

The Kitchen Clinic - Cooking with Chinese Medicinal Herbs

by Daniel Reid

In Chinese cuisine as well as Chinese herbal medicine, there is no clearly defined line between food and medicine. The relationship in Chinese tradition may be depicted by the classical "Tai-chi" symbol representing the transmutable relation between Yin and Yang: the border between the two is fluid and flexible, and each contains within itself the potential seed of the other.

Traditional Chinese kitchens are always well stocked with a variety of medicinal herbs (e.g. ginseng, astragalus, wolfberry, and jujube) that are used in cooking to enhance and balance the therapeutic properties of food, while Chinese herbal pharmacies carry herbs that in the Western world are defined more as food than as medicine (e.g. garlic, ginger, cinnamon, and cardamom). In traditional Chinese households, the kitchen serves not only as the family hearth for cooking food, but also as the family clinic for preparing herbal remedies. Besides cooking tasty meals for the whole family, the family cook also concocts fortifying dishes laced with the potent therapeutic properties of medicinal herbs. These dishes are custom blended to meet the constitutional requirements of various members of the family, to balance the prevailing energies of season and geography, and to tonify the vital organs and enhance their functions, all in accordance with the classical principles of Yin and Yang, the Five Elemental Energies, and other basic parameters of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

In fact, classical Chinese cuisine evolved as an offshoot of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which explains why virtually all food cooked the Chinese way contains at least one, and usually several medicinally active herbs, such as ginger and garlic. In the imperial palaces and wealthy households of ancient China, professional herbalists—not cooks—were hired and it was they who supervised the purchase and preparation of all food and decided which herbs were to be cooked with which foods, while the cooks simply served as assistants, cooking everything according to the herbalists' instructions.

It was the herbalists' responsibility to insure that all dishes and all meals prepared in the kitchen were properly balanced with medicinal herbs to deliver maximum health benefits to the whole family, while also meeting the most stringent culinary standards in taste and appearance. It was also their job to formulate specific therapeutic recipes for individual members of the family, based on their personal health requirements, and to determine when it was time to adjust the blend of Yin and Yang on daily menus according to seasonal changes. One reason that traditional Chinese cuisine sits so well on the stomach that you "feel hungry again an hour later" is because rich, heavy ingredients such as meat and fish are always cooked in combination with herbs that balance their pharmacodynamic properties, such as ginger and scallions, facilitating their harmonious digestion in the stomach and enhancing efficient production of metabolic energy. The recipes for preparing classical Chinese cuisine thus represent the cumulative wisdom and clinical experience of a 5000-year-old tradition in herbal medicine, and any food prepared in this manner yields as much therapeutic benefit to the consumer as it does culinary satisfaction.

The primary principle in TCM is preventive health care, and this is also the major guideline for using medicinal herbs to prepare food in traditional Chinese cuisine. In China, the occurrence of

disease has always been viewed as a frontline failure to properly practice the principle of prevention. In traditional Chinese households, whenever someone fell ill, an accusing glance was always cast first at the family cook, for possible dereliction of duty in preparing that person's meals in strict accordance with the family herbalist's specifications. It now became the duty of the herbalist to effect a cure—at his own expense! It was only in the relatively rare cases when someone actually got sick that medicinal herbs were used to cook food for explicitly curative purposes.

For the most part, medicinal herbs were used in cooking to prevent disease and degeneration, not to cure them. This was achieved in two basic ways: "constitutional" formulas specifically blended to balance inherent or acquired deficiencies in particular individuals, thereby preventing such constitutional imbalances from giving rise to disease; and general "tonic" formulas, which have long been used in China for their therapeutic powers to boost immunity and increase resistance, enhance vitality and nurture health, slow aging and prolong life.

Constitutional Formulas

Constitutional formulas are designed to compensate for congenital deficiencies in the human system, or to counteract systemic imbalances acquired as a result of illness, accident, toxins, bad habits, or old age. Unlike curative formulas, which employ powerful, highly bioactive, sometimes semi-toxic herbs to combat specific diseases in brief but intensive periods of therapy, constitutional formulas utilize relatively gentle, nourishing herbs that naturally balance Yin and Yang polarity throughout the system and harmonize the Five Elemental Energies that govern the internal organs and their vital functions. These formulas are meant for long-term use, and the blend of ingredients should be adjusted from time to time as the individual's system gradually rebalances itself.

In traditional Chinese households, people consume constitutional herbal formulas cooked into their daily meals for many of the same chronic conditions and common deficiencies for which people in modern Western households take powerful, often addictive pharmaceutical drugs. For example, many common cerebral disorders such as chronic mental fatigue, insomnia, memory loss, and headaches are caused by a constitutional deficiency in cerebral circulation. The modern Western approach is to take a specific drug to counteract each specific symptom, such as sleeping pills for insomnia, analgesics for headache, amphetamines for fatigue, and so forth. The traditional Chinese way to deal with this condition is to consume food cooked with herbs that are known to enhance cerebral circulation, thereby counteracting the root cause of all of the symptoms. In this case, some of the herbs that might be useful in cooking food to stimulate circulation to and through the brain include gotu kola, ginkgo, ginseng, schisandra, and epimedium.

Similarly, a woman with chronic menstrual problems such as PMS or dysmenorrhea probably has an inherent or acquired constitutional imbalance in her blood and/or deficiency in circulation. Regardless of what the specific symptoms are, they may all be readily relieved simply by rebalancing the basic imbalance responsible for their occurrence, which in this case is a blood imbalance. As all Chinese women know, the single most effective herb on earth for correcting any and all female blood disorders is the great blood tonic *Angelica sinensis* (*dang-gui*), which lends itself very well to cooking in stews, soups and gruels.

While the lady of the house sips her *dang-gui tang* ("Angelica Soup") to regulate her menses, the lord of the manor might lunch on a chicken stew liberally laced with ginseng, wolfberry,

epimedium, cardamom and caltrop to compensate for the constitutional deficiency in kidney/adrenal system energy (which governs sexual potency) that he acquired as a result of excessive promiscuity during his profligate youth. Today, most middle-aged men who suffer from chronic lumbago, weak knees, cold hands and feet, frequent urination, tinnitus (ringing ears), impotence, and other common symptoms of this acquired kidney imbalance take various chemical prescription drugs to relieve their symptoms, without realizing that they all have a common root cause that may be corrected and gradually cured simply by cooking the right selections of herbs into their meals.

Constitutional formulas may be used to correct constitutional imbalances in children as well as adults, and timely application of such herbal therapy early in life can prevent internal imbalances in vital functions from developing into debilitating physical conditions later in life. Many children today, especially in the industrially developed Western countries, display all of the classic symptoms of extreme Yang excess, known in TCM terminology as "Fire energy overload."

Common symptoms of this condition include hypertension, inability to concentrate, irritability, sleep disorders, constipation, and a desire for ice-cold food and drink. The therapy of choice for this problem for over three million children in America is daily doses of the addictive amphetamine drug Ritalin. The only thing the drug does is to partially relieve some of the most overt symptoms, without in any way correcting the root causes, but it also causes severe damage to the growing child's delicately balanced endocrine and central nervous systems, and results in a pattern of addiction that continues into adulthood.

There are many factors involved in "Fire energy overload" in children today, but the primary causes are excessive consumption of highly refined sugar (especially carbonated soft drinks), industrially processed junk foods produced with chemical additives, critical deficiency in calcium, magnesium, and other alkaline minerals, and excessive exposure to artificial electromagnetic fields from television, computers, and power lines. Ideally, all of these causative factors should be eliminated from a child's life in order to correct the condition, but since this is often not possible these days due to modern lifestyles, another approach is to cook special food for such children, prepared with particular herbs that counteract the excessively Yang side-effect of the factors.

Ginger, for example, is a savory herb with potent alkalizing properties, and it may therefore be used to prepare tasty dishes (and drinks) that counteract the extremely acidifying effects of sugar and chemical additives in food. Chinese jujube, which has a sweet fruity flavor, is very suitable for cooking the sort of food that children will eat, such as hot, naturally sweetened breakfast porridge. This herb not only counteracts excess yang factors in the diet, it also calms the nervous system, balances cerebral functions, and pacifies the heart, thereby directly relieving the most troublesome symptoms of this condition.

Tonic formulas

Tonic herbs have been used in China to promote health and prolong life for thousands of years, and one of the most popular ways of taking them is to cook them together with tonic foods, particularly seafood and wild game. Tonic formulas are unique in the annals of herbal medicine in that they are meant to be used exclusively by people who are already in a state of relative good health and who wish to elevate themselves to a state of superior health. In other words, they are strictly preventive herbs, not curative. If you're using tonic herbs and foods regularly, but for some reason

you get sick, you should immediately terminate consumption of tonics and switch over to curative formulas specifically designed to cure your ailment. Only when your system is completely restored to normal health should you resume the use of tonics.

In Chinese herbology, all tonics fall into the category known as "Superior Medicine" (shang-yao) . This indicates that they are completely non-toxic and have no negative side-effects whatsoever, which means that they may be safely used for prolonged periods or even for life. In the parlance of modern Western herbology and nutritional science, Chinese tonic herbs are sometimes referred to as "Food Grade Herbs," because they have been found to contain such a broad range of essential nutritional factors that they have potent nutrient value as food as well as therapeutic value as medicine. Due to the sheer demand for tonics among Chinese people throughout the world, they have become the most highly prized—and expensive—items in the entire Chinese pharmacopeia.

Another unique feature of tonic herbs is their "bidirectional properties". Most medicinal herbs, particularly of the curative variety are "unidirectional" which means that they function in only one way when ingested into the human system, and that they always function that way regardless of internal or external conditions. For example, a cooling curative Yin herb such as gardenia always cools the system, even if the person taking it already has an overly cool system. Tonic herbs, however, are bidirectional (adaptogens) which means that they can influence the human system to move in either direction—Yin or Yang, hot or cold, stimulation or sedation, moist or dry—depending on the internal and/or external conditions that need to be rebalanced. For example, ginseng root, which is revered in Chinese medicine as the "King of the Myriad Herbs" due to its broad range of tonic properties, raises blood sugar in people whose levels are chronically low (e.g. hypoglycemia), but lowers it in those who have chronically high blood sugar (e.g. diabetics). Similarly, ginseng lowers blood pressure when it's too high, and raises it when it's too low.

Tonics are therefore whole body medicines that rebalance the entire human energy system, normalize vital functions, harmonize the system with environmental energies, and adapt the body to respond successfully to metabolic pressures caused by diet, stress, fatigue, travel, ageing, and environmental pollution. Such herbs are known in Western herbology as "adaptogens," due to their proven power to swiftly adjust vital bodily responses to meet the challenges of adverse conditions, internal as well as external.

Tonics work their therapeutic wonders primarily by boosting the energy and balancing the functions of three major systems: immune, cerebral, and sexual. These three systems interact and mutually support (or suppress) one another by virtue of internal biofeedback among hormones, neurotransmitters, and various immune factors, secretions of which are stimulated by tonic herbs. The much touted aphrodisiac properties of Chinese tonics are really just the side-effects of the overall enhancement of glandular and cerebral secretions prompted throughout the system by these herbs. The powerful self-healing response known as "psychoneuroimmunology" (PNI) is mediated by positive self-sustaining biofeedback between neuropeptides produced in the brain and immune factors produced in the glands, bone marrow, and blood. Similarly, high levels of sexual hormones increase immune response by stimulating glandular secretions throughout the entire endocrine system, which in turn improve cerebral functions by activating secretions of various neurotransmitters. Tonics therefore provide a balanced blend of benefits that together pave the way for human health and longevity. As Western herbal scientist Dr. Daniel B. Mowrey explains in his book *Herbal Tonic Therapies*:

A tonic is any substance that balances the biochemical and physiological events that comprise body systems. . . The consumption of tonics is a fail-safe approach to restoring balance and promoting overall health of the body. . . It is a worry-free method of handling life's daily challenges to health and happiness.

In this day and age of pernicious pollution, chronic stress, denatured diets, and other factors of life that pose grave "daily challenges to health and happiness," the judicious use of tonic herbs as part of one's daily diet makes good scientific sense and provides a safe, easy, and pleasant way to keep the whole body in a state of optimum balance and harmony.

Curative Formulas

In the traditional Chinese view, the onset of disease is a clear indication that normal preventive health care has been neglected or carelessly applied, opening a window of vulnerability through which illness enters. In wealthy households, whenever someone fell ill, the family doctor was held responsible for failing to foresee and prevent it, and all payments to the doctor were immediately stopped until he effected a cure, entirely at his own expense. In other words, family doctors only got paid when they kept everyone in the family healthy, not when someone got sick, and therefore it was always to the doctor's own advantage to cure a patient swiftly and effectively. This system was a powerful incentive against malpractice, and it prompted the development of curative formulas with swift, lasting effects.

When used for curative purposes, therapeutic food cooked with medicinal herbs is usually taken as an adjunct to more concentrated forms of herbal medicine, such as decoctions, pills, or extracts. It's also important to strictly regulate the entire diet during curative herbal therapy, to avoid consumption of foods and seasonings whose pharmacodynamic properties conflict with the effects of the therapeutic herbs, or further aggravate the condition to be cured. For example, consumption of seafood and soybean products is contraindicated when using some of the most potent curative herbs, and chilli peppers should be avoided when taking herbal remedies for liver problems.

Many of the herbs used in cooking food for curative purposes fall into the "bitter" flavor (Fire element) category, because bitter herbs are well known for their detoxifying and anti-inflammatory properties, and they also assist digestion and assimilation of nutrients and herbal essences in food. The therapeutic benefits of "bitters" were once common knowledge in western households as well, as evidenced by the wide range of bitter herbal digestifs traditionally produced in Europe and still available in gourmet shops, but today, especially in America, bitter flavors have gone completely out of style, while consumption of sugary sweets has risen drastically. That's one reason why more than 50% of the American population report some sort of chronic digestive ailment, especially hyperacidity, a situation that could be readily remedied simply by consuming food and drink prepared with bitter herbs.

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The idea of using food as medicine occurred to the founders of Western medicine as well as traditional Chinese medicine, and it has only been since food started coming to us from factories rather than farms about 50 years ago that Western food stopped supporting human health and became a primary source of disease and degeneration instead. Hippocrates, known as the father of

western medicine, taught his students "Thy food shall be thy medicine," which accords well with the words of the famous Tang dynasty physician Sun Su-miao, who fourteen centuries ago wrote a milestone medical tome called "Precious Recipes" in which he states, "The truly good physician . . . first treats the patient with food; only when food fails does he resort to drugs." One wonders what these venerable physicians would have to say about the medicinal value of the products found today on the shelves of most modern supermarkets and fast-food outlets.

Dr. Charles Mayo, one of the most renowned American physicians of the 20th century, had this to say:

"Normal resistance to disease is directly dependent upon adequate food. Normal resistance to disease never comes out of pill boxes."

If that's true, it no doubt helps explain why so many people today have lost their "normal resistance to disease," despite the bewildering array of pill boxes that are now sold alongside food in supermarkets. One way to remedy this situation would be to emulate the traditional Chinese approach by taking the "food as medicine" concept one step further and using "medicine as food." To do this, the medicine must be herbal and edible, not chemical and noxious, and it must be prepared at home in the "kitchen clinic" with the same finesse and flavor as haute cuisine.

Bon appetit!