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The Herbs and the Formulae

We will now take a look at the individual herbs and the formulae or groups of herbs which the herbalist uses. Chinese herbal medicine is based in the individual herbs, but almost always prescribes a formula or groups of herbs. The reason for this is that the subtle blend of the actions of the individual herbs produces a greater overall healing action.

What is a herb?

The first *materia medica* published after the liberation of China in 1949 was translated as *The Handbook of Traditional Drugs*. In it were listed 475 Substances, which were broken down as follows:

- Fruits: 130
- Roots: 120
- Leaves and stems: 50
- Animal parts: 45
- Flowers: 40
- Minerals: 30
- Stems: 25

- Bark: 20
- Leaves alone: 15

So although we talk of *herbal* medicine, some of the materials used are mineral or animal Substances. These are a small part of the repertoire and, in spite of the potential confusion, we refer to them all as herbs. Of course, they have been chosen because they have a healing action.

Vegetarians may be concerned to hear that animal parts are used. If you are a vegetarian, you should let your herbalist know. Only a few formulae contain animal parts and there are always plant substitutes. Many practitioners in the UK, especially those registered with a professional body (see the Appendix), use no animal parts from endangered species and in practice will use no, or only a few, animal Substances at all.

The general characteristics of herbs

There are some terms which are useful when talking about individual herbs and formulae. Generally speaking, but with some exceptions, most herbs have been *cultivated*, *harvested* and *processed*. The purpose of these processes is to maximise the herb's effect. In addition, they all have properties – *taste*, *temperature*, *direction* and *channel entered* – and they all have *actions*, that is, the effects the herb has on the Organs, Substances and Pathogenic Factors. Often the action is 'explained' by the herb's taste, temperature, direction and the Organ affected. A herb or formula also has *indications* and *symptoms* which are the bodily or mental conditions affected.

We can now look at some of the processes by which herbs are prepared.

The process: cultivation, harvesting and processing

Cultivation

Cultivation is the growing of the plant. Some plants are only sought in their natural surroundings. Some are cultivated, which involves considerable knowledge in selecting the seeds, splitting roots, grafting, fertilisation, irrigating and other agricultural approaches. In the lush regions of southern China growing plants for herbal medicine is a major industry.

Harvesting

When harvesting, different parts of a plant are taken. For example, 'dang gui', or angelica, is a plant known both for 'nourishing' the Blood and 'moving' the Blood. The 'head' or the uppermost part is the 'Blood-nourishing' part, while the 'tail' or the root is the 'Blood-moving' part. In many cases with other plants, only one part is ever used, such as the fruit or the stem.

The time of harvesting often depends upon the part of the plant being collected. For example, roots grow below the ground and are most powerful in late autumn and early spring when they store more nutrients. Barks are collected in February and May when their moisture and nutrient content is highest. Leaves are gathered just before the flowers bloom or in autumn just before they drop. Flowers are picked between March and August when they are in bud or just after blooming. Fruits are picked as they ripen, although a few are picked specifically before they ripen. Seeds are collected after they have matured. This timing is to ensure the potency of the processed herb.

Processing

This comes after the harvesting. The various purposes of processing are to ensure that the final product is clean, easily stored, easily prepared by the herbalist, maximally strong, has side-effects minimised, and has some of its potential clinical effects enhanced.

Processing is said to have three stages. One stage is cleaning and sorting. The next stage is the cutting, pulverising or slicing, often using water to moisten and soften the plant. The third stage uses heat and water, alcohol, vinegar, honey or salt to further process the plant.

For example, 'qing pi' is immature orange fruit. The fruit, which is small, is picked in July or August before it is ripe. It is then cut in half and dried in the sun. It is then soaked in water overnight, cut into slices and again dried in the sun. 'Fu zi', which is the root of the aconite plant, is dug up in July and August and prepared with salt to alter its otherwise toxic effects. Roots are normally dried in the sun or indoors by a fire. Aromatic herbs such as mint are dried in the shade so as not to overdry and lose valuable properties. Animal parts are steamed to kill parasites and bacteria before drying. Each Substance is processed differently.

It is amazing, without the aid of modern chemistry, that the processors learned how to change the actions of a Substance. Chinese foxglove plant is an example. The root is gently heated on hot bricks until the centre is dry. It is then cut into slices and further dried in the sun. This is called fresh rehmannia and has strong cooling properties and is said to clear Heat. To create 'prepared rehmannia', the dried rehmannia is then soaked in rice wine and steamed until it is black. The black indicates the decomposition of a component called catapol. The steamed root, which is black and moist, is a strong tonic and nourishes the Yin.

The properties: taste, temperature and direction

Taste

Tastes are classified as pungent, sour, bitter, sweet or salty. 'Pungent' is also called 'acrid'. The taste can be neutral and is called bland. The following table gives the taste, the effect of the taste in the body, and a typical food which has that taste.

Taste	**Function of taste**	**Herbs or foods with this taste**
Pungent	Disperses, invigorates, promotes circulation, accelerating	Cinnamon, cayenne, ginger, mint, pepper, onion
Sour	Absorbs, consolidates, astringes, hold in, contracts	Crab apple, gooseberry, lemon, lime, vinegar
Bitter	Disperses, eliminates, descends, dries	Coffee, pumpkin seeds, rhubarb, watercress, Angostura bitters
Sweet	Tonifies, harmonises, moderates, expands, relaxes	Bamboo shoots, potatoes, corn, rice, beef, chicken, eggs, liquorice, molasses, soya milk
Salty	Densifies, concentrates, breaks up lumps	Salt, seaweed

The above connections between taste and function do not hold in all cases, but nevertheless have guided many herbalists in originally assessing the potential effect of the herb. Cinnamon and ginger are pungent and you might imagine the effect of these to disperse and invigorate the energy. Cinnamon, for example, is used to disperse. A common cold is described by the Chinese as an 'invasion of

Wind and Cold'. Cinnamon disperses the Wind and Cold and thereby affects the cold.

The sour taste makes your lips pucker or tighten up. This feeling is also the effect of many of the sour herbs – they are said to hold things in that previously were leaking out. Thus, they are used, when appropriate, for a variety of 'leaking' symptoms such as diarrhoea, vaginal discharge, and urgent and frequent urination.

Watercress and Angostura bitters are probably the most familiar bitter tastes. The root of rhubarb is bitter and is used primarily for constipation, to eliminate and to descend.

The sweet herbs are mainly ones which tonify. The greatest tonifier of all, ginseng, is classified as sweet. For most of us who were raised on white sugar, the sweetness of ginseng or corn or chicken or soya milk is not so obvious. To a cultivated palate, however, these would all be considered sweet.

The salty taste is that of table salt. Again, our palates have been spoiled by having so much of such a pure taste, that the herbs that are said to be salty might not be recognised as such by most of us. Many of the herbs which soften lumps that form in the neck are said to be salty.

Temperature

The gradations of temperature are from hot to warm to neutral to cool to cold. These do not refer to the actual temperature of a Substance, as taken by a thermometer, but the effect it will have on the body. For example, certain curries are known to be hot and they easily increase the heat of the body and make a person sweat. Other foods, such as cucumber, melon, yogurt or cottage cheese are cool. Many people who are Yang Deficient, or short on the warming type of energy, may eat cold foods and have great difficulty digesting them. They really need warmer foods which will

warm up the digestive system rather than cool it down. The effect of warming Substances is generally to increase the heat of the body; the effect of cold Substances is to reduce heat, for example, in the case of a fever or infection.

Direction

Traditionally, Substances have also been classified by their direction: ascending, descending, floating and sinking. These again were determined by the taster and then tested out in practice.

Substances with floating or ascending properties make the energy go upward and outward. They might be used to cause vomiting or sweating in order to create beneficial effects. Substances that descend and sink conduct the Qi downward and may bring heat down from the head and calm the mind or promote urination or a bowel movement. Flowers and leaves that are light in quality tend to float or ascend. Seeds, fruits and minerals tend to sink or descend.

Primary actions: strengthening and clearing

A herb may have several actions, but its main one is usually either strengthening or clearing. What is strengthened is the Substances or Organs as in the actions: 'nourish Blood' or 'tonify the Spleen'. What is cleared or got rid of is the Pathogenic Factors as in the actions 'clear Damp', 'resolve Phlegm' or 'clear Heat'.

This two-pronged approach, clearing and strengthening, is one of the great strengths of Chinese herbal medicine. We will look first at three herbs that strengthen and then three that clear. These are simply examples, chosen from literally hundreds of possibilities.