

HOW TO LEARN CHINESE HERBS

(PART THREE)

by Lu Yubin

For most western students, studying Chinese herbal medicine is particularly difficult. Facing so many new Chinese and Latin names, as well as a great deal of information involving so many diseases, a Western student can easily feel frustrated. So can it be made easier to learn Chinese herbs and memorise such copious information? In this third article, suggestions are made that may help in this process. Two categories of herbs are discussed, i. Herbs that promote the flow of qi, and ii. Herbs that clear heat.

Herbs that Promote the Flow of Qi

Chen Pi (Pericarpium Citri Reticulatae), Qing Pi (Pericarpium Citri Reticulatae Viride) and Zhi Shi (Fructus Citri seu Ponciri Immaturus)

Chen Pi is the mature tangerine peel. Maturity means that the herb has absorbed more heat and dryness, while its yellow colour indicates that it has close connections with the Spleen. So Chen Pi is mainly used to promote the flow of qi in the middle jiao and can also dry dampness and dissolve phlegm.

Qing Pi is the immature peel of the tangerine. Immaturity means that it has a stronger growing or moving property, while its green colour corresponds to wood or the Liver in the human body. So Qing Pi is mainly used to break up stagnation of qi, especially Liver qi. As it is strong in moving qi, severe stagnation of qi caused by substantial pathogens, such as retained food, can also be treated with this herb.

Zhi Shi is the immature fruit of the bitter orange and the whole fruit is used as the herb. Because it is not mature, it is hard, and 'shi' in Chinese also means solid or hard. So this herb has a strong effect in moving qi, and is mainly used to break up stagnant qi due to obstruction of substantial pathogens such as retained food, constipation, phlegm and dampness, as well as to treat stagnation of qi in the chest due to accumulation of phlegm.

Fo Shou (Fructus Citri Sarcodactylis)

'Fo Shou' means the 'Buddha hand', and the five fingers,

when spread, are similar to the branches or twigs of trees. So this herb has a close relationship with the Liver whose qi tends to flow outward and upward. In the clinic, it is mainly used to treat stagnation of Liver qi with good effect, although its pain relieving action is mild.

Mu Xiang (Radix Saussureae seu Vladimiraie)

Mu Xiang literally means 'wood fragrance'. Wood is related to the Liver but as this herb has a strong pungent or aromatic taste and is bitter in nature, it is often used to move qi to help transform dampness which is mostly related to the Spleen. So instead of helping treat stagnation of Liver qi, Mu Xiang is more frequently used to treat stagnation of Spleen or Stomach qi with dampness in the gastrointestinal tract.

Xiang Fu (Rhizoma Cyperi Rotundi)

Xiang Fu resembles a small liver, whilst 'fu' in Chinese also means female. Besides it is also black in colour which is related to Liver blood. So, Xiang Fu is good at treating stagnation of Liver qi and female menstrual disorders and it is also said to be the herb that can move qi in blood.

Wu Yao (Radix Linderae Strychnifoliae)

'Wu' means black. Black is related to the water phase, the Kidney zang, and the cold temperature. So, this herb is used to treat stagnation of qi due to invasion of cold, and Kidney cold caused by Kidney yang deficiency and marked by frequent urination or incontinence of urine.

Chen Xiang (Lignum Aquilariae)

Chen Xiang is a herb with very strong pungent taste and mainly grows in tropical areas, thus absorbing warmth. 'Xiang' means fragrance, while 'chen' means sinking or heaviness. This herb has a good effect in relieving stagnation of qi due to cold, and lowering rebellion of Stomach qi due to Stomach cold, giving rise to vomiting or hiccup. This is also a herb that can descend to the Kidneys to warm Kidney qi and assist the Kidney in grasping qi.

Chuan Lian Zi (Fructus Meliae Toosendan)

The character 'chuan' has the appearance of a bundle of

tendons, which are controlled by the Liver. 'Lian' also means persuading, or harmonising, and this herb is mainly collected in the winter, which means it has a cold nature. So Chuan Lian Zi is mainly used to treat pain in the hypochondrium, Stomach or lower abdomen due to stagnation of Liver qi or disharmony between the Liver and the Stomach, especially when caused by heat.

Li Zhi He (*Semen Litchi Chinensis*)

This herb is the seed of the lychee and is collected in the summer and hence is warm. Because it is warm, it is mainly used to treat stagnation of qi due to invasion of cold, and because it is a hard seed it can act on hard masses or nodules. So this herb is mostly used to treat hernial pain or swelling and pain of the scrotum due to cold invading the Liver channel. It is also good at treating premenstrual abdominal or postpartum pain due to stagnation of blood, which will also produce a visible or hard obstruction, or chronic Stomach pain which may suggest stagnation of qi which has given rise to stagnation of blood.

Xie Bai (*Bulbus Allii*)

'Xie' is a kind of garlic, whilst 'bai' means white which is related to cold or yang deficiency. A head of garlic is similar to the chest in shape and has a very strong smell (which reflects its yang moving and nodule dissipating qualities). So it can dissolve phlegm and strongly remove obstruction of yang qi in the chest. In the clinic, it serves as a very important herb for chest bi (painful obstruction) syndrome which is mainly caused by obstruction of cold phlegm or turbid dampness in the chest.

Tan Xiang (*Lignum Santali Albi*)

'Tan' means a jar with a small opening and a big belly, which is like the chest above the diaphragm. Tan Xiang is another warm tropical herb with a strong fragrance (xiang) which can help disperse stagnant qi. So this herb specially enters the chest or Stomach to treat pain caused by stagnation of qi due to invasion of cold.

Herbs that clear heat

Zhi Mu (*Radix Anemarrhenae Asphodeloidis*)

'Zhi' means knowing and 'Mu' means mother. 'Mother' belongs to yin, and yin deficiency causes heat. Therefore the functions of this herb are mainly to purge heat and nourish yin. As the Lung and Kidney have a mutual mother-son relationship, it especially nourishes Kidney and Lung yin deficiency with exuberance of heat.

Lu Gen (*Rhizoma Phragmitis Communis*)

This is the root of the reed, which lives in water and has the shape of a tube. Water is cold and moist, so this herb can both purge heat from the Stomach and the Lung and promote production of body fluid to quench thirst. Furthermore as it is similar to the urethra in shape, it can also induce diuresis to clear heat.

Shi Gao (*Gypsum*)

Shi Gao is a stone¹ and is very white² in colour and hence has a very cold nature and can especially enter the qi level to purge heat. The qi level mainly involves the Stomach and

the Lung, the two principal zangfu which take body fluid as their yin fluid. Shi Gao can also purge Lung and Stomach heat and promote production of body fluid to quench thirst.

Tian Hua Fen (*Radix Trichosanthis*)

This is a white herb and the white colour corresponds to the qi level and to body fluid. When a pathogen enters the qi level, it will give rise to severe heat in the Lung and Stomach and injure body fluid. This is why Tian Hua Fen is mainly used to treat impairment of body fluid during the course of febrile diseases, marked by dry mouth and severe thirst, or else to treat excessive drinking in diabetes. Also because white stands for cold and this herb enters the qi level, it is used to treat cough due to Lung heat. Carbuncle is also a condition marked by strong heat, and the pus formed in carbuncles will be white or yellowish in colour. So Tian Hua Fen can clear heat, purge fire, drain pus and subdue swelling in the treatment of carbuncles.

Zhu Ye (*Herba Lophatheri Gracilis*)

Zhu Ye (Bamboo Leaf) is round at one end and sharp at the other, resembling the heart in shape. So this herb can specially act on the Heart to treat restlessness due to heat disturbing the Heart shen in epidemic febrile disease, flaring up of Heart fire, or painful urinary dysfunction (lin) due to transmission of Heart fire into the Small Intestine.

Zhi Zi (*Fructus Gardeniae Jasminoidis*)

Zhi Zi also resembles the Heart in shape, and is red or deep brown in colour. So this herb has three functions, i. purging heat in the Heart to relieve restlessness, ii. cooling blood (which is red in colour) to stop bleeding, and iii. clearing damp-heat (brown or yellow in colour) to relieve jaundice.

Han Shui Shi (*Calcitum*)

'Han' means cold, 'shui' means water, 'shi' means stone. All these three characters in Chinese indicate something very cold. Because this substance is so cold, it has a strong effect on purging heat at the qi level and treating diseases caused by toxic heat or fire such as red eyes, sore throat, mouth ulcers and burns.

Herbs That Clear Heat and Remove Toxic Heat

Jin Yin Hua (*Flos Lonicerae Japonicae*)

'Jin' means gold and 'yin' means silver. This herb is two-coloured - white and yellow - corresponding to silver and gold. The white colour stands for the qi level in Chinese medicine, while the yellow colour or any deep colour is related to blood. So this herb mainly purges heat at the qi level or disperses heat in the wei level, but it can also enter the blood or ying level to purge heat.

Lian Qiao (*Fructus Forsythiae Suspensae*)

Lian Qiao is another herb that resembles the heart in shape, and when cut open, its chambers are very similar to these of the heart. So Lian Qiao is good at clearing heat or purging fire from the Heart. Lian Qiao is also very sharp at one end, and this enables the herb to break up nodules or masses, like a knife.

Zi Hua Di Ding (*Herba Violae cum Radice*)

'Di' means earth, and this herb has its root deeply located in

the earth, whilst the character 'ding' in Chinese is almost the same as the character for 'nail'. Zi Hua Di Ding is effective at treating furuncle, which is called nail-carbuncle in Chinese medicine as it has a flat surface and, like both a nail and the herb, has a long and deep root. Furuncle is considered a dangerous condition in Chinese medicine, whilst another dangerous disorder for which this herb is used is snake bite.

Da Qing Ye (*Folium Daqingye*)

'Da' means great; 'qing' means blue or green; 'ye' means leaf. The blue colour stands for cold since cold has the property of contracting the blood vessels giving rise to a blue hue in the face or skin. 'Big blue' thus indicates extreme cold, and this herb can cool severe heat in the blood, relieving maculae, restlessness and high fever. It is also used to treat symptoms such as sore throat, erysipelas and mouth ulcers caused by fire.

Qing Dai (*Indigo Pulverata Levis*)

'Qing' means blue, hence cold, thus Qing Dai has a cold nature and just like Da Qing Ye, can cool blood heat and treat macula and bleeding. Blue is also the colour of the Liver, and Qing Dai can purge Liver heat to calm endogenous wind.

Chuan Xin Lian (*Herba Andrographitis Panicuatae*)

This herb in Chinese is named "Lotus Penetrating the Heart". The Heart belongs to fire in five elements, and when there is fire in the Heart, it may transmit to the Lung (the two lungs lie either side of the heart). Therefore this herb is used to treat excessive heat in the Lung marked by cough and asthma, carbuncles in the Lung (Lung abscess) or sore throat. Another of its properties derives from the fact that the lotus lives in water and is therefore related to water or dampness. As well as clearing toxic heat, it can dry dampness and treat dysentery due to damp heat, hot painful urinary dysfunction (lin) or eczema due to damp heat.

Zao Xiu (*Rhizoma Paridis*)

'Zao' means flea; 'xiu' means stopping. Carbuncles are caused by localised toxic heat. Fire and heat belong to yang which dominates movement and this herb can subdue swelling to relieve pain, similar to stopping the jumpy hyperactivity of a flea. It is also used to treat convulsions due to abnormal hyperactivity of the tendons, which can also be compared to the restlessness or hyperactivity of a flea.

Ban Bian Lian (*Herba Lobeliae Chinensis cum Radice*)

'Lian' means lotus. In Chinese medicine, the heart, which belongs to fire, is said to be like a lotus placed upside down, and this herb can treat diseases caused by toxic fire such as carbuncles, bee stings or snake bite. Since the lotus lives in water this herb can also induce diuresis to relieve oedema.

Yu Xing Cao (*Herba Houttuyniae Cordatae*)

'Yu' means fish, 'xing' means fishy, and 'cao' means herb. Yu Xing Cao is named after the strong fishy smell of the fresh herb. One of the most important manifestations of Lung abscess is cough with fishy and foul-smelling phlegm.

So this herb can clear heat and drain pus and thus treat cough with pus and blood which smells fishy. The fish lives in water and this herb can also induce diuresis to treat painful urinary dysfunction (lin).

She Gan (*Rhizoma Belamcandae Chinensis*)

'She' means launching, 'gan' means dry or finishing. This herb has a good effect in treating sore throat, cough or asthma with copious phlegm by dissolving and eliminating phlegm, 'launching' the phlegm out of the Lung, as well as drying it.

Ya Dan Zi (*Fructus Brucae Javanicae*)

'Ya' means crow; 'dan' means gallbladder or bile; 'zi' means seed. Bile is a very bitter substance, so this herb is also very bitter and is usually not used in decoction form. Also because it is very bitter, it has a strong effect in purging fire to treat dysentery due to toxic heat. Bile is the secretion of the Gall Bladder, which is located in the half-interior and half-exterior portion. According to Chinese medicine, malaria is a disease caused by the malaria pathogen hiding in an area between the Lung and the Stomach (gao). This is also a half-exterior and half interior region, because the Lung is in the yang upper region while the Stomach is located in the yin abdomen. Yang corresponds to the exterior (in febrile disease, patterns of the Lung generally belong to the more exterior wei stage), whilst yin corresponds to the interior (in febrile disease, patterns of the Stomach generally belong to the more interior yangming stage). Another important function of Ya Dan Zi, therefore, is to treat malaria.

Hong Teng (*Caulis Sargentodoxae Cuneatae*)

This herb is named red (hong) vine (teng). Red is the colour of fire and also indicates blood, whilst as a vine the herb can enter the collaterals to remove obstruction. Intestinal abscess is a disease caused by toxic heat (fire) obstructing the collaterals of the abdomen. This herb can treat intestinal abscess, but is specific for the pain from intestinal abscess, which is caused by stagnation of blood in the blood vessels.

Bai Xian Pi (*Cortex Dictamni Dasycarpi Radicis*)

This herb is one of the most commonly used herbs for eczema or pustules, which are mostly caused by damp heat. Eczema in Chinese is called shi zhen (damp-rash). Its pathogenesis is damp-heat and its manifestations include exudation, a sign of dampness, giving rise to severe itching. 'Bai' means white, indicating that this herb can treat heat; 'xian' means fresh or juicy, and 'pi' means skin. This herb can therefore clear heat, remove toxic materials, dry dampness and stop itching, and in the clinic is mainly used for skin disorders marked by exudation.

Lou Lu (*Radix Rhapontici seu Echinops*)

'Lu' means gourd, which resembles the breast, whilst 'lou' means dripping or leaking, related to the secretion of milk. So this herb mainly functions to treat breast disorders, both acute mastitis which should be treated by removing toxic heat, and distension of the breast due to accumulation of milk, since the herb can both clear away toxic heat and promote milk secretion.

Di Gu Pi (Cortex Lycii Chinensis Radicis)

'Di' means earth; 'gu' means bone; 'pi' means skin (which is controlled by the Lung). Di (earth) belongs to yin, so Di Gu Pi can treat heat due to yin deficiency. However this herb is especially used for bone-heat as reflected in the name (gu), and can also purge Lung heat to relieve cough and asthma because pi (skin) is related to the Lung.

Herb to Clear Heat and Cool Blood

Sheng Di Huang (Radix Rehmanniae Glutinosae)

This is fresh rehmannia root. 'Sheng' (fresh) means it has more juice, and is cold in nature, while Di Huang (rehmannia root) means "earth yellow", i.e. related to the earth or yin fluid. When pathogenic heat enters the ying level, there is both heat in the blood and impairment of yin fluid. Sheng Di Huang both cools blood to stop bleeding and treats body fluid deficiency or yin consumption in febrile diseases.

Xuan Shen (Radix Scrophulariae Ningpoensis)

'Xuan' means black, which corresponds to the water phase and to the Kidneys. This suggests that this herb must be able to nourish yin on the one hand, and to clear heat on the other, since water can douse fire. In the clinic, Xuan Shen is also especially good at treating sore throat or scrofula (luo li) because it can both detoxify and dissipate nodules.

Mu Dan Pi (Cortex Moutan Radicis)

This the bark of tree peony, and if you check the appearance of this herb in the pharmacy, you will never forget what it does: it closely resembles a white-coloured blood vessel. The white colour means that it is cold in nature, whilst its blood vessel-like shape indicates that it works on the blood level or the blood vessels themselves. So this herb on one hand can clear heat from the blood or ying levels, and on the other hand is good at removing stagnant blood from the blood vessels. Thus it can promote the flow of blood to treat disorders such as amenorrhoea and dysmenorrhoea. Blood belongs to yin and when a pathogen enters the blood level, it means it has entered the deep part of the body. So Mu Dan Pi is said to be able to clear hidden heat from the blood and can also treat heat of the deficiency type.

Chi Shao (Radix Paeoniae Rubrae)

'Chi' means red, indicating blood, and Chi Shao is another herb specific to disorders of blood. It is similar to Mu Dan Pi in its functions, since it also derives from the peony and can clear heat from the blood and promote blood flow to remove stagnation of blood. The difference is that this herb is stronger than Mu Dan Pi in removing stagnant blood to relieve pain.

***Xi Jiao (Cornu Rhinoceri)*³**

This is the horn of the rhinoceros, which has a strong effect on cooling blood. Heat in the blood may force blood to go outwards as haemorrhage, so this herb is good at treating haemetemesis or epistaxis due to blood heat. Heat in the blood will also disturb the Heart spirit, since the Heart controls blood, and Xi Jiao is effective at purging fire and calming the spirit and is used to treat high fever, coma or delirium in febrile diseases or convulsions due to severe

heat. Finally, heat in the blood will cause blood to extravasate and manifest as rashes or macules during the course of febrile disease, which can also be treated with this herb.

Notes

- 1 Most stones are cold in temperature.
- 2 The white colour in Chinese medicine corresponds to the Lung, the Stomach and the qi level. This is because the Lung in five phase theory belongs to metal which corresponds to the white colour. The reason why the white colour further corresponds to the Stomach and the qi level is rather more complicated and derives from the relationship between the body fluid and the Lung, the Stomach and the qi level. Compared to other forms of yin fluid such as blood and essence, body fluid is the lightest in weight, and so generally-speaking mainly distributes in the upper part (the Lung and Stomach). In epidemic febrile diseases, pathogenic factors tend to attack the upper jiao or the upper part of the human body first, and this stage is usually recognised as belonging to the qi level (both the patterns of the Lung and the Stomach in epidemic febrile diseases belong to the qi level), which is also marked by impairment of the body fluid. This is why some herbs working on disorders of the body fluid such as dampness, are also white in colour.
- 3 This substance is illegal in most countries and is included here for reference and informational purposes only.

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