

Zhang Zhicong (fl. 1619-1674)

On Fuzi



***Translated by
Heiner Fruehauf***

The flavor of Fuzi is pungent, its qi is warm, and it is extremely toxic. It treats wind cold pathogens that induce coughing and other counterflow issues, wind damp arthritis causing wandering pain and constriction, and knee pain with inability to walk. It breaks up tumors and masses, and heals blood accumulations as well as wounds caused by metal objects.¹

The best Fuzi is produced in Mianzhou in the region of Shu.² Although aconite plants can also be found in other areas, their medicinal power is weak and therefore unsuitable for treating disease. The territory of Mianzhou consists of eight districts, and only the district of Zhangming produces Fuzi. Zhangming District, in turn, is divided into 20 townships, and of those only Chishui, Jianshui, Changming, and Huichang cultivate Fuzi. Among them, Chishui is known as the village that produces superior quality Fuzi.

When the seedling is first planted and then matures, it becomes what is known as Wutou³, because the root is shaped like the head of a crow. Fuzi⁴ is the part of the plant that grows sideways off the mother root; both parts pressed against each other without being connected as one solid piece—just like a child (zi) is attached (fu) to its mother. The smaller knobs that branch off to one side are called Cezi, and those roots that grow solitary to a size of 3-4 cun without any offshoots at all are called Tianxiong.

The type of Fuzi that sits squat in the ground, exhibits clear joint margins, and has few Cezi attached to the root is of superior quality. Next are those roots that have clear margins but are poked with holes, and of the lowest quality are those that are damaged, wrinkled, or appear

defective in other ways. In terms of color, grey is best, followed by black and then bluish-green. The black ones are commonly called Hei Fuzi (Black Fuzi), to distinguish them from the ones that are lighter in color.

Fuzi is endowed with a potent type of martial power, as well as a warming and heating nature, which account for its so-called “extreme toxicity.” In the *Shen Nong bencao jing*’s category of “Lower Drugs”⁵, a great many of the medicinal materials listed here are labeled “toxic” or “extremely toxic.” This fits the premise presented in the “Suwen” (Simple Questions) part of the *Huangdi neijing* (The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine), namely that “toxic herbs have the capacity to fight the presence of pathogens.” This represents the way of attacking the pathogen and reviving the righteous qi in the process, thereby achieving a tonifying effect through the act of purging.

The flavor of Fuzi is pungent and its nature is warming. Especially the Fuzi grown in the township of Chishui in Zhangming District is endowed with an intensely heating qi, which can simultaneously boost the surface yang of the Taiyang system and invigorate the fire of the Shaoyang system. When the solar heat of the Taiyang network does not infuse all pores of the body with appropriate circulation, then pathogens will enter, causing wind cold symptoms and coughing. Fuzi boosts the surface yang of the Taiyang system, and therefore it is capable of treating these symptoms. If the righteous fire qi of the Shaoyang system does not travel through the body’s joints and connective tissue, moreover, wind damp symptoms such as arthritic pain, constriction, and knee pain with inability to move will ensue. Fuzi does invigorate the heat and fire of the Shaoyang system, and it is thus that it can treat these symptoms. Tumors and masses are generally caused by yang deficiency inviting the internal coagulation of cold energies. Blood accumulation represents a stagnation of yin blood, gradually forming masses. Externally induced wounds, finally, are

injuries that have been inflicted by a knife or axe, and do now ulcerate and heal poorly. By virtue of its heating qi, Fuzi can disperse all forms of yin influences and simultaneously endow the body with healthy yang qi—stimulating, for instance, the growth of healthy muscles and connective tissue. It is thus that Fuzi can treat the diseases mentioned in the related entry of the *Shen Nong bencao jing*.

The Classic states: “Plants come in five colors; the combinations of these colors are many and cannot be beholden in their completeness by any eye. Plants come in five flavors; the pleasure of tasting all flavor combinations cannot possibly be exhausted in one lifetime. Heaven feeds humanity with five types of qi, Earth feeds humanity with five types of flavors.”⁶ Heaven is associated with time, and its laws command to use herbs that have absorbed the energy of a particular cosmic environment. Earth is associated with the realm of matter, specifically agricultural production; here, the laws of the five directions and the five types of fertile soil⁷ apply.

If Fuzi is produced in Zhangming District, the one in Chishui Township is superior, because it is there that it can be endowed with the ultimate essence it needs from the earth. This is because the yang energy of Taiyang can be symbolically described as the Water of Heavenly Oneness—it is generated by the body’s water (shui) *fu*, namely the bladder network, and radiantly unfolds itself (zhangming) above. The yang energy of Shaoyang, moreover, can be symbolically described as the Fire of Earthly Twoness—it is generated by the fire of the lower burner, which ascends like the flaming (chi) disk of the sun in the sky. It is therefore absolutely fitting that the ideal place where this substance is produced is called Zhangming (Radiantly Unfolding) and, on the township level, Chishui (Flaming Water). If one wishes to know the essence of a particular substance, or would like to know what type of crop should be planted on which land, it is indeed fitting to consult the names that were given to a thing or a place by the ancestral sages.

Nowadays, Fuzi is also being cultivated in Shaanxi. It is called Western Fuzi (Xi Fuzi). While the energetic characteristics of this type are also pungent and warming, its medicinal effect is comparably weak—not at all in par with the Fuzi grown in Sichuan, where the earth is rich and the medicinal power of the aconite grown in local fields is fierce. It should be noted that virtually all of the prepared Fuzi one finds nowadays in herbal pharmacies is this type of Western Fuzi. Anyone who would like to use the genuine article should know that the price of Sichuan Fuzi is high, and that it is the business practice of the local traders to sell it in bulk as whole roots rather than in the more common form of slices.

I urgently suggest you consider prepared/cooked Fuzi for any condition involving an internal exhaustion of fire qi and a simultaneous rushing of yang qi to the outside. It will boost the vital fire of life, cause the universal life force to rise up from within without becoming extinguished in the effort, and circulate at the surface without leaking to the outside. With Fuzi, it is extremely easy to achieve symptomatic relief when this kind of problem is still in its early stages. Today's doctors, however, do not possess a very clear understanding about the principles of our medicine anymore, and thus fail to grasp the underlying energetic situation of most diseases. They tend to believe that the therapeutic use of Fuzi should be reserved for only those patients who exhibit an expiring pulse and ice-cold hands, people where the body still breathes but the spirit has evacuated the physical shell already. Fuzi is a remedy that heals the living—why do people think of it only as a medicine that can temporarily resuscitate a dying person?

There are many doctors who regard Fuzi as a type of vicious poison for the duration of their entire career. They go around telling people: “You can't take Fuzi--if you do, it will cause you to become wild and crazy and bleed from every orifice in your body; it will cause fire symptoms to engulf your body, and toxic sores

to erupt everywhere; it will cause your organs to rot internally, and if you take it this year, the effects of toxic degeneration will become visible next year.” Alas! Under these circumstances, how does one ever dare to use Fuzi when it is indicated? Disregard income and reputation and excuse oneself from treatment? Humble oneself and recommend another doctor as better suited? This will then end in a situation where the patient gets this medicine prescribed today and that medicine tomorrow, until the patient's spirit becomes severely degenerated. If at that time one returns to the right type of treatment, it will be too late—even if you have the elixir of immortality in your possession, nothing will be able to save the patient then.

If this scenario is encountered by a wise and compassionate physician, s/he may be unable to just stand by and watch the patient die; s/he will very possibly feel moved to ask whether a prescription of Fuzi could be tried to save the patient. If s/he succeeds, it should rightfully be his or her achievement. If s/he administers this type of emergency treatment and it doesn't work, then no blame should be cast. The reality is, however, that the original doctor is afraid of the possibility that this new prescription might work, and so naturally welcomes the event of the patient's death. After death, moreover, the responsibility is transferred to the latter doctor, with the argument that the patient died not despite of, but because of the administration of Fuzi. Ah, what to do when you are a doctor with a sense of conscience? Any physician, therefore, who does not possess a proper understanding of the principles conveyed in the classics is like a beast dressed up in fancy robes--can that kind of person really be called a doctor?

If Fuzi is prescribed, it is advisable to use roots that weigh one liang (30g) or more, otherwise its medicinal properties may not be strong enough. The weight of the weaker Cezi (root offshoots) should not be included in this amount. The local peasants, however, in their desire to increase the weight of their commodity, tend to beat the

Cezi into the root with wooden utensils. Such a root should then at least weigh 1.5 or 1.6 liang (45-48g). The local peasants, moreover, fear that other growers in the South get a hold of their seedlings, and thus tend to immerse the roots in brine right after the harvest, then beat the surface of the roots flat with wooden implements. Originally, Fuzi does not exhibit a salty flavor, it is only after this immersion in brine that the herbal material will turn salty.

The proper way to process Fuzi is by peeling away the skin first, then splicing the root into four quarters, further cutting them into slices and repeatedly flushing them with flowing water to rinse away the brine and their toxic flavor. When the slices are half dried, they are fried until thoroughly cooked inside a copper vat. In very ancient times, people lived by the cycles of heaven, and when fire qi commanded the heavens, one would specifically harvest warming herbs. The Classic states: “A substance harvested during a particular year contains within it the gathered essence of that time. Herbs that are not harvested in accordance with cosmic time possess a much weakened and dispersed essence.”⁸ Some say that aconite must be processed with fire since harvesting is nowadays not done in accordance with seasonal energetics anymore. In most recent times, the herb is boiled in human urine—this is clearly one of those typical cases of false transmission: one mistake engendering another, until the practice has become a habit and nobody remembers that this is fundamentally wrong.⁹

From *Bencao chongyuan* (Honoring the Source Knowledge of the Materia Medica)

Endnotes

- 1 Original description of Fuzi in the single herb classic, *Shen Nong bencao jing* (Shen Nong’s Materia Medica). Most every entry in Zhang Zhicong’s own materia medica is organized as a commentary on the information provided in the original *Shen Nong bencao jing*.
- 2 Mianzhou is the ancient name for today’s Jiangyou City in Sichuan Province.
- 3 The word *wutou* literally means “crow’s head.”
- 4 The word *fuzi* literally means “offspring attached to both sides.”
- 5 Fuzi is the lead herb discussed in the “Xiapin” (Lower Herbs) chapter of the *Shen Nong bencao jing*.
- 6 See *Huangdi neijing suwen*, chapter 9
- 7 Wutu (five types of fertile soil) refer to the soil of mountain forests (shanlin), marshland (chuanze), hilly terrain (qiuling), flat areas in river valleys (fenyan), and plains covering low-laying ground (yuanxi).
- 8 See *Huangdi neijing suwen*, chapter 74
- 9 Zhang Zhicong is here identifying the very practical problem of erroneous aconite processing, which will only get worse after his time: modern processing techniques often tend to include the use of hydrochloric acid and/or bleach

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