si Wu Tang* as an unmodified unit – to which herbs are then added for patients with cold hands or scanty menses – is less elegant than recognising that Dang Gui (Angelicae sinensis Radix) and Chuan Xiong (Chuanxiong Rhizoma) are the only two appropriate constituents therein. If one has only studied the actions and indications of Bai Shao (Paeoniae Radix alba) – such as that it ‘nourishes the blood’ or ‘softens the Liver’ – it is easy to include this apparently benign herb in prescriptions where its effect on the qi will not be conducive to successful treatment. Any herb in a classical formula, no matter how complete the formula may seem, may have a flavour and nature that could be detrimental to the health of any specific patient. By emphasising the flavour and nature of herbs as our pivotal focus it becomes evident that the appropriateness of each herb in a formula should be considered individually, instead of using any formula as an unmodified unit to which herbs are added for the individual patient.

The historical importance of flavour and nature

Students and practitioners of Chinese medicine may wonder how the great doctors of history were able to create such powerful formulas that remain so relevant today. The truth is that they did not create formulas to be used as unmodified building blocks. Following the theories of the *Nei Jing*, they recognised the causative factor in their patients that was creating an imbalance in the yin and yang and resulting in symptoms. They then decided whether the best way to affect that causative factor and rebalance the yin and yang was through introducing acrid, sweet, sour, bitter or salty flavours into the body in order to influence the qi in a specific way. Thus, herbal formulas were created by combining herbs with the appropriate flavours to affect the qi – dispersing, moving, building, slowing, draining, drying, gathering, astringing, descending, softening or permeating – which then resulted in resolution of the symptom or disease. In contrast, practitioners today tend to start at the end of this process – selecting a formula or single herbs to treat specific illnesses or patterns – without realising that the formulas themselves do not ‘treat’ IBS, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease or cancer, nor do they expel cold, pacify Liver yang or anchor the shen. In actuality, herbs are simply a vehicle for flavour, and it is the effect of the flavour and nature of the herb that creates change in the body. The difference between these approaches may not seem so profound, but it is actually the basis of the Chinese medicine aphorism, ‘因人而異’ (‘[treat each situation] according to the person’). From a classical Chinese medicine perspective the individual is treated

by focusing on the appropriate way to affect their qi. The modern perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the pattern, disease or symptom name, with less thought to the appropriateness of the herbs for the individual as a whole.

The *Ben Cao Bei Yao* states that the order of our methodology when prescribing herbs is crucial to success:

‘每藥先辨其氣味形色，次著其所入經絡，乃為發明其功用，而以主治之證，具列於後，其所以主治之理，既在前功用之中...’

‘Each herb: first differentiate its flavour and nature, form and colour; secondly the channel it enters. Only then [can one] expound upon its function, and the illness that it treats. After aligning these [qualities], the reason why it is used to treat [a given disease is] already included in the aforementioned functions.’

The *Ben Cao Bei Yao* echoes the words of the *Nei Jing* that our first consideration should be the flavours of the herbs we prescribe; only then will we understand the patterns the herbs can treat. While this theory may seem elementary, and one may feel obliged to seek more scientific or erudite explanations of how herbs work in the body, the succinct and profound words from the *Nei Jing* were the foundation of herbal application for the great doctors who have come before us, who treated both acute and chronic illnesses with considerable success. In the following quotation the Qing dynasty physician Zhou Xueting makes the relationship of flavour, nature and the patient quite clear:

‘周學庭曰：黃芩安胎者也、烏附傷胎者也，而胎當寒結，黃芩轉為傷胎之鳩血烏附又為安胎之靈丹。白朮安胎者也，芒硝傷胎者也，而胎當熱結，白朮反為傷胎之砒霜，芒硝又為安胎之妙品。無藥不可以安胎，無藥不可以傷胎，有何一定之方，有何一定之藥也。彼本草所注安胎，藥性所言禁服，不過為初學導之先路。’

‘Zhou Xue Ting states: “Huang Qin [Scutellariae Radix] calms the foetus, Hei Fu Zi [Aconiti Radix lateralis preparata] harms the foetus, but if there is cold accumulation, Huang Qin [Scutellariae Radix] will harm the foetus [as if there is] poison in the blood, and Hei Fu Zi [Aconiti Radix lateralis preparata] will protect it like a miracle medicine. Bai Zhu [Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma] calms the foetus, Mang Xiao [Mirabilitum] harms the foetus. But if there is heat accumulation, Bai Zhu [Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma] will harm the foetus like arsenic and Mang Xiao [Mirabilitum] will benefit the foetus like a magical substance. Every herb could be used to protect the foetus, and every herb could harm the foetus. There can be no set formulas, there can be no fixed herbs. The Ben Cao notes [a herb] as calming to the foetus, or states that the nature of a herb [makes it] forbidden to be used [in pregnancy], this is only for beginning students to guide them in their early path.”’

Although the words of Zhou Xueting discuss the dangers of incorrect herb use during pregnancy and state that prohibitions are just for ‘beginning students’, his words might be applied to every herb and formula we use today. By focusing herb use on actions and indications without stressing the appropriateness of their flavour and nature, they can become ‘as dangerous as poison in the blood’.

The Shanghan Lun

The *Shang Han Lun* (傷寒論, *Treatise On Cold Damage*) is possibly the greatest example of the application of flavour and nature in herbal treatment. In the *Shang Han Lun*, Zhang Zhongjing collected the great formulas of antiquity, laying out how the flavour and nature of herbs are best used, as well as pointing out what happens when patients are mistreated by doctors who, for example, use bitter when they should have used acrid, use acrid when they should have used sour, or use sour when they should have used sweet. For example, in the Taiyang chapter of the *Shang Han Lun*, *Gui Zhi Tang* (Cinnamon Twig Decoction) is indicated for treating invasion of pernicious wind manifesting with a floating pulse, headache, fear of wind and sweating. In *Gui Zhi Tang* light, warm and acrid Gui Zhi (Cinnamomi Ramulus) disperses the pernicious wind from the surface (muscle layer), while thick, warm and acrid Sheng Jiang (Zingiberis Rhizoma recens) disperses the wind that has entered more deeply. Sweet and neutral Da Zao (Jujubae Fructus) and Gan Cao (Glycyrrhizae Radix) slow down the wind, and prevent it from penetrating into the body more deeply. Lastly, cool and sour Bai Shao (Paeoniae Radix alba) restrains the yin fluids that are leaking out through sweat, and prevents the formula from being too warm and damaging the yin. Thus, in a small five-herb formula we see the direct application of three aspects of *Nei Jing* herbal theory: acrid disperses, sweet slows and sour astringes.

Also in the Taiyang chapter, *Gui Zhi Tang* is modified by removing Bai Shao (Paeoniae Radix alba) to become a ‘new’ formula named *Gui Zhi Qu Shao Yao Tang* (Cinnamon Twig Decoction Minus Peony). The associated symptoms of a skipping pulse and chest fullness are explained as being due to damage to the yang qi from inappropriate purging using cold and bitter herbs. The appropriate treatment in such cases is to use acrid and warm herbs to stimulate the yang qi with movement and warmth. In this situation, sour (Paeoniae Radix alba) is removed because the gathering/astringing effect of its sour flavour would aggravate the fullness in the chest, and of course its cool nature would not be appropriate when warming yang is the focus of treatment.

In the Taiyin chapter of the *Shang Han Lun* we see the opposite scenario, where *Gui Zhi Tang* is modified by doubling the dosage of cool, sour Bai Shao (Paeoniae Radix alba). In this situation the patient presents with a soft pulse, diarrhoea and abdominal pain. In this application of *Gui Zhi Jia Bai Shao Tang* (Cinnamon Twig Decoction

Plus Peony), warm acrid Gui Zhi and warm acrid Sheng Jiang (*Zingiberis Rhizoma recens*) stimulate the yang qi and disperse pathogenic cold, while sweet Gan Cao (*Glycyrrhizae Radix*) and Da Zao (*Jujubae Fructus*) assist by building the Spleen qi. The sour function of Bai Shao (*Paeoniae Radix alba*) is then used to create a gathering action in order to stop the diarrhoea. In this example we can see that the gathering action is the focus of the treatment. Whereas in unmodified *Gui Zhi Tang* cool, sour Bai Shao (*Paeoniae Radix alba*) astringes yin due to loss of fluids from sweat, in this formula the increased dosage of a sour herb is necessary as the fluid loss is more severe. It is also apparent that the cool nature of Bai Shao (*Paeoniae Radix alba*) is tempered by warm Gui Zhi (*Cinnamomi Ramulus*) and Sheng Jiang (*Zingiberis Rhizoma recens*), and that the yang has not been damaged to the extent that the inclusion of a cool herb is inappropriate.

The Pi Wei Lun

Examination of historical formulas from a flavour and nature perspective reveals that the brilliance of the doctors of antiquity was simply due to their effective application of *Nei Jing* herbal theory. Li Dongyuan, author of the *Pi Wei Lun* (脾胃論, *Treatise on Spleen and Stomach*) states:

‘脾胃為元氣之本而主升發，若因飲食勞倦所傷，脾胃不主升發，元氣不足。乃百病發生之由’

[The] Spleen and Stomach are the root of yuan qi and govern raising and spreading. If there is damage by drink/liquids, food and by physical labour and fatigue, the Spleen and Stomach cannot govern raising and spreading qi, and [therefore] the yuan qi will not be full. Thus, the hundred illnesses² can happen.’

Li Dongyuan founded the Bu Tu Pai (補土派, Nourish the Earth School), which recommended an approach to treatment focused on returning the Spleen and Stomach to harmony. He believed that an unobstructed Spleen was the key to preventing the ‘100 illnesses’ and used herbs accordingly to relieve obstructions hindering the healthy movement of the Spleen qi. Li’s approach is today often simplistically presented as being focused on ‘tonifying’ the Spleen with herbs such as Huang Qi (*Astragali Radix*), Bai Zhu (*Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma*) or Fu Ling (*Poria*). In fact, examination of the formulas of the *Pi Wei Lun* shows a prevalence of acrid and light herbs that are designed to disperse accumulation, separate the clear from the turbid and assist the raising and spreading of the clear yang qi. Thus, the Spleen is ‘tonified’ by removing what is impairing its function, not by adding/building ‘more qi’ to make the Spleen work better. Herbs like Chuan Xiong (*Chuanxiong Rhizoma*), Du Huo (*Angelicae pubescentis Radix*), Qiang Huo (*Notopterygii Rhizoma seu Radix*), Fang Feng (*Saposhnikovia Radix*), Chai Hu (*Bupleuri Radix*) and Sheng Ma (*Cimicifugae Rhizoma*) are not herbs

that are typically thought to treat or tonify the Spleen, but they are consistently applied in the formulas of the *Pi Wei Lun* to do just this.³

It is important to understand that the term ‘tonify’ (補, bu), while having the meanings of ‘boosting’ and ‘building’ in the West, also means ‘to benefit’, ‘to be of help’ or ‘to repair’ in Chinese. Thus benefitting or repairing the patient

“In the formulas of Li Dongyuan, strengthening the middle is done by draining, raising and building qi in ratios appropriate to the patient's condition.”

– in other words affecting the patient’s qi in a way that returns the yin and yang of the body to harmony – can be achieved by removing a blockage, expelling pernicious, restraining what is leaking, warming, dispersing and so on. When the qi is moving optimally, the patient returns to a state of health, and in a sense has been ‘tonified’. But this should not be confused with simply prescribing Huang Qi (*Astragali Radix*) or Bai Zhu (*Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma*) in order to give ‘more qi’ to the Spleen, or indeed using tonifying herbs to benefit any other system of the body. In the formulas of Li Dongyuan, strengthening the middle is done by draining, raising and building qi in ratios appropriate to the patient’s condition. It is therefore fundamental that we redefine our understanding of treatment to focus on returning the patient’s yin and yang, and the movement of their qi, to optimal function. This involves applying the words of the *Nei Jing* by choosing herbs with flavours that affect the patient’s qi in a manner which repairs or benefits them as a whole.

Other texts

It was not only Zhang Zhongjing and Li Dongyuan who focused on the flavour of herbs to inform their treatment strategies. Ming Dynasty physician Zhang Jingyue stated that flavour and nature are not just important to consider – they are ‘the Dao’ of herbal usage:

‘用藥之道無他也，惟在精其氣味，識其陰陽，則藥味雖多，可得其要矣。’

‘The way of using herbs, there is one way, there is no other. That is to master the herb’s nature and flavour, and to understand its yin and yang.’ Only with this understanding, even if the herbs are many, can you achieve desired results.’

Basing herb selection on flavour and nature is critical. By doing so, not only can we understand classical formulas and achieve desired treatment, we can avoid injuring our patients by accidentally affecting the qi inappropriately. In the Song Dynasty Pang Anshi highlighted this important point:

‘設當行辛甘而用酸苦，設當行酸苦而用辛甘，是昧於陰陽之用，如此醫殺之耳。’

‘When the method should be [to use] acrid and sweet but instead sour and bitter are used, or the method should be [to use] sour and bitter but instead acrid and sweet are used, this is to be blind to the use of yin and yang, and in this way a doctor kills their patient.’

Shang Han Zong Bing Lun (傷寒總病論三卷, Complete Treatise on Cold Damage, Third Scroll)

The formula did not contain any ‘stop bleeding’ herbs - and yet the formula effectively stopped the bleeding.

Flavour and nature in the clinic

To successfully apply the *Nei Jing* theory of flavour and nature in the clinic one must first be clear about one’s chosen treatment strategy. One should ask oneself whether it is necessary to disperse, move, build, slow, harmonise, gather, astringe, drain, dry, soften or descend. By being specific about what we wish to do in our treatment, it also becomes clear what we do not wish to do. Such clarity is critical whether we are writing a formula of our own or making additions and subtractions to a classical formula. With flavour and nature as our starting point, we can confidently prescribe formulas that are safe and effective. A recent case from the author’s clinic provides an example of this approach. The patient was a woman in her late forties from the countryside of China. She had a history of acid reflux, night sweats, thirst, constipation and insomnia, although these were not present during her current visit to the clinic. This time she had come seeking treatment for a slight but continuous leakage of menstrual blood, which had been going on for nine weeks. She also remarked that she was thirsty and had very strong-smelling breath. After checking her pulse and tongue, the diagnosis was Liver excess affecting the Stomach. While this diagnosis did not seem to specifically explain the uterine bleeding, it was clear that overall the Liver and Stomach needed to be harmonised by restraining the excess Liver qi and cooling Stomach heat. In order to harmonise, cool and restrain, the focus of the prescription was on sweet, cool and sour herbs. This combination of flavour and nature was intended to restrain the Liver qi, cool and moisten the Stomach as well as restrain and slow the leakage of blood, making the formula appropriate not only for the pattern of disharmony but also the specific symptom for which she was seeking treatment. The following formula was initially prescribed for two days in order to determine the accuracy of the diagnosis, before proceeding further.

炒棗仁	Chao Zao Ren (Dry-fried Ziziphi spinosae Semen) 25g
白芍藥	Bai Shao Yao (Paeoniae Radix alba) 12g
金櫻子	Jin Ying Zi (Rosae laevigatae Fructus) 9g
山茱萸	Shan Zhu Yu (Corni Fructus) 12g
炒黃連	Chao Huang Lian (Dry-fried Coptidis Rhizoma) 1.5g
阿膠	E Jiao (Asini Corii Colla) 9g

After two days of this formula, the bleeding reduced to slight spotting that appeared in the afternoons only. Based on this progress, she was prescribed five more doses. Within one week, the bleeding had stopped completely. The patient continued to take the formula for two more weeks in order to ensure the symptoms did not return.

This treatment was notable for two reasons. Firstly, the patient presented without a distinct reason for her uterine bleeding: the heat in the body did not appear excessive enough to force blood out of the vessels, she did not have weak enough Spleen qi to explain the blood leaking out of the vessels, nor did she have a history of trauma or the presence of abdominal masses that would indicate blood stasis forcing blood out of the pathways (this had been confirmed by a hospital ultrasound scan during week seven of her bleeding). Her previous symptoms, however, provided a context from which to understand her constitution. The patterns of Liver heat, yin deficiency, rebellious qi in the Stomach with thirst and night sweats suggested that the application of bitter, cold herbs to clear heat and stop the uterine bleeding would be inappropriate, and may even have caused these previously treated symptoms to reappear by damaging fluids and exacerbating yin deficient heat. Instead, focusing on sour and cool herbs to address the Liver-Stomach disharmony by gathering and cooling the Liver qi and cooling and protecting the Stomach yin was intended to benefit the blood leakage without it being the obvious focus of treatment. As I had little concrete information to go on, prescribing the formula for two days initially allowed me to determine if the formula was appropriate before proceeding to longer-term treatment. Secondly, and more pertinent to the discussion in this article, the formula did not contain any ‘stop bleeding’ herbs - and yet the formula effectively stopped the bleeding. This illustrates how herb flavours can create broader possibilities of effect than those documented as actions or indications in modern textbooks.

To illustrate this point further, let us examine five herbs from the ‘Stop Cough and Wheezing’ chapter of the modern text *Chinese Herbal Medicine: Materia Medica*.⁵ Xing Ren (Armeniaca Semen), Zi Wan (Radix Asteris Tatarici), Kuan Dong Hua (Farferae Flos), Zi Su Zi (Fructus Perillae Frutescentis) and Sang Bai Pi (Mori Cortex) are all listed as having the capacity to ‘stop cough and wheezing’. Looking at their flavours and natures, however, shows that they are very different herbs. Xing Ren (Armeniaca Semen)

and Zi Wan (*Radix Asteris Tatarici*) are bitter and slightly warm, and thus from a flavour and nature perspective will warm, and drain. These herbs are therefore appropriate for a cold-damp type cough, but if they were given to a patient with a hot and/or dry cough they would likely exacerbate dryness and/or heat and make the condition worse. Kuan Dong Hua (*Farferae Flos*) and Zi Su Zi (*Fructus Perillae Frutescentis*) are warm and acrid, and thus will warm and disperse in the body when ingested. For a patient with pernicious cold or qi constraint these herbs will disperse the cold, invigorate the yang, warm the chest and aid the Lungs' ability to disseminate qi. But for a patient with weak Lung qi causing cough and wheezing, such dispersal may lengthen the illness and worsen chances of recovery. Finally, Sang Bai Pi (*Mori Cortex*) is sweet and cold, and thus has cooling, building, slowing and harmonising effects when ingested. While appropriate for heat with dryness or hot, sticky phlegm that needs to be cooled and moistened, if prescribed for patients with cold or wet-damp patterns it may damage the yang and thus cause an increase in fluid accumulation. Therefore, although these five herbs have all been documented to have the capacity to stop cough and wheezing, practitioners should not lose sight of the fact that their different flavours and natures affect the qi in very different ways. Thus the type of cough and wheezing they can treat and the manner in which they do this are considerably different. In actual fact, these herbs do not treat coughing and wheezing. Rather, their flavours and natures provide the possibility of stopping coughing and wheezing through their effects on the qi, and could just as easily create heat and dryness, weaken the qi, damage the yang and generate damp.

Choosing a herb primarily for its action – even if one pauses to consider whether it makes sense for a patient in terms of its flavour and nature – is less accurate than first considering whether it is necessary to drain, dry, disperse, descend, gather, soften or build and then choosing a herb with the appropriate flavour and nature. The formula *Xie Bai San* (Clear the White Powder) provides an excellent example of the importance of prescribing herbs and formula according to flavour and nature. *Xie Bai San* consists of:

Chao Sang Bai Pi⁶ (Dry-fried *Mori Cortex*) 30g
 Di Gu Pi (*Cortex Lycii Chinensis Radicis*) 30g
 Zhi Gan Cao (Honey-fried *Glycyrrhizae Radix*) 3g
 Geng Mi (*Semen Oryzae*) 15-30g

In *Formulas and Strategies*,⁷ *Xie Bai San* is discussed in the chapter 'Clearing Heat From the Organs', which states that the formula treats heat in the Lungs and is indicated for cough and wheezing. If we study the flavour and nature of the individual herbs in *Xie Bai San*, we discover that Sang Bai Pi (*Mori Cortex*) and Di Gu Pi (*Cortex Lycii Chinensis Radicis*) are sweet and cold, Zhi Gan Cao (*Honey-fried Glycyrrhizae Radix*) is mildly warm and sweet, and Geng

Mi (*Semen Oryzae*) is neutral and sweet. Thus this small four-herb formula is comprised completely of sweet ingredients. According to the *Nei Jing*, sweet herbs build, slow and harmonise. Thus *Xie Bai San* is a sweet, cold formula that is appropriate for a hot-dry type of cough and wheezing, yin deficiency involving Lung symptoms, or heat in the Lungs with deficient yin fluids. Prescribing this cold and sweet formula without modification would be inappropriate for any condition involving dampness, productive cough, fear of cold, fear of wind, weak Spleen qi, weak yang qi or any exterior pathogen. While *Formulas and Strategies* does state that *Xie Bai San* is contraindicated with patterns of wind-cold, wind-heat or damp-phlegm, without understanding the flavour and nature of the constituent herbs it would be difficult to fully understand why this is the case. While one might not use *Xie Bai San* with an external wind pathogen because the textbook prohibits this, it would be easy to employ its constituent herbs if we were paging through a *materia medica* looking for something to 'stop cough' – a potential mistake that could worsen the condition of some patients. Should we make this mistake, however, we would not be the first to use *Xie Bai San* or its ingredients inappropriately. Wu Jutong in his *Wen Bing Tiao Bian* (Systematic Differentiation of Warm Disease) wrote the following about the misuse of *Xie Bai San*:

‘歷來注此方者，只言其功，不知其弊... 愚按此方治熱病後，與小兒痘後外感已盡，身虛熱者甚良，若兼一毫外感，即不可用，如風寒風溫正盛之時，而用桑皮，地骨，或于別方中加桑皮，或加地骨，如油入麵，錮結而不可解。

'Commentaries about this formula are always about its achievements and not its drawbacks ... According to [the principles of] this formula, I have treated sequelae of heat/febrile diseases and pox in children, when the external illness has already been resolved ... [and if] the body has deficient heat [the results are] very good. If concurrently [there is] even a hint of exogenous [disease], then [the formula] cannot be used. If there is wind and cold, wind and warmth flourishing, and [you] use Sang Bai Pi or Di Gu Pi, or you add Sang Bai Pi or Di Gu Pi to another formula, it is like adding oil to flour, [or] plugging and binding with molten metal [that] cannot be separated.'

After reading this quote many years ago, I began to avoid Sang Bai Pi [*Mori Cortex*] and Di Gu Pi [*Cortex Lycii Chinensis Radicis*] for fear of inadvertently 'plugging and binding' my patients. At the time, reading the actions of these herbs did not clarify how and why they were potentially dangerous. But returning to the *Nei Jing* theory on the flavour of herbs elucidates Wu's admonition. As is so often the case in Chinese medicine, we tend to search for complicated theoretical answers when the truth is simple and clear: 'Sweet can build, can slow, can harmonise'. The cold and sweet natures of Sang Bai Pi [*Mori Cortex*] and

Di Gu Pi [*Cortex Lycii Chinensis Radicis*] have potentially thick, cold, slowing and cloying effects which can trap a pathogen whilst engendering and slowing fluids, when actually dispersing would be the appropriate treatment method.

Conclusion

Without proper emphasis on the *Nei Jing* as the foundation for the practice of herbal medicine, we may not realise that we already have the tools to treat patients safely and effectively, and as successfully as the great doctors from history. If we do not understand the source texts of our medicine, we will be unable to fully grasp the medicine we practise, even when we are successful. The medicine may remain deep and mysterious, and we may feel forced to rely on modern scientific research for explanations of the efficacy of herbs in treatment. Yet, if we understand the *Nei Jing* theory of flavour and nature as the basis for the application of herbal medicine, what seemed mysterious becomes obvious, and the skills of the famous doctors who came before us no longer seem so hard to fathom. With the *Nei Jing* as our foundation, and studying the doctors of the past who treated according to its tenets, every one of us can write a classical formula.

A dedicated practitioner and teacher, JulieAnn Nugent-Head is part of the Association for Traditional Studies, a not-for-profit company dedicated to bringing classical knowledge back to the forefront of Chinese medicine. For more information about the Association for Traditional Studies, its training programs and free online video library of educational material, please visit www.traditionalstudies.org.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Unfortunately there is not space in this article to discuss the yin and yang qualities of herbs (i.e. their thick/thin natures, which subsequently became codified as herb channel theory) in any depth. This subject is discussed in more detail in the *Introduction to Classical Herbalism* lecture at the following link: <http://www.traditionalstudies.org/intro-to-classical-herbalism/>
- 2 Li uses the term '100 illnesses' to refer to the many illnesses that affect human beings, not 100 specific ailments.
- 3 Although the *Pi Wei Lun* contains more than 40 formulas focused on Spleen and Stomach disharmonies, only half of them contain 'Tonify Spleen' herbs such as Bai Zhu (*Atractylodes macrocephalae Rhizoma*) and less than a third of them contain Fu Ling (*Poria*). The sheer number of formulas focused on treating the Spleen and Stomach, together with the preponderance of herbs not typically considered as 'treat Spleen' herbs, highlights the importance Li Dongyuan ascribed to combining the appropriate flavours in appropriate combinations to treat the varying patterns of Spleen and Stomach qi disharmony. This is a quite different perspective than simply adding Huang Qi (*Astragalus Radix*), Bai Zhu (*Atractylodes macrocephalae Rhizoma*) and Fu Ling (*Poria*) to a formula when one wishes to benefit the Spleen.
- 4 The yin and yang quality of the specific herb refers to its thick/thin, light/heavy nature, and thus its ability to affect floating or sinking, lowering or raising in the body (see endnote 1).
- 5 Bensky, D., Clavey, S. (1993). *Chinese Herbal Medicine: Materia Medica*. Seattle: Eastland Press
- 6 *Xie Bai San* traditionally includes Chao (dry-fried) Sang Bai Pi. Dry-frying a cold and sweet herb will balance its coldness and temper its sweetness. This is an important distinction, for reasons that should be clear from the discussion that follows.
- 7 Bensky, D., Barolet, R. (1990). *Chinese Herbal Medicine: Formulas and Strategies*. Seattle: Eastland Press