

Traditional Chinese Medicine and Medicinal Herbs

By Rachel Khanna

Cinnamon tree new foliage and bloom, photo by Ingeborg Hartgerink-Grandia

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) originated about 5,000 years ago, during the rules of two emperors: Huang Di (The Yellow Emperor) and Yan Di (The Red Emperor), who later earned the title Shen Nong (Divine Farmer). These emperors discovered the medicinal properties of plants, the nature of *yin* and *yang* and the five elements, and their impact on health. Their theories form the basis of TCM today.

The theory of TCM is based on the concepts of *yin*, *yang* and *qi* (pronounced, 'chee'). Health is founded on balancing *yin*, *yang* and *qi*, also known as the life-force of the body. TCM is based as much on herbs as it is on acupuncture, acupressure, nutrition and movement (*tai chi* or *qigong*) and meditation. Indeed, herbs are paramount to the treatment of illness. Medicinal agents include more than just plants; they can include such things as animal parts, minerals, fungi and insects.

The earliest herbal remedy handbook was called the *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (*The Divine Farmer's Herb Classic*) and written in the year 200 CE, although it was said to have existed in oral tradition for several thousand years prior to that. It lists 365 herbs. A revised version of this book includes more than 11,000 different combinations of herbs. Most of the herbs used are prepared in decoctions, or soups.

To understand the use of Chinese herbs, it is important to understand the balance of *yin*, *yang* and *qi*. *Yin* and *yang* are two opposing but complementary forces in the universe. A *yin* or *yang* quality can be assigned to everything in existence. *Yin* is that which is cold, introverted or passive while *yang* represents that which is hot, extroverted or active. Within the body, each organ or physical process has a *yin* or *yang* characteristic. *Qi* is dependent on the balance of *yin* and *yang*.

Thus, health is a function of the balance between *yin* and *yang*. When they are in balance, *qi* is strong. When they are not in balance, there may be a weakness in *qi* usually marked by weak digestion, fatigue, weakened immunity



Cinammon bark, photo courtesy of Patricia Bjaaland Welch



Red ginseng (红参) roots, Jilin City, China.

and weakness in the lungs. To fortify *qi*, these common herbs are used: ginseng root, astragalus root, or licorice root.

There are also specific tonic herbs that help treat a *yin* deficiency or excess. An excess would result in sluggishness and general

dampness in the body. A deficiency would be characterised by sensitivity to heat, weight loss, insomnia, hot flashes, dizziness and heart palpitations. Some of the common *yin*-enhancing roots are: raw rehmannia, wild asparagus and American ginseng.

Similar to *yin* tonic herbs are *yang* tonic herbs that alleviate *yang* deficiencies. An excess could result in various inflammations. In contrast, *yang* deficiencies are usually characterised by fatigue, weakness and feeling cold. Some agents that improve *yang* are: dried ginger root, cinnamon bark or deer antler.

At yet another level, Chinese herbs are classified into many different categories, such as 'downward draining' herbs for exterior conditions, such as coughs, chills, muscle aches or a cold. Others are laxatives or purgatives, herbs to clear dampness, herbs to expel wind dampness, a typical cause of arthritis or rheumatism, and herbs to clear phlegm. Within each category, there are many different herbs that are meant to alleviate specific conditions.



Common ginger flower - Zingiber officinale, photo by Ingeborg Hartgerink-Grandia

Rachel Khanna is a professional chef and certified health counsellor. She also has a diploma in food therapy and is currently working on a PhD in holistic health.