

Florian Ploberger
Herbal Formulas –
Western Herbs from the TCM Perspective

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Introduction

Dear reader,

The interest in classical Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) herbal formulas has increased tremendously in recent decades. These herbal formulas are hundreds of years, some of them even 2000 to 3000 years old. Since many traditional works have survived to the present, TCM physicians have recourse to their ancestors' comprehensive wealth of experience.

In this book we make a try at substituting classical TCM herbal formulas by formulas compounded of Western herbs. At this point I would like to state expressly that I hold the classical TCM works in high esteem. For this reason I consider the herbal formulas I describe to be merely suggestions. They should also serve as basis for discussion.

Classical TCM herbal formulas are characterised by their structure: Most herbal formulas comprise at least three of the four main ingredients:

- Chief herb (Jun)
- Minister herb (Chen)
- Messenger herb (Zuo)
- Adjutant herb (Shi)

In this book chief herbs, minister herbs, adjutant herbs and messenger herbs are listed for all herbal formulas.

How can we explain the above mentioned terms?

In ancient China the emperor was sovereign and chief of the country and an important person. Similarly the chief herb has the principal healing action and is often prescribed in the highest dose of all herbs compounded. Traditionally Chinese herbal formulas are often named after the respective chief herb.

It was the task of the minister to serve the sovereign and chief. This explains the function of minister herbs: They promote the therapeutic action of the chief herb. In addition the minister herb has further healing effects for the patient, which are complementary to the actions of the chief herb. If we take a herbal formula which has been compounded to treat Qi Deficiency as an example, we will see that the chief herb is merely alleviating the Qi Deficiency. The minister herb could tonify Qi as well as blood.

Any undesirable side effects of a herbal formula are neutralised by the adjutant herb.

The so-called messenger herbs have a special purpose in compounding a TCM herbal formula. They define the energy direction of effects and the

body region where the herbal formula should take effect (e.g. skin, lumbar part of the spine, temples, etc.). Furthermore, they harmonise the effects of the other herbs.

Of course, not all herbal formulas comprise these four ingredient categories. Usually they consist of chief and minister herbs, while adjutant and messenger herbs may be missing now and then. But including precisely such herbs is typical for TCM.

Unfortunately, in Western countries we do not have as much experience in applying our herbs like physicians in China, to whom ancient medical texts have been descended since 3000 years.

Yet, many arguments underline the approach to apply Western herbs according to TCM criteria:

1. Most of our herbs grow in the immediate vicinity of the user. Some of them we even find in our own gardens.
2. They are easily available and often less expensive than Chinese herbs.
3. They can be grown in a controlled way.
4. The legal approval is regulated.
5. After diagnosis – consultation with the physician to gather the patient's history as well as tongue diagnosis and pulse diagnosis – they can be applied precisely according to TCM criteria.

Although we cannot have recourse to the same wealth of experience like TCM, we know about some experienced herbal specialists who lived in Western countries. As an example, I would like to mention the following few:

- Hippocrates (5th century before christ)
- Empedocles (5th century before christ)
- Pedanius Dioscorides (1st century AD)
- Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD)
- Galen (2nd century AD)
- Ar-Rhazi (869–925 AD)
- Ibn Sina (also known as Avicenna, 980–1037 AD)
- Hildegard of Bingen (12th century AD)
- Otto Brunfels (16th century AD)
- Hieronymus Bock (16th century AD)
- Leonhard Fuchs (16th century AD)
- Jakob Dieter (16th century AD)
- Nicholas Culpepper (16th century AD)
- Carl Linneus (1707–1778 AD)
- Samuel Stearns (18th century AD)
- Samuel Thomson (1769–1843 AD)
- Fletcher Hyde (20th century AD)
- John Christopher (20th century AD)

These scientists and physicians have left numerous texts to posterity, which are commonly used even today.

In this book about 50 herbal formulas are described. Herbs like rosemary, thyme, sage, burdock root, alder buckthorn bark, etc. are used in these herbal formulas. In addition herbs like cardamom, caraway, common fennel and anise are included, which are common kitchen spices in Europe.

The question whether TCM herbal formulas can be substituted by herbal formulas compounded of Western herbs can be answered as follows:

Many traditional Chinese herbal formulas can be excellently replaced by herbal formulas compounded of Western herbs. In particular many herbs can be found in Europe which are eminently suitable for draining Damp Heat.

It is more difficult to properly replace the group of tonifying TCM herbs by Western herbs.

Herbs tonifying blood as well as herbs tonifying Qi cannot be directly substituted by Western herbs. For example, there are no Western equivalents to *Radix Angelicae sinensis* (Danggui), *Radix Ginseng* (Renshen) or *Radix Astragalus* (Huangqi).

In this context the following facts are interesting: Especially bitter-cold herbs like centaury and gentian root were taken as tonifying herbs in European countries in the last centuries. These bitter-cold herbs are used for draining Damp Heat in TCM.

The following might explain why the above mentioned herbs could also be used as tonifying herbs: people had an excess of Damp Heat at that time. This was drained by applying bitter-cold herbs and, as a result, everybody who took these herbs felt better afterwards. Nevertheless: These herbs do not meet the TCM criteria of herbs tonifying Qi!

How this book is structured:

This book describes about 150 herbs such as rosemary, lady's mantle, dandelion etc. Besides their English names, pharmaceutical, botanical and German names are also listed for each herb. In addition, a description of the parts of the plants used, their taste, temperature effect, the organs involved and doses is provided as well as detailed descriptions of the actions and individual fields of application of individual herbs. A painting of each plant is also included in this book.

Furthermore, 50 herbal formulas consisting of Western herbs are presented in this book. They are structured by their effects in 20 groups and are described as follows:

Individual herbs are listed with their respective daily dose in gram per day. This is followed by effect, indication and respective Western symptoms as well as tongue and pulse diagnoses in abbreviated form. The way the formula is compounded and the effects of the individual herbs used in the formula are explained for better understanding.

The book is completed by an appendix, a comprehensive literature list and an index of keywords.

My sincere thanks go Mag. Ursula Derx for her precise, wonderful translation, as well as Simon Becker MSc. for the accurate proofreading and revision of Chapter VIII.

I wish you much pleasure with our wonderful Western herbs.

With warm regards,



Florian Ploberger MD, B.Ac., MA
Vienna, in summer of the Earth Dog year 2018

I. CLASSIFICATION OF HERBS

In this book we attempt to describe Western herbs according to the criteria of Traditional Chinese Medicine. A simple system for describing herbs has developed in China over the past 2500 years: Five pharmaceutical properties (yaoxing) are differentiated:

Primary properties:

- The five tastes (wuwei)
- The four temperature effects (siqi)
- The degree of toxicity (duxing)

Secondary properties:

- The four directions of energy (sheng jiang fu chen)
- Involvement of main inner organs

The actions of herbs can be explained by the properties of taste, temperature effect, organ involvement.

1. The five tastes (wuwei)

The five tastes are: sour, bitter, sweet, acrid, salty. Another taste is listed in the Huangdi neijing (one of the major Traditional Chinese Medicine works; the word by word translation of the title reads: «The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic»): the neutral or bland taste. It refers primarily to mushrooms such as Poria Cocos (Chin.: Fuling), which have a slightly diuretic effect.

The taste determines the basic action of a herb. It is important to know that several tastes can be attributed to some herbs.

The *sour taste* has astringent, constricting, and cohesive effects. For this reason sour herbs are applied to stabilise the Kidney Qi or to retain the fluids in case of incontinence (inability to hold urine in).

The sour taste is contraindicated in Qi Stagnation, amyotrophia, or Stomach Fire.

The *bitter taste* has laxative, purgative, desiccative, soothing, anti-inflammatory, styptic (in case of Blood Heat), downward moving effects and drives

out Toxic Heat and stimulates circulation. Bitter herbs are applied in purulent inflammations, insomnia (sleeplessness), hepatitis (inflammation of the liver), herpes zoster (shingles), eczema (inflammation of the skin), obstipation (constipation), PMS (premenstrual syndrome: pain prior to menses), dysmenorrhoea (pain during the menstrual period).

Tip: It is advisable to take bitter herbs mid-morning. This time period corresponds to the Wood element. In the evening they would cause too much injury to the spleen, and the patient would probably have to pass water during the night.

It is interesting that our Western herbal medicine tradition recommends bitter herbs as tonics, while bitter herbs are classified as detoxicating, anti-inflammatory and draining in China. This could be explained by the fact that small doses (1-3 grams) of bitter herbs stimulate the Qi movement and eliminate Damp from the body, thus making the patient feel better.

Bitter taste is contraindicated in Jinye (body fluids) Deficiency, Blood Deficiency and loss of weight.

The *sweet taste* has humidifying, strengthening, relaxing, calming, harmonising effects and cools Yangming (stomach and large intestine) and Qifen. Sweet herbs are applied in debility, lack of fluids (for example dry skin and coughing), spasms (convulsions), pain and high fever. Sweet taste is contraindicated in adiposity, overweight, diseases involving Phlegm and Damp.

The *acid taste* has dispersive, warming effects and breaks open pathways. It is applied in infections, myoma, rheumatism, etc. It is important to know that there are only a few acid cooling herbs, like peppermint or lime.

Acrid taste is contraindicated in spasms (convulsions), Qi Deficiency, impaired vision, and vertigo (dizziness).

Salty taste nourishes Yin, reduces Yang and has a macerating effect. Salty herbs are applied in vertigo (dizziness), conjunctivitis (inflammation of the conjunctiva), tinnitus (ringing in the ears), obstipation (constipation), during menopause, in lymphadenosis, thyroid nodules, hot flushes, ... For a better understanding it is important to note: Some sources claim that the salty taste has a drying effect; others say it is humidifying. Both are right! You only need to consider the effect of Glauber's salt. Glauber's salt has a humidifying effect in the intestines and therefore dries the rest of the body.

Salty taste is contraindicated in hypertension (high blood pressure).

The *bland taste* has calming, mucolytic effects on the heart pathways; it is diuretic and stimulates the circulation of water. Bland herbs are applied in oedemata (water retention), ascites (dropsy of the belly), confusion, and depression.

The five phases

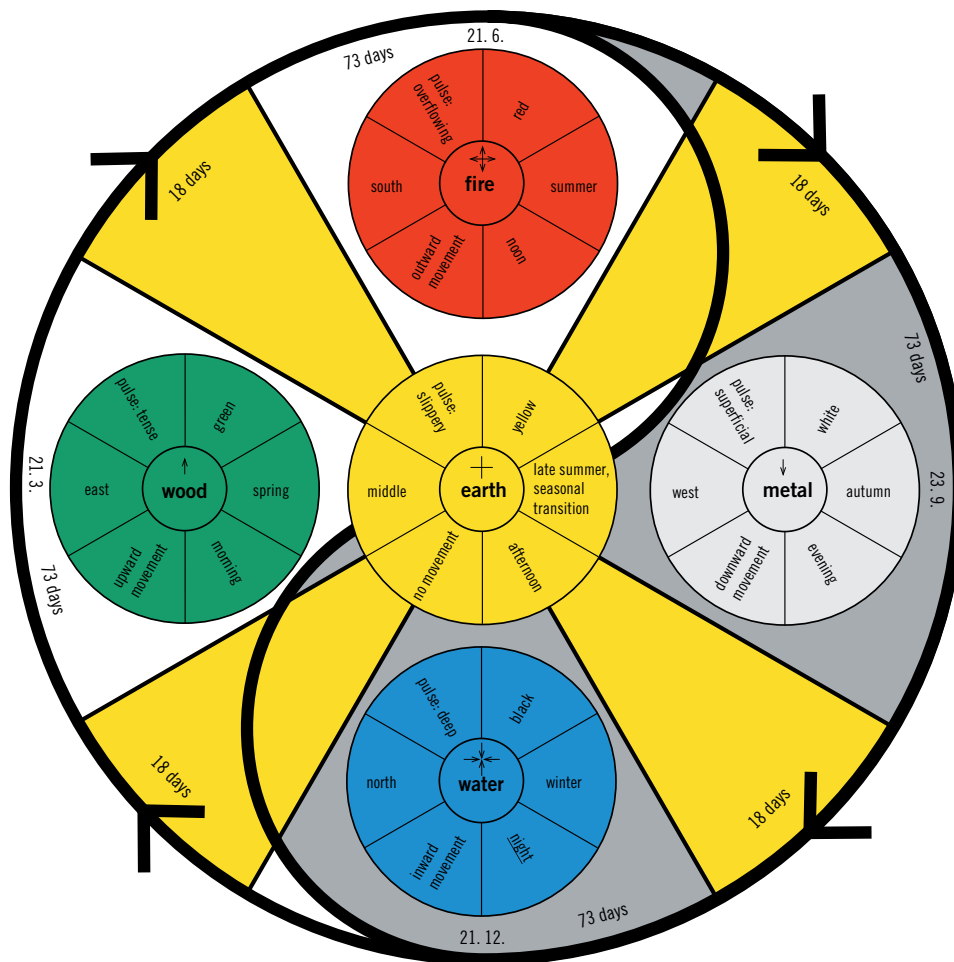


TABLE OF THE FIVE TASTES					
Sour	Bitter	Sweet	Acrid	Salty	Bland
Astringent	Laxative	Humidifying	Dispersive	Nourishes Yin	Calming
Constricting	Purgative	Strengthening	Warming	Reduces Yang	Mucolytic
Cohesive	Desiccative	Relaxing	Breaks open pathways	Macerating	Diuretic
	Draining	Calming			
	Toxic Heat	Harmonising			
	Anti-inflammatory	Cooling			
	Styptic				
	Downward moving				

Each taste can also have a negative effect on the body.

The Huangdi neijing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic) states the following:

- Too sour a taste causes injury to the liver and tendons.
- Too bitter a taste causes injury to the heart and blood.
- Too sweet a taste causes injury to spleen and flesh.
- Too acrid a taste causes injury to lungs and skin.
- Too salty a taste injures kidneys and bones.

2. The four temperature effects (siqi)

As in food stuffs the temperature effect of herbs is determined by a subjective feeling on the one hand, and on the other hand, by objective criteria, like breathing frequency, pulse diagnostic or a hyperemia of certain body parts. A distinction was originally made between four temperature effects: hot, warm, cool and cold. The concept of a neutral temperature effect was added with the passing of time. Additional intermediate levels, like slightly warm, very hot, etc., were introduced at a later stage.

In plain terms, cooling or cold herbs should be prescribed for Heat diseases and warm ones for Cold diseases. In Heat diseases the patient is hot, he or she does not tolerate heat, perspires heavily, the urine is concentrated and smelly, the tongue is red, the pulse rapid (1:6 or more).

In Cold diseases, the patient is very cold, he or she loves warmth, has bright urine, soft stool, a pale tongue with a white coating, a slow pulse (1:4 or less).

However, this does not mean that it would be wrong to use a combination of various herbs that have different temperature effects. It is often necessary to mix herbs that have different temperature effects where complex symptoms are involved. For example, a patient can have Heat in the upper body region, while being cold below. Another example would be a Heat disease on the surface. In this case cooling herbs which have upward and outward moving actions and thus drive the herbal recipe to the body surface are used in combination with acrid-warm herbs such as cinnamon branches.

What actions are related to the four temperature effects?

- Hot herbs, like pepper, ginger, cinnamon, have warming, analgesic actions and help when there is an outbreak of infectious disease.
- Warm herbs such as cardamom and tangerine peel, tonify and have both an aromatic and a carminative effect.
- Cool herbs disperse Wind Heat, nourish the Yin and have a calming action.
- Cold herbs, like gentian root, rhubarb root, dandelion or centaury, discharge the heat and have laxative, downward moving, detoxifying, anti-inflammatory actions.

Note regarding bitter-cold herbs: Here in the West we have a diverse range of herbs which belong to this group: gentian root, rhubarb root, dandelion, and centaury only comprise a small selection of these. In the case of illnesses with Damp Heat, one can easily do without Chinese bitter-cold herbs such as *Coptitis rhizoma* / Huanglian, *Scutellaria radix* / Huangqin, etc. and replace them with Western herbs.

In addition, our herbs can be further classified into herbs which effect the middle burner:

- Silverweed
- Centaury
- Burdock root
- Sage
- Pansy
- Milfoil, common yarrow
- Absinth, wormwood
- Speedwell

... and herbs which effect the lower burner:

- Birch leaves and bark
- Milk thistle
- Dandelion
- Gentian
- Fumatory
- Goldenrod
- Devil's claw

3. The degree of toxicity (duxing)

The Chinese concept of toxicity is completely different from our Western one. Having its origins in Chinese pharmacology, the term toxicity cannot be simply incorporated into our natural scientific school of thought. By preparing herbs in different ways, Chinese experts understand how to develop a drug from toxic raw materials with only a few side effects. A known method is roasting in ginger juice.

Tip: If a tea consisting of many bitter herbs is not tolerated by one's stomach, then chew a ginger root before drinking it!

In China, as in the West, there are toxic herbs which should only be used by experienced therapists. Toxic plants such as celandine, lily of the valley, etc. are also dealt with in this book. Everybody has to decide for him- or herself how much he or she can manage.

4. The four directions of energy (sheng jiang fu chen)

Four directions of energy are described:

- upward movement – sheng
- downward movement – jiang
- outward movement – fu
- astringent movement – chen





Chinese medicine is based on the assumption that everything is prone to permanent change. This idea can be found in the Yin-Yang system as well as in the concept of the Five Elements. Thus, all phases are passed – moving upwards, outwards, downwards and astringently.

Upward movement is directed towards the top and corresponds to the Wood phase in spring. This concept can be visualised by imagining a plant that starts to grow in spring. Upward moving herbs heighten the Yang and the Qi, trigger nausea (feeling of sickness) and help to regain consciousness after fainting. Examples of application are diarrhoea (dysentery), prolapse of the uterus (falling of the womb), gastroptosis (downward displacement of the stomach) and vertigo (dizziness).

Outward movement is not only directed upwards but is also a dispersing movement towards the exterior. It corresponds to the Fire phase in summer. Outward moving herbs clear the surface, they are diaphoretic, stimulate the Wei Qi (according to Western medical practice) and animate the Taiyang. Examples of application are common cold and dermatopathies (skin disorders).

Downward movement is directed towards the bottom and corresponds to the Metal phase in autumn. Downward moving herbs have laxative, anti-emetic and diuretic effects and they lower rising Yang and Lung Qi. By the way, coffee was originally used to that effect: as an antiasthmaticum (against asthma) due to its downward moving effect. Further fields of application of downward moving herbs are migraine headache (paroxysmal, bilious headache), cephalgia (headache), hyperonia (high blood pressure) and nausea (feeling of sickness).

Astringent movement corresponds to the Water element in winter. The movement is directed towards the bottom and the interior. Astringent herbs have stabilising, binding, securing actions; they inhibit sweat secretion and remove Heat. Such herbs are applied in incontinence (inability to hold urine), diarrhoea (dysentery), excessive sweating and disk prolapse. No direction of energy is assigned to the Earth element.

THE FOUR DIRECTIONS			
			
upward movement	outward movement	downward movement	astrigent movement
Raising the Yang Raising the Qi Triggering nausea Regaining consciousness	Opening the surface Stimulating Wei Qi Animating Taiyang Diaphoretic Dispersing coldness	Diuretic Laxative Moving Yang downwards Moving Lung Qi downwards Antiemetic	Stabilising Binding Securing Inhibiting sweat secretion Purging Heat

An Example

In his work, *Shanghan lun*, the renowned physician Zhang Zhongjing describes in detail the progress of an infection caused by Wind Cold.

He recommends the Guizhitang recipe at the Taiyang stage, a stage which is characterised by an infection present in the outer layer (the patient shows shaking chills, arthralgia, sensitiveness to cold, a thin white coating on the tongue, shallow and wiry pulse).

This recipe comprises:

Cinnamomi ramulus	Guizhi
Zingiberis rhizoma	Shengjiang
Paeonia Alba radix	Baishaoyao
Glycyrrhizae radix	Gancao
Ziziphus Jujubae fructus	Dazao

The acrid-warm herbs cinnamon and ginger, which have an outward direction of energy, should disperse the pathogenic agent and thus prevent the infection from spreading throughout the body. Additionally, Zhang Zhongjing recommends eating porridge with shallots (also acrid-warm), going to bed and covering up to the tip of the nose. Now the patient should sweat.

The strength of this recipe is reflected by all other herbs. By adding dates and licorice (sweet wood), Zhang Zhongjing strengthens the middle and therefore prevents injury to spleen and stomach. Please note: From a TCM point of view, lime tea, which is often used in the West (lime is acrid-cooling), should be used as soon as the patient has already begun to sweat and/or has a high temperature.

Traditional texts explain that the direction of energy changes depending on the temperature, taste, weight and preparation of herbs. The preparation of herbs is discussed in a separate chapter of this book (see page 20).

Herbs with acrid, sweet, warm and hot properties mostly have an upward and outward moving direction, while sour, bitter, salty, cool and cold herbs have a downward or astringent direction of energy.

Furthermore different plant parts also have varied directions of energy. Likewise, flowers and leaves are primarily upward moving, while seeds and fruits have a predominantly downward moving direction of energy.

5. Involvement of main inner organs

This system was developed in China over the course of time and was completed around the year 1000.

Besides the taste, temperature effect and direction of energy, the channels to which the respective herb is related are also described. Channels (jingmai) in this connection are representatives of the inner organs (zangfu). Some herbs are very closely related to a specific organ.

«Messenger herbs (envoys)»¹ are herbs which are able to direct the action of other herbs towards a specific inner organ or into a distinct body region. In fact, herbs are not only related to a certain organ, and are therefore not only used to support a specific organ, but rather are always connected to syndromes, since Chinese Medicine treats body cycles which affect other elements as well.

An Example

We could prescribe the patient peppermint (*Mentha herba*) when diagnosing «Liver Qi attacks the stomach», i.e. Wood attacks Earth. In this case the patient suffers from strain, a sensation of fullness, and even occasional pain in the digestive system. Strain and aggression, wasted creativity all contribute to making this patient feel sick. These are often patients who desperately try to lose weight, but to no avail.

When diagnosing pulse we find a wiry pulse (xian) at the location of the gastric region on the right arm, something which is normally related to the liver. Peppermint can move Liver Qi and disperse Stagnations of the middle burner.

Peppermint is a herb which is often underestimated. It is superbly suited to improving the taste of a decoction. Add just 3 grams of *mentha herba* and the taste will be much more pleasant!

1 Bensky & Gamble: envoys (messengers or couriers)