

Clara New: Back when I was in TCM college, I remember the first semester we learned TCM foundation, anatomy, acupuncture points, and Chinese herbs. Chinese herbs to me were so difficult. You had to learn functions of herbs. Like a herb is great for wind cold or qi deficiency. I didn't even know what it meant.

Plus, you had to remember the Chinese pinyin name, like gui zhi, huang qi. It felt so overwhelming. And so I didn't quite like Chinese herbs when I first started. I thought it was just something I wasn't interested in. And then I saw my teacher in clinic giving Chinese herbal formulas to patients that were so, so ill and had so many health issues, and watching them slowly getting their health back, it blew me away.

And then I started paying attention, and I fell in love with Chinese herbal medicine

But I understand that TCM herbs are really hard and feel very overwhelming when we learn them because we have to remember their name, flavor, nature, what channel they connect to, the contraindication, function, what do they do in certain formulas, plus all the formulas.

We had to remember over 350 herbs plus 140 formulas with each ingredient's, the dosage, the function, contraindication. It was mind-boggling and it felt impossible. But I promise you that if you are a student or a new practitioner, it is absolutely possible to remember this and to understand how we use Chinese herb.

Now, I wanna preface this by saying that Chinese herbs take years to study and really a lot of practice. It is one of the most strongest, powerful tool we have as Chinese medicine practitioners, so it's really important to understand the basics

This is why today I wanna give you a clear, basic picture of Chinese herbs Because this is a topic I get asked a lot, and it deserve a shining light

So we're gonna look at what sources Chinese herbs come from, the parts, what each part does, what's the function of the flavor and the nature, and we're gonna look at formulas or how herbs fit into a formula

And lastly why TCM diagnosis always comes first. You cannot prescribe any herbs without having a strong, correct, right TCM diagnosis because they are much more powerful than acupuncture. Of course, I love acupuncture, and acupuncture is amazing, but the side effects of herbs, although they are natural, they are not without side effects that can be quite, quite strong.

So we're gonna discuss all this today

so I'm not gonna try to make you a Chinese herbalist as of today It takes years to study,

by the end, I hope Chinese herbs will feel a little bit more fun and less complicated because if you've been around, you know me, I'm all about making Chinese medicine easy to grasp and fun to learn.

Are you ready? Let's go.

Welcome to AcuPro, a show dedicated to making Chinese medicine and acupuncture easy to grasp and fun to learn. Hi, I'm your host, Clara Cohen. I support practitioners and students like you in changing the world one patient at a time. My goal is to share my passion for TCM and empower you to achieve superior patient care.

I love to showcase the amazing benefits of acupuncture because after all, acupuncture rocks

Let's start at the beginning. Chinese herbal medicine has been used for thousands of years and is one of the major tool we have in TCM. When most people hear the word herbs, they picture a cup of tea with maybe some leaves or flowers in it, and yes, that's part of it, but Chinese herbal medicine is so much more broader than this.

Now let's break down where herbs actually come from. We have three major sources in TCM, and that often surprise students when I start talking about it.

First, plants. Most remedies comes from plant, like ginger, mint, or goji berries.

The second source is minerals. Although we call it Chinese herbal medicine, some source come from mineral, like oyster shell, like calcium, which is often called gypsum, which comes from the calcium or the mineral.

. And the third source is animals. So obviously many practitioners now choose plant-based alternatives and they do not use animals.

But this is a traditional substance that comes from animal for thousands of years. For example, cicada, scorpion, those are animal part that are used in Chinese herbal medicine. But like I said, most are gonna come from plants,

some minerals, and for some people, animals. However, lots of practitioners are gonna choose to stick to plants and/or minerals

even though they're different sources, the goal is the same, right? All we wanna do is support somebody's health.

Now let's talk about the part of the plant. This is one of my favorite thing about Chinese herbs because it completely changes how you think about herbs. Different part of the same plant can have completely different actions in the body.

Think of a plant like a family, but every member has a different personality. We can use roots, leaves, flowers, seeds, bark, stem, fruits, and peel, and each part does something unique.

Let me give you my favorite example, cinnamon. Gui zhi versus rou gui.

Both of these come from the cinnamon tree, right? But they're very different part of the herbs. Gui zhi is the young cinnamon twig. Because it comes from the branches, the outer lighter part of the tree, it has a lighter, more superficial action. Gui zhi releases the exterior, treats wind cold, helps with chills and mild sweating,

and warms the channels. Think of gui zhi as working close to the surface of the body.

Rou gui, on the other hand, is the inner bark of the cinnamon tree.

The bark is much denser, much stronger, so rou gui warms the interior, tonifies skin yang, deeply warms the body from within, and treats severe cold. Think of rou gui as going deep into the core. So same tree, but completely different action.

Another great example is ginger.

Now this is not the part, but it's more the process. If we have fresh ginger, it releases the exterior and stops nausea, while dried ginger is much harder and so it's stronger in warming the interior.

Isn't that amazing? Chinese herbal medicine isn't simply this plant treats this. It's about understanding the nature, the temperature, the flavor, and even the specific part of the plant being used.

That's the beauty of it

Here's a root example, ginseng. It tonify, nourish, supports the body foundation. A leaf example would be bo he or mint leaf, which release the exterior, soothe the body, clears heat, and move qi.

An example of a flower, which is very common, is chrysanthemum flower, which is ju hua. Very good also at clearing heat, brightening the eyes, and calming the mind, and bringing high blood pressure down as well. We have seeds like apricot seeds, peach seeds, you know the little kernel that's inside the apricot pit or the peach pit.

Apricot seed is called xing ren and it moisten, relieves cough, promote bowel movement. We also have bark. As I mentioned, rou gui, which is a cinnamon bark. This one really is warming the interior, moves blood, moves qi, support yang, it is very good for yang deficiency.

We also use stems or twigs, like the cinnamon twig, like gui zhi, which releases the exterior. We use fruits like red dates or goji berries.

Red dates are great to tonify, nourish, support the yin, and benefit digestion. We also use peel, so orange peel or tangerine peel. That is used a lot to harmonize, to transform phlegm, to dry dampness, specifically with chen pi, which is the which is dried tangerine or orange peel.

Now let's talk about the temperature of the herbs. Every single herb in Chinese medicine has a temperature, and understanding this is fundamental because you're not just asking, what does this herb do? You're asking, what does this herb do to the body's temperature and environment? Because we know TCM is all about yin excess, yang deficiency, yang excess, yin deficiency.

It's all about the eight principles. Do we have excess or deficiency? Is it excess cold, deficiency cold, excess heat, deficiency heat? Make sense? So it's really important that we understand the nature of the herbs so we don't give someone a really cold formula while their digestive system, like spleen, is very weak, very deficient, and they feel cold all the time, right?

That's very key. So let's look at some examples

We have four major temperature: hot, warm, cool, and cold, and then we have neutral.

So we can't really call it a temperature, that's a fifth one, but we know some herbs are neutral, so they're really good to put in a formula to balance every herb in that formula. So let's look at example like fu zi, which is aconite. It's actually a toxic herb. It's very, very hot. It's one of the hottest herb in Chinese medicine, and it's used to rescue really yang collapse, yang deficiency with severe internal cold.

So think icy cold patients with cold limbs and extreme yang deficiency.

It's very powerful, and we would never use it by itself. This is what we're gonna talk about when we talk about the formula. An example of a warm herb is, of course, ginger. Cinnamon is also warm. Ginger is great for nausea, chills, wind cold invasion, right? Specifically arthritis that is painful when there is a lot of cold that makes it worse. Those are great to warm the body, but they're not super hot. Then we have the cold herbs. So a cold herb would be shi gao, which is calcium or gypsum, huang shin is really cold. Shi gao is really cold. They usually clear excess heat. A huang shin, for example, dries dampness, clears heat, is great for infection or diarrhea with heat or lung heat.

That gives you a little bit of an idea.

Then we have cool herb like bo he, which is mint. mint is cool in nature. And this is why when I lived in Morocco years, years ago, they drink a lot of mint tea.

Moroccan mint tea is so good. Even though it's hot in Morocco, the mint tea will cool you from the inside. That makes sense? So mint is very cooling. It's great for wind heat. Sore throat, fever, headaches. It's really good for liver yang rising as well.

And the last one is neutral. They don't have a temperature that goes one way or the other, like dang shen. Dang shen is basically going to tonify spleen, tonify lung qi. It's great for fatigue or poor digestion.

We don't wanna give hot or cold, which are extreme temperature, to people for a long time. This should be used just for acute, because that's extreme, and that's going to create some side effect eventually. However, cool and warm can be taken a little bit longer. Does that make sense? But no matter what, all those herbs are going to be part of a formula.

Ad: If you still struggle to come up with the right treatment protocol for your patients, you are going to love my third book. By popular demand, I have

created a guide for TCM treatments for over 160 common syndromes with acupuncture points, herbal formula, ear points, diet, and so much more, including many, many of my clinical pearls.

It is the game changer for acupuncture students and specifically for practitioners. You can download the digital version on any device, and it comes with many video links to complement it. Or if you're like me and you'd rather have a hard copy version, the publisher ships it all over the world. But before you invest in my Chinese Medicine Treatments Made Easy, I wanna make sure it's everything you were looking for so you can download a sample of it.

Listen to what people who invest in this book had to say. "Thank you, Clara. This is exactly what I needed. I love how you organized this book. It's truly helping me in my first year in practice." Yay . "So excited. Bought it immediately. It will be a great resource for studying for boards." That's awesome. "Oh my God, I immediately purchased this, and it is such a bargain price that I almost feel ashamed for paying what I believe is worth of much, much more.

Even as an experienced practitioner for over 10 years, I like your stuff just as much and benefit from it." Yay! All this is just so rewarding for me. So I hope you get your copy if you don't have one. The link is in the show notes below, or you can go to my website, acuproacademy.com, and click the shop tab on the menu bar.

You won't regret it. I put so much heart and soul in it. I hope you enjoy it and benefit from it, and in turn, your patients do as well.

Clara Cohen: Let's continue the journey down the basics of Chinese medicine herbs.

And now the five flavors. Just like food, herb have flavors. The five flavors from the five elements

so we know the five flavors from the five element: pungent or spicy, sweet, bitter, sour, and salty. We know each of those go to specific organ element, like spicy goes more to the lung, while sweet goes more to the spleen, bitter to the heart, sour to the liver, and salty to the kidney. Now, this is part of the five element.

I want to start with the spicy or the pungent herb. Sheng Jiang or fresh ginger. Cinnamon is spicy, but mint is also spicy. So we can have spicy herb that can be

warm, like ginger and cinnamon, or cool like mint, right? So we always have to take in consideration the flavor, but also the nature.

What is the temperature of this herb? Pungent or spicy herb move and disperse. They help release the exterior, they move qi and blood because they increase circulation

Second flavor is sweet. Now, gan cao or licorice root is considered sweet.

Sweet herb tonify, nourish, and harmonize, specifically the digestive system. They are often used in strengthening qi, relieving pain, and harmonizing other herb within a formula. Other sweet herb can be huang qi, which is astragalus, da zao, which is dates.

The next flavor is bitter. Huang Qin, for example, is bitter. Bitter herbs usually clear heat, dry dampness, and drain excess. Think of bitter as the flavor that gets rid of things we don't want. Long Dan Cao, which is Gentiana flower, is also bitter. Huang Lian is another one that's bitter.

We have a lot of bitter herbs that are not quite well-known in English, so I'm not gonna tell you what the Latin word is, 'cause that's not gonna give you any clue unless you've studied Latin. I studied Latin for four years in school, so, uh, yeah, I didn't like it, just FYI.

Next flavor is sour. I love sour food, but sour herbs are very, very astringent.

They prevent leakage. A sour herb would be Wu Wei Zi, which is a berry, a Schisandra berry. We also have Shan Zhu Yu that is very sour as well. So they help hold things in. They astringe when there's leakage, like excessive sweating or excessive diarrhea, basically losing fluids

and the last flavor is salty. An example is kun bu, which is kelp, seaweed. We have hai zao as well, or mang xiao. mang xiao is a mineral, while hai zao, it comes from the sea as well.

Salty herbs soften hardness and dissolve masses. They often use for nodules, cyst, goiter, or phlegm masses

so the things I want you to remember about the five flavors is pungent moves and expels. Sour is the opposite. It contains, it keeps things in from leaking.

Sweet tonifies. Bitter drains things out of the body, specifically excess dampness and clears heat most of the time. And salty soften hardness

so when you look at a herb and you know its flavor and its temperature, you already have a huge clue about what it is going to do. That's the logic built right into the TCM herb system.

Now let's talk about formulas.

There are many formulas, and we have a lot of classic formulas. Everybody knows Xiao Yao San, for example. This is one of the most common formula out there, and it means rambling powder or easy free wanderer. That's the translation. But Chinese herbal formulas are such a good tools because they have been used and tried and tested for thousands of years, all those herbs together, and it works really well.

It worked then, and it works in our modern world today as well.

As I said earlier, herbs are always combined into a formula, and there's a reason for that.

Think of a formula like a sports team, right? Every player has a role. You cannot play by yourself. So every herb works together in a formula. They become more effective. They enhance each other's function. They're becoming more targeted, and they are safer because they also, some of the herbs, will lessen the side effect other herb in that formula have.

So they basically balance each other out. That's why classic formula have been used for hundreds, even thousands of years, because they work

now let's break down how a formula works like a team. You have the chief, that's the star player, that's the king herb in that formula, and the king or the chief player in that formula treats the main pattern and addresses the primary problem.

So let's say someone has blood deficiency, liver blood deficiency. The king herb in that formula would address the liver blood deficiency. Make sense? Okay. So the second one in a formula is a deputy, an assistant coach, right? So this one enhances the chief target accompanying with symptoms. So a deputy would be, if you have liver blood deficiency, a herb that is going to nourish blood but targets specific symptoms, let's say eye problem, like twitches and blurred vision and seeing spot and night blindness.

That would be how we use that second herb or that deputy.

Then we have the assistant. The assistant is like the support staff. It supports the team, it balances or reduces the side effect of a herb. So let's say someone is blood deficient, but one of the nourishing herb for blood is not very warm and this person's always cold, then you can add up an assistant that is going to warm the body and help with that part.

Does that make sense? Okay. The last one is the envoy. The envoy is the guide. Basically, what it does is it guides the formula to the target areas and enhances overall harmony. So again, if that was a formula for liver blood deficiency that affects the eyes or the eyes are involved, then we want an envoy that is going to guide the whole formula to nourish the eyes.

Yes? Okay. One other thing I want to emphasize is, for example, when we have a chief, can we have more than one chief? Yes. Can we have more than one deputy or assistant? Yes. Usually, there's only one guide. Sometimes there's two, but most of the time there's only one guide.

But there can be many assistants in the formula. Now, a classic formula like Xiao Yao San or Free and Easy Wanderer Powder, Bai shao would be the chief in that formula because it nourishes blood and it softens the liver.

Chai hu is going to be the deputy, and it's gonna soothe the liver, relieve the liver qi stagnation because Xiao Yao San is used for liver qi stagnation as well as deficiency Bai zhu is going to be one of the assistant and it's going to support the spleen and strengthen spleen qi. And then gan cao, which is the licorice part, is going to be the envoy.

It's gonna harmonize the formula, guide the formula to the spleen and the liver. Now, there's other herbs in that formula that are part of the assistant and deputy. I'm not gonna mention them all. I just wanted to mention four to show you the role within that formula.

Each herb has a role, but together they create the synergy and make the formula safe, effective, and balanced. Yes? Awesome.

Ad: Before we continue with today's episode, I wanna share something that honestly feels like a big moment for me. If you've been following me for a while, you know I've always said no to all sponsorships. I've been approached many times, but I turn them all down because if I don't genuinely use a product or love it, I will never recommend it to you.

But today is different. I am super excited to introduce my very first sponsor, drum roll, please, Jane App. I'm also a Jane ambassador, so this is a company I actually use and love. I am saying yes because I've used Jane for years in my own multidisciplinary clinic. Truly, it's the best practice management software and electronic medical record I've ever worked with.

Before Jane, we were using a clunky system that made everything harder than it needed to be. When we switched, the entire clinic felt the difference immediately. Jane is built by people who actually understand what it's like to be a practitioner running a busy practice. One of my favorite features is online booking.

There is nothing better than waking up and seeing patients booking their own appointment while I was asleep. Your patients can book when it works for them, and the wait list feature fills last-minute cancellations automatically. I love that. I used to spend so much time calling eight to 10 people just to fill up one spot.

Jane also automates the things we never enjoy doing, like intake forms, reminders, confirmation. It honestly feels like having an extra assistant handling all the moving parts so you can focus on what really matters, which is supporting your patients and being the TCM rockstar practitioner you truly are.

There are so many features I could talk about, but we would be here all day. If you're looking for a system that brings more ease, more clarity, and calm into your practice, I truly recommend Jane. You can check it out at jane.app/demo, and because you're part of the AcuPro community, you can use my code ACUPRO1MO, one month, when you sign up to get a one-month grace period on your new account.

The link and the code are also in the show notes below for you. Now let's get back to today's episode.

Clara Cohen: Now, diagnosis come first. I said that when I started, and it always comes first. This is probably my most important point, so I want you to really hear this.

No diagnosis, no herb, meaning no TCM diagnosis, no herb. I mean it. Same symptoms does not mean same formula. , This is one of the biggest differences between Chinese herbal medicine and just grabbing something off a health food store shelf because it says, "Stress relief," right, on the label.

Let me give you an example. Insomnia. Two patients come in, both can't sleep, but one has heart blood deficiency: pale, tired, anxious, poor memory, cannot fall asleep, palpitation; while the other one has liver yang rising upwards from being irritable, stress, wakes up between 1:00 and 3:00, has lots of dream.

Same symptoms technically, both have insomnia, and if the person was going to the doctor, they would give them something to sleep. We wanna go to the root pattern of the problem. So if it's a liver yang rising that raises heat, it's completely different from a heart blood deficiency, right?

'Cause the symptoms are very different.

This is why we diagnose first always, and this is actually what makes Chinese medicine so powerful. It's really targeting the root cause. Two people with the same Western diagnosis can need totally different treatments. Now, with acupuncture, we can get away with it, because if someone doesn't sleep well, we can calm the mind with Heart 7, maybe Yin Tang, right?

Anmian is a great point for insomnia, so that would help. It might be just temporary, because we wouldn't be able to have a long-term effect because we're not addressing the root pattern, but it would help. While with herbal formula, it would not. It would actually make things worse if we don't have the right diagnosis, so we need the right formula for the right diagnosis.

This is why diagnosis always comes first.

The last thing I need to mention is natural herbs does not mean safe. Okay? Let's bust a myth that I hear all the time. "It's natural, so can it hurt me?" I get it. I understand why people think that, but here's the reality.

Poison ivy is natural Mushrooms are natural. Should we ingest them all? Probably not. Should we touch the poison ivy? Doesn't feel good, does it?

Chinese herb are incredibly safe when prescribed appropriately, but taking the wrong herb, the wrong dosage, the wrong formula for your pattern can absolutely cause problem. So a few things every practitioners needs to keep in mind.

Pregnancy precaution. If you're not well-versed in Chinese herb, absolutely never prescribe to pregnant women. Herb-drug interaction, that's something that is really key here. A lot of patients take medication, and herbs can interact with

medication, with blood thinners, with diabetes medication, blood pressure medication.

And we don't have enough understanding of the interaction because there hasn't been any study, so we have to really be aware. Quality matters, of course. Poor quality herbs may contain heavy metals, pesticides, contaminants, fillers, so we really wanna get good quality herbs, and that is the research we all have to do as practitioners in order to get the best for our patients.

And that leads me to needing to buy from reputable companies, companies that test for purity, potency, and safety, that follow guideline, that provide transparent sourcing and have a strong reputation in our TCM world

And if you don't feel confident with herb, it's great to work with a trained practitioner to basically shadow and learn from someone that have used Chinese herb for a long time.

And when we treat patients, we wanna make sure that we monitor progress and potential side effects. We wanna have an accurate diagnosis and choose the right appropriate formula, right? So it's very personalized care because it leads to safer,

more effective results. . It's better to be safe, so when in doubt, maybe don't prescribe

Chinese herbs are a powerful medicine. They're incredibly safe if and when prescribed properly. The wrong herb, though, with the wrong dosage or wrong formula can cause problem. We wanna make sure that we are confident in our ability to prescribe herbs

And that leads me to the last part of this Chinese herbal medicine 101, which is different forms of Chinese herbs. People ask me all the time, "Oh, do you prefer tinctures, raw herb, granules, pellets, tablets?" You have to choose what works best for your patients for compliancy and for you. So the most common one in China would be raw herbs.

We go to the Chinese practitioner, and they take raw dried herbs, and they prescribe a decoction. Decoction means that we're going to have to cook from scratch in a big pot. It can smell. It takes a lot of work, and the compliancy with patients, not that great. Plus, it doesn't taste super good. Often, the herbs are very bitter.

The pros of raw herb is you can customize your formula and adapt it to each patient, and they're very powerful. , The con is they can taste bitter, they're time-consuming, they require cooking equipment, and you can't really travel with them, so the compliancy of patients, pretty low

The second form is granules or powder. They're extracted, they're concentrated, they're dried into fine little granules or powder, and we mix them with hot water and we drink them.

They're convenient. It's easier. You just need a bit of hot water. You can customize them to each patient, so that's great. They're easy to adjust the dosage. They absorb well. . It's probably the most commonly used form of TCM herb by most practitioners. .

But they are more expensive than raw herb.

The third form is tinctures. I love tinctures. First of all, they're easy to take, they're fast absorption, they're great for children or people who dislike anything that's bitter or they have problem with taste.

They have a long shelf life, and they're portable. You can take them anywhere you go. So I love tinctures. However, it is difficult because they're less easy to customize. The formula are usually already pre-made. You can't change anything. They're not ideal for sensitive patients. They also contain alcohol.

Some of them are made with glycerin, but most of them with alcohol, and some people just don't wanna take that, right? So there's always pros and con with everything.

The last one, which I think is the easiest one to take, is pellets or tablets or capsules, right? They're pre-made herbal formula.

They're very easy and convenient. They're pre-dosed. They travel easily, and there's no preparation needed to do, and you don't taste anything, right? But you can't customize them. They're slower in absorption. And the fillers or the binders may also present some issues for people. They're not as strong.

The raw herb are probably your strongest effect. The granules and powders second, the tinctures same thing, but the pellets and tablets and capsules you have to take more in order to be able to get the same effect as, let's say, raw herb. Make sense?

But no matter what, the best form is the one your patients will actually take consistently, because compliancy is what's gonna give us results

I hope you feel like Chinese herbs have great potential and they're less overwhelming now. Start with 10 formulas. Learn them really well. Know their ingredients, their pattern, their key symptoms, then add a few more to your knowledge,

chinese herbs don't have to feel intimidating. Start simple, stay curious, and before you know it, you'll have all your own favorite herbs and formulas that you reach for all the time. Everyone has their favorite, right? It's like acupuncture points. I love Stomach 40, I can do it on everybody. Well, Chinese herbal formulas and Chinese herbs might be the same thing.

You're like, "Oh my God, I love Xiao San, it's helped so many of my patients." Obviously, it's not appropriate for everybody, but mild, gentle formulas that can be taken for a long time definitely are gonna be used more often.

When it comes to dosage, I'm not gonna go into depth with it, but basically it depends on the form.

If you have tinctures, it's all about drops. If you have powder, it's all about how many tablespoon or teaspoon. If you have raw herb, it's about how many grams, right? So this is going to be a big subject. I'm not gonna go into it, but I wanted to kind of give you an understanding of look at the temperature, look at each flavor and what each flavor does, and then see how they are all balancing each other in a formula

thank you for spending your time with me today. I truly hope you got value from this episode, and I would love for you to share it with a friend or a classmate who is also navigating the world of Chinese herbs.

Follow the show. Leave a review. I would love if you could do that. Please, that would be so appreciated. And if you want more, go to my website at acupointacademy.com. I have tons of resources there, treatment protocol, case study, free courses, and so much more.

Connect with me on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook. I'm at AcuPoint Academy, and no matter what, keep rocking it using TCM.

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