

A Brief Discussion on the Application of Ginseng in Different Formulations

Qianyu Luo

Shanghai Jian Qiao University, Shanghai 201306, China

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Ginseng is a superior tonic medicinal herb with a long history of use in China, appearing in many different formulae. This paper selects several classic formulae containing ginseng for discussion, elaborating on the compatibility principles and clinical application of ginseng in different formulations.

Keywords: Ginseng; Formulae; Compatibility; Clinical application

Online publication: December 31, 2025

1. Herbal origin

Ginseng (*Panax ginseng* C. A. Mey. [P. schin-seng Nees]) is recorded in the 2015 edition of the *Pharmacopoeia of the People's Republic of China*, where it is described as the rhizome and dried root of the Araliaceae plant ginseng^[1]. Ginseng was first documented in the *Shennong Bencao Jing* (Divine Farmer's Materia Medica), also known by the names Guigai and Renxian, and was classified as a superior-grade medicinal^[2]. It records that ginseng's "flavor is sweet, [nature] slightly cold. It mainly supplements the five viscera, calms the spirit, stabilizes the ethereal and corporeal souls, stops palpitations and fright, expels evil qi, brightens the eyes, and boosts intelligence." The *Mingyi Bie lu* (Supplementary Records of Famous Physicians) records ginseng as "produced in Shangdang and Liaodong," describing its nature and flavor as "slightly warm, non-toxic. It mainly treats cold in the stomach and intestines, pain and distention in the heart and abdomen, counterflow fullness in the chest and diaphragm, vomiting and counterflow in cholera, regulates the middle, stops wasting-thirst, frees the blood vessels, and breaks up hard accumulations"^[3]. In ancient times, ginseng was primarily used as a medicinal for supplementing deficiency, mainly because it can generate fluid and stop thirst, greatly supplement original qi, boost qi and secure collapse, and can treat internal damage and consumptive fatigue. Reviewing ancient texts shows that ginseng has historically been used in formulae for supplementing the five viscera, qi, and blood.

2. Application of ginseng in different formulae

2.1. Dushen Tang (Single Ginseng Decoction)

Dushen Tang originates from *Shanghan Daquan* (Complete Book of Cold Damage). It uses only ginseng as a

single ingredient in large doses (used according to the actual situation: large dose up to 60g, medium dose 30–40g, small dose 10–20g). Add water, decoct slowly over a gentle fire until concentrated, and take the entire dose at once. It is primarily used to treat massive hemorrhagic shock when the condition has developed to a critical stage, life is hanging by a thread, and the situation is dire. The pattern manifests as mental indifference, pale complexion, spontaneous sweating like beads, heart palpitations and panic, weak breathing, and faint, thin pulse. *Jingyue Quanshu · Gufang Bazhen* (Zhang Jiebin's Complete Works · Ancient Formulae in Eight Arrays) records Dushen Tang: use 2 liang of ginseng, 1 liter of water, boil down to 4g, take warm in one draught, take twice a day. It treats “various qi deficiencies, qi collapse,... all kinds of critical deficiency patterns”^[2]. *Bencao Zheng* (Materia Medica Rectified) states about ginseng: “For those with exhaustion of yang qi, this can return it from the brink of nothingness; for those with flooding and pouring of yin blood, this can stem it after the breach has already occurred”^[4]. This illustrates ginseng's effect of boosting qi and securing collapse. This formula uses only ginseng without combining it with other medicinals, hoping to utilize ginseng's power to its maximum effect without interference from other herbs. However, it is noteworthy that when rescuing a critical situation, the dose of ginseng must be large; otherwise, if the medicinal effect is insufficient and the condition is severe, this formula's efficacy cannot be exerted.

Furthermore, the selection, dosage, and decoction method of ginseng in Dushen Tang are particular. Ginseng from Jilin and Liaodong is considered the best quality, as *Bencao Zhengyi* (Materia Medica Meaning) states, “Liaodong ginseng possesses a pure nature, utterly without signs of harshness or intensity; it is especially unmatched in nourishing yin fluids”^[5]. The preferred physical form of ginseng is plump, moist, heavy-textured, with a thick main root and few branching roots, as the nutrients are concentrated in the main root. It is best to use one whole root, not pieced together, which also aligns with the meaning of “single” in Dushen Tang. The primary decoction method is “slow stewing in a double boiler.” After stewing, allow it to cool naturally, then take in one draught. After drinking, advise the patient to rest quietly in bed.

2.2. Clinical application of this formula

Dushen Tang is clinically used mainly to treat acute shock, postpartum hemorrhage, acute myocardial infarction, neonatal respiratory distress syndrome, etc.

3. Sijunzi Tang (Four Gentlemen Decoction)

Sijunzi Tang originates from Taipei (Formulas from the Imperial Pharmacy for Universal Relief). It treats patterns such as sallow complexion, low and weak speech, reduced food intake and loose stools, stomach deficiency with no desire to eat, and spleen deficiency failing in transportation, belonging to the pattern of spleen deficiency and qi weakness. Therefore, it needs to supplement qi and fortify the spleen. Ye Tianshi said: “The spleen functions properly when it raises [clear yang], the stomach functions harmoniously when it lowers [turbid yin]”^[6]. The spleen and stomach are mainly responsible for transporting and transforming water and grains. If the spleen and stomach are disharmonious and their ascending/descending functions are impaired, various diseases can arise. The spleen prefers dryness and dislikes dampness, while the stomach prefers moisture and dislikes dryness, so their characteristics differ. Sijunzi Tang can well balance the characteristics of both. The four medicinals in Sijunzi Tang are all upright gentlemen, fortifying the spleen and boosting qi, enhancing the body's righteous qi, so that pathogenic qi naturally has nowhere to hide.

3.1. Composition and dosage in the formula

Ginseng, Baizhu (*Atractylodes macrocephala*), Fuling (*Poria cocos*), and Zhi Gancao (honey-fried *Glycyrrhiza uralensis*) in equal parts. Decoct in water for oral administration.

3.2. Compatibility characteristics in the formula

Ginseng in the formula is primarily used to greatly supplement original qi and replenish the essence qi in the kidneys. Baizhu fortifies the spleen and stimulates the stomach, enhancing the spleen and stomach's function of transporting and transforming the essence of water and grains. It can be said that ginseng supplements the congenital foundation, while Baizhu nourishes the acquired spleen and stomach. Fuling is used for its action of fortifying the spleen and percolating dampness, taking into account the spleen's aversion to dampness. Gancao harmonizes the other medicinals, fortifies the spleen, and boosts qi. This formula's nature is mild and balanced, possessing the demeanor of a modest gentleman. Hence, it is named Sijunzi Tang.

3.3. Clinical application of this formula

Sijunzi Tang can be clinically applied for fatigue, lack of energy, poor appetite, and indigestion. Furthermore, relevant literature^[6] indicates that this formula can be applied for gastric acid reflux and premenstrual tension syndrome.

4. Buzhong Yiqi Tang (Center-Supplementing and Qi-Boosting Decoction)

Buzhong Yiqi Tang originates from Piwei Lun (Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach), created by Li Dongyuan. Li Dongyuan was one of the Four Great Masters of the Jin-Yuan period and a master of the School of Supplementing Earth. His theory held that “Earth generates the myriad things,” “if there is stomach qi, there is life; if there is no stomach qi, there is death,” and “internal damage to the spleen and stomach gives rise to hundreds of diseases.” The Ming dynasty physician Wang Lun once commented: “For external afflictions, follow Zhongjing [Zhang Zhongjing]; for internal damage, follow Dongyuan”^[7]. It treats six categories of patterns: qi deficiency failing to nourish, qi deficiency failing to restrain, qi deficiency failing to secure, qi deficiency failing to hold, qi deficiency failing to rise, and qi stagnation failing to reach. Symptomatic manifestations include sallow complexion, no desire to eat, pale tongue, weak and slow pulse, frequent sweating, hematuria, bloody stools, uterine bleeding, chronic dysentery, frequent urination, urinary incontinence, spontaneous lactation, abdominal sagging and distention, sweating, thirst, etc. These patterns are all due to insufficiency of middle qi, deficiency of defensive qi in the shaoyang sanjiao, and sinking of yang qi within the body. The treatment method is to supplement the center and boost qi, and raise yang and lift the fallen.

4.1. Composition and dosage in the formula

Huangqi (*Astragalus membranaceus*) 24g, Ginseng 15g, Baizhu (*Atractylodes macrocephala*) 10g, Zhi Gancao (honey-fried *Glycyrrhiza uralensis*) 6g, Chenpi (*Citrus reticulata* pericarp) 9g, Danggui (*Angelica sinensis*) 10g, Shengma (*Cimicifuga foetida*) 6g, Chaihu (*Bupleurum chinense*) 6g. Decoct in water for oral administration. If making honey pills, the dosage needs to be increased.

4.2. Compatibility characteristics in the formula

Huangqi is the sovereign medicinal in this formula. Huangqi supplements lung qi and also benefits middle qi,

raising clear yang. Ginseng supplements original qi, benefits kidney qi, and benefits the spleen and lung. Baizhu fortifies the spleen and stomach. Shengma raises the spleen yang from the middle jiao. Chaihu raises the liver qi from the lower jiao. The ingredient in this formula assists Huangqi in enhancing the effect of raising yang and lifting the fallen. Chenpi assists Huangqi, awakening the spleen and facilitating qi, preventing the tonification from causing stagnation. Danggui regulates the liver and nourishes blood. This formula is precise and well-considered, making it a famous classic formula.

4.3. Clinical application of this formula

Buzhong Yiqi Tang is clinically applied mainly for headache, food stagnation, taxing strangury, enuresis, spermatorrhea, rectal prolapse, uterine prolapse in women, retained placenta, incessant menstrual bleeding, gestational edema, etc.

5. Conclusion

The most widely known functions of ginseng are greatly supplementing original qi, securing collapse, and generating fluids. However, in formula, we can see that ginseng also has the effects of supplementing the five viscera, calming the spirit, supplementing the spleen and lung, and harmonizing the stomach. Ginseng is an excellent tonic, but its use requires attention: ginseng is suitable for deficiency patterns, not for internal heat or excess patterns. Furthermore, in the Eighteen Incompatibilities and Nineteen Antagonisms, it is specifically mentioned that ginseng is incompatible with Lilu (*Veratrum nigrum*) and antagonistic to Wulingzhi (*Trogopterus dung*), and cannot be used simultaneously. In the formula, we can see that different correspond to different patterns. Prescribing medicinals based on the pattern, with additions, subtractions, and selections within the formula, produces different effects, truly embodying the saying “The essence of a formula lies in its variation”^[8]. Each medicinal in a formula is like a star under the summer night sky; the stars combine and change into constellations, implying different meanings. Similarly, formulae, based on the five natures, five flavors, channel entry, and the medicinals, exert the roles of sovereign, minister, assistant, and envoy. We read ancient texts, observe how famous masters prescribed formulae and used medicinals, learning from the rigorous scholarship and the noble virtue of mindful compassion for all beings of our predecessors. When we are confused or hesitant, their outstanding ideas become guiding lights on our path forward, illuminating the road ahead.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Ji R, Yuan Y, Liu J, 2017, Analysis of Differences in Chemical Composition and Pharmacological Activity between Ginseng Leaf and Ginseng Root. Chinese Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 2017: 385–388.
- [2] Yang S, Yang Y, 2017, Analysis of the Application of Ginseng in Historical Formulae. Journal of Zhejiang Chinese Medical University, 41(7): 601–604.
- [3] Zhu Y, Zhang G, 2011, Application of Ginseng in Zhang Zhongjing’s Formulae. Jiangsu Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 2011: 77–78.

- [4] Chen C, 2009, Treatment Methods and Formulae in Traditional Chinese Medicine, People's Medical Publishing House, Beijing.
- [5] Jin M, Piao F, 2001, Discussion on the Usage of Dushen Tang. Jilin Medical Information, 2001: 36.
- [6] Li J, 2018, Informal Discussion on the Spleen-Stomach Theory and New Clinical Uses of Sijunzi Tang. Doctor Online, 2018: 34–35.
- [7] Guo X, 2015, Brief Discussion on Buzhong Yiqi Tang. Shandong Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 2015: 69.
- [8] Fan R, Gu B, Li J, 2017, Analysis of Liu Wansu's Use of "Modified" Xiaochaihu Tang for Postpartum Diseases. Tianjin Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 2017: 31–33.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.