For most western students, studying Chinese herbal medicine is particularly difficult. Facing so many new Chinese and Latin names, as well as a great deal of information involving so many diseases, a Western student can easily feel frustrated. So can it be made easier to learn Chinese herbs and memorise such copious information? Here are some suggestions that may help in this process.

Memorise the functions of the herbs based on their colour

In Chinese medicine, the colour of a herb is related to its function. According to five phase theory, different colours denote different kinds of qi and also act on different organs. Thus by paying attention to the colour of herbs, we can obtain an idea of their functions.

Red

The red colour corresponds to fire in five phase theory, and to the Heart which dominates the blood and blood vessels. So most herbs with a red colour act on the Heart or blood, with the function of promoting the flow of blood and so on. For example, Hong Hua (Flos Carthami Tinctorii), Chi Shao (Radix Paeoniae Rubrae), Dan Shen (Radix Salviae Miltiorrhizae) and Zhu Sha (Cinnabaris) are either red or have “red” in their names. Hong Hua, Chi Shao and Dan Shen can promote the flow of blood and Zhu Sha can calm the mind. Some other herbs do not focus on the Heart or blood as their main functions, but as they are red may secondarily act on the Heart. For example, Chi Xiao Du (Semen Phaseoli Calcarati) can help to induce diuresis to treat oedema, but as it is red, it can also treat carbuncles (carbuncles are mostly caused by toxic heat stagnating in the blood vessels which are governed by the Heart). The plant of Shi Wei (Folium Pyrrosiae) is red, so although it is mainly used to treat lin (painful urinary dysfunction), it is more effective in the treatment of lin with haematuria.

White

The white colour in Chinese medicine corresponds to the Lung, the Stomach and the qi level. Therefore many herbs with a white colour can be used to clear Lung heat, Stomach heat or disorders involving dampness. Such herbs include Shi Gao (Gypsum), Bai Wei (Radix Cynanchi), Bai Jie Zi (Semem Sinapis Albae), Bai Ji (Rhizoma Bletillae Striatae), Bai Guo (Semem Gingko Biloba), Shan Yao (Radix Dioscoreae Oppositaiae), Bi Xie (Rhizoma Dioscoreae), Fu Ling (Sclerotium Poriae Cocos), Yi Yi Ren (Semem Coicis Lachryma-jobi), etc.

Red

Shi Gao can clear heat from the Lung and the Stomach; Bai Wei can clear heat of both the excess and deficiency type, especially heat from the Lung. Bai Ji can stop bleeding, especially from the Lung and Stomach. Xing Ren (Semen Pruni Armeniacae), Chuan Bei Mu (Bulbus Fritillariae Cirrhosae) and Zhe Bei Mu (Bulbus Fritillariae Thunbergii) are also white in colour, and thus act on the Lung to relieve cough, whilst Bai Jie Zi is able to expel phlegm and circulate and warm the Lung qi.

Another group of white herbs includes those that can strengthen the function of the Spleen and remove turbid dampness. These herbs include Fu Ling, Bi Xie and Shan Yao. Fu Ling and Shan Yao can treat Spleen deficiency and remove dampness. Bi Xie is a herb specially used for lin with urine like rice-water, which is usually regarded as due to turbid dampness or to nutrients that flow downwards due to failure of the deficient Spleen qi to send them upwards.

Yellow

Yellow is the colour of the earth according to five phase theory, and is also the colour of dampness. Herbs with a yellow colour therefore mainly include two groups, those that can strengthen the Spleen and remove dampness and those that can clear damp heat.

Huang Qi (Radix Astragali), Bai Zhu (Rhizoma Atractylodis Macrocephalae) [this herb is yellow in appearance although it has bai = white in its name], Cang Zhu (Rhizoma Atractylodis), Dang Shen (Radix Codonopsis Pillosulae) and Gan Cao (Radix Glycyrrhizae Uralensis) are the typical herbs in the first group. Dang Shen and Gan Cao strengthen the Spleen qi as their main function, while Bai Zhu and Cang Zhu can both strengthen the functions of the
Spleen and remove dampness. Huang Qi is the strongest herb for tonifying the Spleen qi. Zao Xin Tu (Terra Flava Usta) is the dry yellow clay from the oven and can warm Spleen yang to stop bleeding due to Spleen yang deficiency. Huang Lian (Rhizoma Coptidis), Huang Qin (Radix Scutellariae Baicalensis), Huang Bai (Cortex Phellodendri) and Da Huang (Rhizoma Rhei) are the typical herbs in the second group. They are mainly used to treat damp heat, with Huang Lian usually being used for heat in the middle jiao, Huang Qin for heat in the upper jiao, Huang Bai for heat in the lower jiao and Da Huang for heat in the intestine.

**Green or Blue**

Green or blue corresponds to wood in five phase theory. Several herbs can promote the flow of Liver qi or purge Liver heat, such as Qing Pi (Pericarpium Citri Reticulatae Viride), Qing Dai (Indigo Pulverata Levis), Qing Xiang Zi (Semen Celosiae Argenteae), etc. all have Qing (blue) in their names. Qing Pi can strongly break up Liver qi stagnation, Qing Dai can purge Liver heat and Qing Xiang Zi can purge Liver heat to treat nebula and other eye disorders.

**Black**

Black corresponds to the Kidneys or water according to five phase theory, and most black coloured herbs can nourish yin in general or Kidney yin in particular, for example Xuan Shen (Radix Scrophulariae Ningpoensis), Gui Ban (Plastrum Testudinis), Shu Di Huang (Radix Rehmanniae Glutinosae Conquitaee), Sheng Di Huang (Radix Rehmanniae Glutinosae), He Shou Wu (Radix Polygoni Multiflori) and Rou Cong Rong (Herba Cistanches).

**Appearance**

In Chinese medicine, the appearance of a herb is also related to its functions. Because they have the same or similar appearance to certain parts of the human body, they may specially act on that part. Herbs with this property can be classified into the following groups:

**Twigs or Vines**

Substances deriving from twigs or vines resemble the channels, collaterals or limbs of the human body. Most of these herbs can therefore promote the flow of qi and blood in the collaterals or limbs to relieve pain or eliminate wind dampness. These herbs include Gui Zhi (Ramulus Cinnamomi Cassiae), Sang Zhi (Ramulus Mori Albae), Hai Feng Teng (Caulis Piperis), Luo Shi Teng (Caulis Trachelospermi Jasminoidii), Xu Chang Qing (Radix seu Rhizoma Cynanchi) and Ji Xue Teng (Radix et Caulis Jixueteng).

**Tubular structures**

Herbs which derive from the branches or twigs of trees, with holes or a tube in the centre are similar to the urethra in appearance. This is why in Chinese herbology they have the function of inducing diuresis. Such herbs include Mu Tong (Caulis Mutong), Tong Cao (Medulla Tetrapanacis Papyrifera), Qu Mai (Herba Dianthi), etc. Some herbs may also induce diuresis because they have many small holes, although they are from the fungus of trees, for example Fu Ling (Sclerotium Polypori Cocos) whose loose structure has numerous minute holes that cannot be easily seen with naked eyes and Zhu Ling (Sclerotium Polypori Umbellati).

**Skin or Bark**

Many herbs come from the skin or bark of plants or fruits and in Chinese medicine have an affinity with the skin of the human body. The skin is controlled by the Lung which is why they are often used to treat oedema marked by water retention under the skin. Such herbs include Dong Gua Pi (Epiparrum Benincasae Hispidae), Fu Ling Pi (Cortex Polyporia Cocos) and Sheng Jiang Pi (Cortex Rhizoma Zingiberis Officinalis Recens). As the skin is controlled by the Lung, some herbs from the bark or skin of trees, or having “pi” (skin or bark) in their names, are mainly used to treat Lung diseases, for example Sang Bai Pi (Cortex Mori Albae Radicis) and Di Gu Pi (Cortex Lycii Chinensis Radicis).

**Special Shape**

Some herbs have a special shape which can indicate their functions.

Niu Xi (Radix Achyranthis Bidentatae) looks very similar to the ox knee, hence the name “Ox Knee”. In terms of its functions, this herb can strengthen the lumbar region and knees. Its ability to treat weakness in the knees also reflects its ability to induce blood to flow downwards.

Sang Ye (Folium Mori Albae) is the leaf of the mulberry tree with many vein-like structures. In shape it is very similar to the Lung and its function is to moisten the Lung and relieve cough. Wu Jutong, the famous Qing dynasty doctor who developed the formula for cough, Sang Ju Yin (Mulberry Leaf and Chrysanthemum Decoction), explained why Sang Ye is used as the main herb in this formula, said “it has a lot of veins, similar to the Lung in appearance, so it is specially good at eliminating pathogens from the Lung collaterals and relieving cough”.

Xiang Fu (Rhizoma Cyperi Rotundi) is a herb used to promote the flow of Liver qi, especially in menstrual disorders, hence the saying that Xiang Fu acts on the qi in the blood. The appearance of this herb when dried is just like a small liver.

Another herb that resembles the liver is Zhi Shi (Fructus Citri seu Puncirii Immaturus). Like Xiang Fu, this herb also breaks up stagnant qi which mainly relates to the Liver.

Xiao Hui Xiang (Fructus Foeniculi Vulgaris) is also similar to the liver in appearance with two relatively sharp ends, but has more grooves on it. These grooves can be viewed as the “channels or collaterals” of the seed. That is why Xiao Hui Xiang is mainly used for hernia or a bearing-down sensation in the scrotum due to cold invading the Liver channel.

Many herbs treating Liver disorders resemble the iris, and so are used to treat eye diseases or other diseases related to the Liver or the Liver channel.
Mi Meng Hua (Flos Budleiae Officinalis Immaturus) and Qing Xiang Zi (Semen Celosiae Argenteae) both take the shape of an eye or the iris and can purge Liver heat to treat nebula, redness of the eyes, etc.

Cang Zhu (Rhizoma Atractylodis) also looks like the iris, because of the lines that radiate outwards evenly from the centre, and this is why it can treat night blindness.

Mu Tong (Caulis Mutong) resembles the breast and one of its most important functions is to promote milk secretion. The Stomach and Liver channels pass through the breast. Milk comes from qi and blood generated from the Stomach, whilst its secretion depends on the Liver’s dredging effect. Lian Qiao (Fructus Forsythiae Suspensae) is sharp on one end and round at the other, resembling the traditional Chinese anatomical description of the heart, and it contains two chambers. This is why Lian Qiao can clear heat and toxic heat (the Heart belongs to fire), especially clearing Heart heat and dissipating nodules (the sharp end means it can prick or dissipate the nodules).

Zhi Zi (Fructus Gardeniae Jasminoidis) is another herb that has the shape of the heart, being sharp on one end and round on the other. Zhi Zi can purge Heart heat or fire and cool blood to stop bleeding.

Lou Lu (Radix Rhapontici seu Echinops) in Chinese means leaking cucurbit, which looks like a breast. Leaking here should be related to secretion of the milk. So this herb has two functions, acute mastitis and distending breasts due to failure of milk to be discharged.

Dong Gua Pi (Epicarpium Benincasae Hispidae, Winter Melon Skin) can treat retained water by promoting urination. Winter melon can be compared to a human body with oedema, because it is looks swollen. Hu Lu (Pericarpium Lagenaria Siceraria) looks like the abdomen, so it is mainly used to treat ascites, a disease caused by water retention in the abdomen.

Some herbs that can stop convulsions may have a shape similar to convulsed limbs, for example Gou Teng (Ramus Uncariae Cum Uncis). Its name, Hook Vine, relates to the pathogenesis of convulsions (hooking or bending) of the tendons (vine).

Gui Ban comes from the shell of the turtle. It is very similar to the spine or back of the human body, that is why this herb can be used to treat weakness of the lower back and knees due to Kidney deficiency.

**The meaning of the Chinese names**

The names of many herbs are related to their functions. For example Zhi Mu (Radix Anemarrhenae Asphodeloidis) means “knowing the mother” in Chinese. Mother belongs to yin, so Zhi Mu can nourish yin and clear heat.

Di Gu Pi (Cortex Lycii Chinensis Radicis) means “Earth bone and skin”. Earth belongs to yin, so it can treat heat due to yin deficiency. When there is yin deficiency, patients may also have bone-heat which can be specially treated with Di Gu Pi. Pi means skin which is controlled by the Lung, so Di Gu Pi is also a herb that can clear heat from the Lung.

Wu Jia Pi (Cortex Acanthopanacis Radicis) comes from a plant with five leaves crossing each other. Here, the five leaves may be described as the five zang organs which have their root in the Kidney. That is why Wu Jia Pi, which enters the Kidney channel, can strengthen sinews and bones and is especially good for treating the elderly and for developmental delays in children, particularly delayed walking.

Sang Ji Sheng (Ramus Loranthi seu Visci) means host (Ji Sheng in Chinese means both parasite and host) of the mulberry tree, a relationship that can be compared to the baby temporarily residing in its pregnant mother. Pregnancy and the uterus are controlled by the Kidney in Chinese medicine, so Sang Ji Sheng can treat pain in the lower back due to deficiency of the Liver and the Kidneys, as well as excessive foetal movement.

Deng Xin Cao (Medulla Junci Effusii) means “lamp wick herb” in Chinese, and the wick is also called the “lamp heart” in Chinese because it can produce the fire and is located in the centre of the lamp. Among the herbs that can drain dampness and induce diuresis, Deng Xin Cao has a special action of clearing Heart heat marked by night crying, restlessness, insomnia and epilepsy.

Jin Yin Hua (Flos Lonicerae Japonicae) is so named because it has two colours, golden and silver (or yellow and white). This herb can clear heat from both the qi level (represented by the colour white) and the blood level (represented by the colour yellow).

Zi Cao (Radix Lithospermi seu Arnebiae) is another example of this kind. Zi in Chinese means purple and the purple colour in diagnosis indicates sluggish flow of blood or blood stasis. In epidemic febrile disease, it may suggest intense heat. So this herb is mainly used to treat purple macules or papules due to toxic heat. That is also why this herb can both cool blood and activate blood flow.

Yu Xing Cao (Herba Houttuyniae Cordatae) literally means “fishy-smelling herb”. It is traditionally used to treat Lung abscess which is marked by cough with pus and blood and with a fishy and fetid smell. Also because fish live in water, this herb can induce diuresis to treat lin due to damp-heat.

**Comparing herbs according to their nature**

Among the herbs that can promote flow of qi, Chen Pi (Pericarpium Citri Reticulatae), Qing Pi (Pericarpium Citri Reticulatae Viride) and Zhi Shi (Fructus Citri seu Ponciri Immaturus) derive from the same source. But Chen Pi is the peel of the matured tangerine, while Qing Pi is the peel of the immature tangerine and Zhi Shi is the whole immature fruit. What is the difference?

When the tangerine is mature (Chen Pi), it will become warm, dry and yellow, so it will mainly act on the Spleen, and function to promote flow of the Spleen qi, dry dampness and strengthen the Spleen. Qing Pi still has a strong growing tendency and therefore especially acts on the Liver to break up stagnant Liver qi. Zhi Shi is the whole fruit which is still hard and solid, so this herb is specially used for stagnation of qi due to obstruction of substantial pathogens.
such as food retention, damp heat in the interior or phlegm obstructing the interior.

**Notes**

1. The white colour in Chinese medicine corresponds to the Lung, the Stomach and the qi level. This is because the Lung in five phase theory belongs to metal which corresponds to the white colour. The reason why the white colour further corresponds to the Stomach and the qi level is rather more complicated and derives from the relationship between the body fluid and the Lung, the Stomach and the qi level. Compared to other forms of yin fluid such as blood and essence, body fluid is the lightest in weight, and so generally-speaking mainly distributes in the upper part (the Lung and Stomach). In epidemic febrile diseases, pathogenic factors tend to attack the upper jiao or the upper part of the human body first, and this stage is usually recognised as belonging to the qi level (both the patterns of the Lung and the Stomach in epidemic febrile diseases belong to the qi level), which is also marked by impairment of the body fluid. This is why some herbs working on disorders of the body fluid such as dampness, are also white in colour.

2. Of the Cucurbitaceae family which includes the pumpkin, cucumber, squash and gourd.

3. In an epidemic febrile disease, depth of colour also stands for the depth of the pathogen. At the wei level, the colour of the tongue coating is white, while at the qi level, the tongue will present with a yellow coating. So Jin Yin Hua can disperse wind heat from both the wei level represented by the white colour, and the qi level represented by the yellow colour.