

The Yin and Yang of Herbs

Abstract

The previous two articles in this series ('The First Materia Medica: Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing' and 'Returning Our Focus to the Flavour and Nature of Herbs', issues 104 and 105 respectively) focused on classical herbal perspectives. This article discusses the yin and yang of herbs in order to better understand the clinical application of the concepts of flavour (味, wei), nature (氣, qi - often translated as temperature), thinness (薄, bo), thickness (厚, hou), lightness (輕, qing) and heaviness (重, zhong). Although essential for clinical effectiveness, the modern transmission of Chinese herbal medicine has neglected this understanding of herbal medicine.

Introduction

Before beginning a discussion on the yin and yang of herbs, we must remind ourselves that yin and yang are not separate or static entities, but rather are shifting and relational aspects of any defined object. The terms yin and yang can be used in a myriad of ways to help us understand the qualities of the universe. In Chinese, the characters yin 陰 and yang 陽 are adjectives, and depict the sunny southern side of a mountain (yang), in comparison to the shaded northern side of the same mountain (yin). In pictographically contrasting two sides of a mountain, it is imperative to recognise yin and yang can only be discussed in the context of the objects being compared. In Chinese, there is no way to discuss yin or yang without speaking about the yin of 'what'. In the context of this article, individual herbs of the Chinese materia medica are discussed in terms of yin and yang attributes in order to understand their nature and thus use them effectively in the clinic.

To speak of the yin and yang of a herb is quite different to speaking about its actions, chemical components or clinical indications. Moreover, to understand herbs according to their unique yin and yang aspects is the only way to stay within the paradigm and methodology of classical Chinese medicine. Many practitioners assume that the yin or yang of a herb refers to whether it is cool/cold (and thus yin) or warm/hot (and thus yang). While this is not incorrect, it does not reflect the breadth of yin-yang qualities referred to in the classic materia medicas or by Zhang Jing Yue (1563-1640) in the following admonition to return to using herbs from the classical perspective of the *Nei Jing* (Inner Classic):

張景岳：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 no other [way]. To be proficient at the flavor and nature [of the herbs], to recognise their yin and yang, even though the herbs [used] are many, only [then] can you achieve what is essential [i.e. the desired results].

Complete Works of Jing Yue (景岳全書)

In issue 105 of *The Journal of Chinese Medicine*, I discussed how the *Nei Jing* outlines flavour and nature as the foundations of herbal medicine formulation. This article, part three in this series on classical herbalism, focuses on defining three yin and yang properties of herbs in order to better understand the substances we use as medicines.

Yin and yang flavours, yin and yang qi

The 'complete nature' (性 xing) of a herb incorporates all of the yin and yang qualities that make that herb unique. The qi 氣 (herb nature - often translated as temperature) and the wei 味 (flavour) simply represent one yin and yang aspect of the entire nature of each herb. Thus, we will begin our examination of yin and yang with the qualities of herbal qi and herbal flavour. In this article the terms flavour and qi will be used instead of the commonly used terms flavour and nature/temperature.

Flavour is defined as yin in relation to qi, which is defined as yang. This is because whilst herb flavour is physically experienced in the mouth, the qi of a herb is experienced in a comparatively more ethereal way in the body. After defining the broad category of herb flavour as yin and the broad category of herb qi as yang, specific flavours and qi can be identified as being more yin or yang in quality. Flavours such as sour, bitter and salty are defined as yin, while acrid and sweet are yang. As the overall category of flavour is yin, and the flavours sour, bitter and salty are also

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Keywords:
Chinese medicine,
Chinese herb,
yin-yang,

yin, these flavours can be described as yin within yin (陰中之陰), while acrid and sweet are said to be yang within yin (陰中之陽).

One can also identify the specific herbal qi as being yin or yang in quality. For example, warm and hot qi are yang, while cool and cold qi are yin. As previously defined, because herb qi is a yang quality (compared to the yin quality of flavour) warm and hot qi herbs represent yang within yang (陽中之陽), while cool and cold qi herbs represent yin within yang (陽中之陰). While such definitions may seem mere semantics, the following statement from the *Nei Jing*, 'Great Treatise on Expected Appearance of Yin Yang' (陰陽應象大論), confirms that what we have classified as yin does in fact act in a yin manner, and what we have classified as yang does in fact act in a yang manner:

陰味出下竅

Yin flavours exit [i.e. descend toward] the lower orifices.

陽氣出上竅

Yang qi exit [i.e. ascend toward] the upper orifices

As discussed in the previous article in this series, the *Nei Jing* states that the bitter flavour affects a person's qi in such a way as to cause drying, draining or solidifying in the body (苦能泄能燥能堅), the sour flavour affects the qi in such a way as to cause gathering or astringing (酸能收能澀), and the salty flavour affects the qi in such a way as to cause softening and descending (鹹能下能軟). In this article, we can expand on that theory by defining bitter, sour and salty as yin within yin flavours, and thus they will cause the aforementioned flavour-defined effects to happen in a yin manner. For example, yin-flavoured bitter, sour and salty herbs will have a tendency to descend and create their effects more profoundly in the lower (yin) regions of the body. Yang-flavoured sweet and acrid herbs on the other hand will have a yang tendency to affect or move toward the upper (yang) regions of the body. In clinical practice, we can see this in formulas that release the surface with yang-flavoured acrid herbs that go upward and outward, such as Gui Zhi (Cinnamomi Ramulus), Jing Jie (Schizonepetae Herba), Ma Huang (Ephedrae Herba) and Qiang Huo (Notopterygii Rhizoma seu Radix), while purging and clearing formulas employ yin-flavoured herbs that have a downward action, like Da Huang (Rhei Radix et Rhizoma), Mang Xiao (Mirabilitum), Xing Ren (Armeniacae Semen), Zhi Shi (Aurantii Fructus immaturus) and Huang Qin (Scutellariae Radix).

In terms of herb qi, the *Nei Jing* states that warm, hot and very hot herbs will tend to affect the qi in an upward, yang manner, while herbs with yin qi will act in a descending manner. In the Ming Dynasty *Ben Cao Gang Mu* (本草綱目, *Compendium of Materia Medica*) Li Shizhen attempted to further clarify the *Nei Jing* in the following statements:

酸鹹無升

Sour and salty are without ascending

甘辛無降

Sweet and acrid are without descending

寒無浮

Cold is without floating

熱無沉

Hot is without sinking

則沉而直達下焦

Thus what sinks goes directly to the lower jiao

則浮而上之巔頂

What floats goes to the top of the head

Here the *Ben Cao Gang Mu* reminds us of the fundamental yin and yang principles that apply to herbs and that govern their effects in the body. Thus, if one desires a yang warming action in a yin (lower) area of the body, or a yin cooling action in a yang (upper) area of the body, the herbs in a formula must be chosen appropriately. This is important clinically, as in order to clear heat from the eyes, we must take into consideration that a herb with cool or cold qi will not naturally/easily ascend to the head unless we create a formula that has yang within yin to reach the upper part of the body. Equally, in order to warm the legs and lower body, we must remember that herbs with warm or hot qi do not naturally descend, and thus we must include yin within yang in order to reach the feet.

To underscore what the *Nei Jing* and the *Ben Cao Gang Mu* provide with this seemingly basic yin and yang theory is that we can expect a herb to affect the body in a way that correlates with its yin or yang designation, and the intensity of its effect will depend on whether it is yin within yin (very yin), or yang within yin (not very yin), yang within yang (very yang) or yin within yang (not very yang).

The yin and yang of thin and thick, light and heavy

The next yin and yang attributes to discuss are thin (薄, bo) and thick (厚, hou), and light (輕, qing) and heavy (重, zhong). These terms seem to be almost completely missing from the contemporary study of Chinese herbalism, however they are an important part of the classical materia medicas. In the most simplistic sense, these terms define the density of the physical substance as well as the intensity and duration of the effects of the herb's flavour and/or qi.

The *Nei Jing* describes the attributes of thin and thick as follows:

氣厚者為陽，薄為陽之陰，

Thick qi is yang, thin is yin within yang.

味厚者為陰，薄為陰之陽，

Thick flavor is yin, thin is yang within yin.

A simple trick to aid understanding these distinctions involves replacing the words 'thick' or 'heavy' with 'more' and the words 'thin' or 'light' with 'less'. Thus if the qi of a herb is yang and 'thick', then it would be 'more' yang (more warming/profound) in its effects. If the qi of a herb is yang and thin, then it would be comparatively less yang (less warming/profound) in its action. If the flavour of a herb is yin and thick then it would be comparatively more yin in its action; whilst if the flavour of a herb is yin and thin, then its effects will be comparatively less yin in effect than other yin herbs.

While modern materia medicas may document herbs as being very hot, hot or warm, these qualifiers do not sufficiently reflect that some herbs are intensely and lingeringly hot, while others are intensely hot but relatively fleeting in their effects. For example, although Huo Xiang (Herba Pogostemonis) is documented as being only slightly warm, its 'slight warmth' is persistent and penetrating; its qi is said to be thick. While Huo Xiang is not a hot herb, its lingering effect demonstrates that thickness and thinness of herb qi does not simply relate to a gradation of temperature. Herbs like Fu Zi (Aconiti Radix lateralis preparata), Gan Jiang (Zingiberis Rhizoma), Huang Lian (Coptidis Rhizoma) or Bing Pian (Borneol) create an obvious, powerful *and* lingering thermal sensation in the body; they are said to possess thick qi. In comparison, herbs like Man Jing Zi (Viticis Fructus), Sheng Ma (Cimicifugae Rhizoma) or Ze Xie (Alismatis Rhizoma) do not create an obvious thermal sensation to the patient, yet they are not documented as having a neutral qi. Thin qi herbs warm or cool the body in a more gentle or ephemeral way.

Some herbs are profound and undeniable in their flavour, and are said to possess a thick flavour. Examples are the potent bitter flavour of Huang Lian (Coptidis Rhizoma), the salty flavour of Mang Xiao (Mirabilitum) or the sour flavor of Wu Wei Zi (Schisandrae Fructus). Where the flavour is significant on the tongue, its on the person is comparatively intense, even in small doses. In contrast, herbs like Jue Ming Zi (Cassiae Semen), Dong Kui Zi (Fructus Malvae) or Gao Ben (Ligustici Rhizoma) do not possess a profound taste in the mouth and are said to be thin in terms of flavour.

The *Nei Jing* states that the yin-yang qualities of thickness and thinness of herb flavour and qi govern the action that each herb will have in the body:

味厚者為陰

Thick flavour is yin

薄為陰中之陽

Thin [flavour] is yang within yin

氣厚者為陽

Thick qi is yang

薄為陽中之陰

Thin [qi] is yin within yang

味厚則泄，薄則通，

Thick flavours discharge, thin [flavours] flow.

氣薄則發泄，厚則發熱。

Thin qi promotes discharge, thick qi generates [or disperses] heat

Some herbs are intensely and lingeringly hot, while others are intensely hot but relatively fleeting in their effects.

The *Nei Jing* states that thick flavours 'xie' 泄 (discharge, drain, vent, leak out or scatter), while thin flavours 'tong' 通 (free, unstop, course, de-obstruct). The character xie 泄 includes the water radical, alluding to the idea of water that flushes away or discharges - the active creation of movement. The character tong 通 implies the opening of pathways, which as a result allows movement and flow. These terms are purposefully in yin-yang pairs. However, it is important to recognise that they are representative and not definitive, and that not all thick-flavoured herbs discharge while all thin-flavoured herbs create flow, but rather, the characters distinguish an active function compared to a relatively passive function. Thus strongly (i.e. thick-flavoured) bitter herbs will drain more profoundly than mildly (i.e. thin-flavoured) bitter herbs, and strongly sweet herbs will build, slow and harmonise more actively than mildly sweet herbs. Profoundly acrid herbs will disperse and create movement more powerfully than mildly acrid herbs, and so on. What this means is that herbs that are thin in flavour do not have the same flavour-defined strength of action as their thick-flavoured counterparts. This explains why herbs that are documented to have the same flavour have different clinical applications (see below).

In terms of qi, the *Nei Jing* states that herbs with thick qi (yang within yang, or more yang) will generate or disperse heat (發熱, fa re), while those with light qi (yin within yang, or less yang) will affect discharge, draining, venting, leaking out or scattering (發泄, fa xie). Again, the intensity of herb action is based on the thickness or thinness of each herb's qi. This means that herbs with thin qi (yin within yang) will create movement, but do not cause profound or lingering thermal sensations as do herbs with thick qi. The *Ben Cao Bei Yao* (本草備要, Must-Have Materia Medica) in the *Yao Xing Zong Yi* (藥性總義, Complete Meaning of Herbal Qualities) clarifies these words by adding to the original *Nei Jing* text:

氣薄則發泄，表散。

Light qi creates/causes 'xie'; dispersing/moving the surface.

厚則發熱。溫。

Thick [qi] generates heat. Warming.

味厚則泄，降瀉。

Thick flavours 'xie'; descending pouring out/draining.
薄則通。

Thin [flavours] free/unstop/course/de-obstruct.

Clinically, we can use thin qi herbs to cause coursing, flow and de-obstruction without creating penetrating or overwhelming thermal effects for the patient. In comparison, herbs with thick qi will palpably create or extinguish heat. For example, whilst Rou Gui (Cinnamomi Cortex) and Gui Zhi (Cinnamomi Cassiae) are both warm and acrid, Rou Gui's qi is thick, while Gui Zhi's qi is thin. Rou Gui generates a lingering, deep heating sensation that expels cold, benefits ministerial fire and warms the lower jiao. Gui Zhi, in comparison disperses cold by coursing and flowing the channels. It does not create radiating or lingering heat. Gui Zhi's thin qi creates a warming, moving action, leading to the common saying in Chinese that Gui Zhi's qi 'moves and does not stay put' (桂枝行而不受). For this reason, Gui Zhi is often applied in clinical practice to unblock and create flow in conditions like arthritis, despite the patient having localised heat and inflammation in the joints. What seems like a contraindication - to use a warm and acrid herb - can be understood in terms of the lightness of Gui Zhi's qi.

In the *Yao Xing Zong Yi* we find further explanation of thin and thick, light and heavy, and their relationship to yin and yang:

輕清升浮為陽；

Light, clear, ascending, floating are yang;

重濁沈降為陰。

Heavy, turbid, sinking, descending are yin.

陽氣出上竅；

Yang qi exits [rises towards] the upper orifices;

陰氣出下竅。

Yin qi exits [descends towards] the lower orifices.

In the above statement, the terms light and heavy are referring not only to the richness/intensity of herb flavour and qi, but also to the density of the plant or mineral substance itself. To understand how herb density relates to effect - one can conceptualise light or thin herbs floating, or travelling upwards easily, and that they would not be prone to sinking or easily settling downward. Equally, it is easy to understand how heavy herbs are prone to sinking, pulling things downward to the lower jiao, rather than moving upwards.

Understanding herbs according to their yin and yang matrix

It is only by putting together all of the yin and yang variations that one can completely understand herbs. A

herb may have flavour and qi that are both thick, both thin, or one thick and the other thin. A herb may have one thick flavour and one thin flavour, or may be thick flavoured and thick natured but quite light in overall quality; or all of its qualities could be thin and light. It is the particular matrix of yin and yang qualities of each herb that makes it unique. This is why no single quality can fully represent the complete nature (性) of a herb. For example, Xi Xin (Asari Herba) and Sheng Jiang (Zingiberis Rhizoma recens) are both thickly warm and thickly acrid. Both of these substances create an obvious and lingering warming effect that strongly disperses pathogenic cold and damp in the body. Xi Xin, however, is light, dry and spindly in quality, while Sheng Jiang is plump and heavy. Thus, although Xi Xin and Sheng Jiang have the same thick acrid flavour and thick warm qi, the difference in their physical form (ie: lightness and heaviness) explains their different applications. Xi Xin's light yang quality will tend to create an ascending and scattering movement, while Sheng Jiang's heavy yin quality will tend to a more descending affect. This explains Xi Xin's application to treat headaches, accumulated fluids and qi stagnation in the chest, while Sheng Jiang excels at warming the middle, transforming phlegm and descending rebellious qi.

Gui Zhi (Cinnamomi Ramulus) and Bai Zhi (Angelicae dahuricae Radix) constitute another example: both are warm and acrid, and both are said to have thin qi and thin flavour. Gui Zhi and Bai Zhi unblock and create flow in order to affect cold obstruction, but do not create a deep or lingering sensation of warmth, nor are they strong enough (unless used in significant doses) to resolve pathogenic cold on their own. Thus, they are more similar than modern herbal texts might suggest. However, because one is a tender twig and the other a root, they are not exactly the same; such differences make a yin-yang difference, and in clinical practice Gui Zhi tends to be more acrid and warm than Bai Zhi.

Sheng Jiang, Xi Xin, Gui Zhi and Bai Zhi are excellent examples because all four share the same flavour and qi - being warm and acrid - yet are used quite differently in treatment. Thus, without the knowledge of a herb's yin-yang matrix, we will not be able to understand its actions, and therefore will not achieve the desired results.

The yin and yang of herbs and the channels

Zhang Yuan Su (1151-1234) believed that by understanding the yin and yang qualities of herbs (i.e.: flavour and qi, thick and thin, raising and descending, floating and sinking, building and draining), one can understand the location of their effects. It was through looking at herbs within this yin-yang matrix that Zhang Yuan Su designed the channel theory we see in textbooks today. Contrary to common belief, however, his theory on herbs 'entering' specific channels was not a new discovery. It was simply

his composition on the directions of movement and predominant areas of affect using the language of the channels. Today, not being clear on the ramifications of the yin and yang of herbs, we simply memorise this channel theory as fact. This has led to erroneously believing that herbs have an unexplainable property that causes them to enter specific channels. For example, if we read that Bai Zhi 'enters' the Lung and Stomach channels, it may seem that Bai Zhi is able to 'travel' along the Hand Taiyin or Foot Yangming channel pathways. What Zhang actually meant was to define the area of the herb's expected greater influence due to its flavour and qi, thickness and thinness, raising and descending, floating and sinking, building and draining qualities. Bai Zhi, for example, possessing a thin yang flavour, thin yang qi and thin yang density will affect coursing and dispersing in a rising manner. It is not that Bai Zhi 'enters' the Lung or Stomach channels but rather that the yin-yang properties of Bai Zhi cause warming, drying, dispersing and flowing toward/in the upper regions of the body. In terms of its documented actions, we understand this as treating wind-cold, unblocking the face, alleviating pain in the teeth and head and drying dampness in the sinuses. This warming, drying and raising action also explains Bai Zhi's affect on leucorrhoea (i.e. its drying and raising action affects sinking/leaking out). Understanding Bai Zhi as a thinly warm and thinly acrid substance with a light yang quality allows the practitioner to grasp the overall nature of the plant, apply it more broadly, and most importantly understand why it has been documented with the aforementioned actions.

To continue with another example, Sheng Jiang, possessing a thick yang flavour and thick yang qi with a heavy yin quality/density generates deep and lingering warmth, scatters pathogenic cold and affects the organs of the torso - namely the Spleen and Stomach. While materia medicas today state that Sheng Jiang 'enters' the Lung, Spleen and Stomach channels; it is more accurate to state that Sheng Jiang affects those organs by creating a lingering warmth and strong dispersing/ descending of cold/ water in the middle and upper torso. Thus, taken internally, Sheng Jiang affects an area of the body that includes the Lung, Spleen and Stomach organs more profoundly than it affects the corresponding channel pathways. Understanding its region of influence in this way instead of according to the language of channel theory, we can see that Sheng Jiang would also obviously warm the other organs in the middle jiao - the Liver and Gall Bladder. We see this in clinical practice with the formula *Wen Dan Tang* (Warm Gall Bladder Decotion) where Sheng Jiang affects damp and cold in the Gall Bladder organ itself, and with the formula *Wu Zhu Yu Tang* (Evodia Decotion), which disperses cold in the Liver and Stomach, despite the fact that Sheng Jiang is not demarcated to affect Gallbladder & Liver channels.

Thus, in order to accurately apply the channel theory

included in modern textbooks, we must ask ourselves each time whether Zhang Yuan Su was referring to the channel pathway, the organ represented by the channel, or a region of the body that the channel traverses. The answer should be obvious if we focus on the yin and yang of herbs.

It was through looking at herbs within this yin-yang matrix that Zhang Yuan Su designed the channel theory we see in textbooks today.

Conclusion

Understanding why and how - and thus where - a herb affects the qi of the body is the key to moving beyond the current focus on actions, indications and channel theory (as well chemical components and disease name indications), towards a greater understanding of classical herb use and formulation. One must learn to study and view herbs in the same way as pre-modern practitioners did, in order to achieve the same profound results, which, in this author's opinion, can only be done by staying within the paradigm and terminology of Chinese medicine. By returning to a classical perspective, with yin and yang as the focus of herbal application can one understand what Zhang Jing Yue terms the Dao of using herbs: 'There is no other way.'

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