



HERBAL MEDICINE

The Herb *Coffea* (Coffee) in Chinese Medicine

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Coffee (*Coffea arabica* and *Coffea canephora*) is humanity's most widely used psychoactive substance. Tea and coffee are similar, though the use of tea, specifically in China, predates that of coffee by well over 1,000 years. With regard to cultural use, however, the two share many characteristics. Although the uses of coffee and tea overlap in many cultures, each beverage has its share of fervent aficionados. There is a "culture of tea" and a "culture of coffee."

Tributes to coffee are more recent in history through contemporary advertising. When personal, they often inject sarcasm and humor. For example: "*Coffee saves lives, just ask my children.*"

Excerpt from "Coffee," by Francis Saltus Saltus:

*Voluptuous berry! Where may mortals find
Nectars divine that can with thee compare,
When, having dined, we sip thy essence rare,
And feel toward wit and repartee inclined?*

Due to its longer history, there are more poetic attributes ascribed to tea than coffee. Personally, I feel these tea tributes would equally fit coffee:

Lu Tung:

*The first cup moistens my lips and throat.
The second shatters my loneliness.
The third causes the wrongs of life to fade gently from my recollection.
The fourth purifies my soul.
The fifth lifts me to the realms of the unwinking gods.*

Japanese Proverb:

If man has no tea in him, he is incapable of understanding truth and beauty.

Not only does coffee play a role in social customs; its widespread use coincides with the emergence of a major era in human civilization, notably the industrial age.

In Chinese medical terms, coffee and tea have energetic differences, but also similarities – and of course, their stimulant effect with regard to the chemical caffeine is similar. As psychoactive substances, they are herbs embedded in humanity's collective consciousness. At the collective level, this relationship between plant and human manifests through the sea of the extraordinary channels. These channels can be reservoirs of both the personal and collective.

With the dawn of the industrial age, humanity's physical and mental capabilities were forced to accelerate. Presently, the digital age has given birth to a technology that is again accelerating humanity, especially with regard to mind. This accelerated pace and concurrent use of a universal stimulant have arisen together.

Coffee affects the *shen*, or spirit/mind; its *qi* impacts through the *yang* motility channel, *yang qiao mai*, and from there enters the primary and divergent channels.

The *yang* motility as an active force of the governing channel literally and figuratively allows us to step forward into and through the world, both individually and collectively.

In the process of flowing from the extraordinary to the primary channels, coffee's *qi* impacts the bladder, kidneys, and heart. It acts on both the *yin* and *yang* of the heart by reinforcing a circuitous route to the heart through several systems:

- The bladder divergent channel, which enters the heart
- The bladder channel's *tai yang* partner and the heart's exteriorly coupled channel, the small intestine
- The kidney-to-heart connection
- The bladder channel's penetration into the brain

In the act of "flowing," it impacts the wood phase through the liver and gallbladder, as well as the defensive *wei qi* through *tai yang*.

Coffee's bitter nature stimulates the fire phase within the *wu xing*, or five phases or elements. Green coffee beans are quite cooling. Roasting them warms their properties a bit, but they are still cool to neutral. Coffee's properties are also acrid and very slightly sweet. The bitter and acrid natures together are drying. They can hurt the *yin* of the stomach, kidneys, and heart in either those who are constitutionally moving toward *yin* vacuity, or those whose overall diet and lifestyle do not support the use of this herb.

Both through its five-phase relationship to fire/heart, and through the bladder connection via the *yang* motility, its strong force can deplete the water element, which then can stress earth through the inner restraining cycle of the five phases. Here there is a water-fire-earth triad.

This strong force can also imbalance the *yin* motility, *yin qiao mai*, and *yin* linking, *yin wei mai*, systems as well, leading, for example to insomnia, tachycardia, reflux, etc.

Clinically, I find coffee to have mostly a dispersing nature. It can benefit the *shen* by reinforcing the circuitous route mentioned earlier; that is, through the *yang* motility via heart and brain.

This herb can liberate that which is latent. When pathologies are observed with regard to use, one must look deeper, considering either a latent pathology or a mental/emotional disturbance. Coffee does not cause anxiety: it allows hidden anxiety to surface. Even overuse of and addiction to the

herb indicates constitutionally predisposed liver *qi* stasis or blocked *shen*.

Along with psychoactive substances, all addictive substances are imbedded in the collective. The addictive nature of caffeine can blind one to its pathology. Caffeine addiction is the redundancy of habitual use manifesting as the need to awaken or flow, impacting the wood phase as previously mentioned. Redundancy is an earth characteristic.

In this manifestation, caffeine's pathology affects *shen*. The warp of earth embedded in *shen* then creates reaction manifesting as excitation of the *hun*. It is not uncommon for caffeine withdrawal to manifest as tension in the *shao yang*, especially with headaches.

When overall *qi* is strong and abundant, coffee disperses wind. As long as there is no strong addition, at the earliest stages of an external wind invasion, this herb can be ingested, then clothes piled on to induce sweat, mobilizing defensive *qi* to disperse the wind.

Published in the journal *CNS Neuroscience & Therapeutics*, Volume 29, Issue 11, November 2023, science has shown coffee lowers striatal volume in the brain, blocks the activity of the neurotransmitter adenosine, and affects the dopamine system. Within the field of biomedicine, whether these effects are positive or negative is now, from the above paper, unknown.

For some this herb is settling, offering focus and self-reflection, while for others it reinforces the comfort of habituated pathologies. I am not arguing for or against the use of coffee, tea, or caffeine; however, being opposed to addictive behavior, I do err on the side of refraining from habitual overuse.

As its use is widely accepted, we grapple with its role in health and society. Ultimately, it may bring only false hope in humanity's advancement; or perhaps, there is a symbiotic relationship between the earth and her plant and human offspring, stimulating humanity to fulfill its role in a universal destiny.

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