

PORIA & BAMBOO FORMULA

WEN DAN TANG

ORIGINS: *San Yin Ji Yi Bing Zheng Fang Lun*, 12th century, with roots in formularies from the 6th century.

Poria & Bamboo Formula (*Wen Dan Tang*) comes from a 12th century publication, *San Yin Ji Yi Bing Zheng Fang Lun* (*Discussion of Illnesses, Patterns, and Formulas Related to the Unification of the Three Etiologies*), but that formula has roots in formularies from the Tang Dynasty of the 6th century.

GENERAL SIGNS/SYMPTOMS

There are four general categories of conditions addressed by **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*): 1) digestive disorders with nausea, vomiting, gnawing hunger, and bitter taste in the mouth; 2) dizziness and vertigo; 3) mental/ emotional disorders, usually involving fear, anxiety over decision-making, irritability, insomnia, mania, or timid personality; and 4) cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease with the presence of phlegm. Today the most common applications are with mental illness and emotional disorders, but in order to properly identify the pattern, signs and symptoms from the digestive and/or dizziness and vertigo categories can support the diagnosis. Another important confirmation will be a tongue coat that is thick or greasy (either white or yellow). The pulse will likely be slippery or wiry, and may also be rapid.

This formula is often associated with phlegm-heat conditions, but it is important to understand that the heat here is an unnecessary component of the pattern. Phlegm, on the other hand is the key pathogenic factor. The phlegm obstruction can cause heat to develop, even intense heat, and that heat can rise up into the chest and even into the head to cause irritability, dizziness/ vertigo, or even an acute episode of a mental disorder. Conversely, the translation of *Wen Dan Tang*, “Warm the Gallbladder Decoction,” implies to many clinicians that the formula is warming and treats cold, but this is not exactly the case either. The sum of the ingredients is only slightly warm. The “cold” implied here is a reference to the relative constraint and inactivity of the gallbladder function, which may or may not be the result of an external cold pathogen. In short, temperature should not be a deciding factor for prescribing **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*).

CLASSICAL ACTIONS

1. Transforms phlegm and regulates qi

2. Harmonizes stomach and settles rebellion

3. Frees the the gallbladder and calms *shen*

INGREDIENTS

PINYIN	LATIN	ENGLISH	PERCENT OF FORMULA
<i>Chen Pi</i> (assistant)	<i>Citri Reticulatae Pericarpium</i>	Tangerine Peel	21%
<i>Zhu Ru</i> (deputy)	<i>Bambusae Caulis in Taenia</i>	Bamboo Shavings	17%
<i>Zhi Ban Xia</i> (chief)	<i>Pinelliae Rhizoma Preparatum</i>	Pinellia, ginger-cured	14%
<i>Zhi Shi</i> (assistant)	<i>Aurantii Fructus Immaturus</i>	Immature Bitter Orange Fruit	14%
<i>Fu Ling</i> (assistant)	<i>Poria Sclerotium</i>	Poria, Hoelen, Tuckahoe	11%
<i>Gan Cao</i> (assistant & envoy)	<i>Glycyrrhizae Radix</i>	Chinese Licorice Root	6%
<i>Sheng Jiang</i> (envoy)	<i>Zingiberis Rhizoma Recens</i>	Fresh Ginger	6%
<i>Yuan Zhi</i> (assistant)	<i>Polygalae Radix</i>	Polygala Root	5%
<i>Hong Zao, Da Zao</i> (deputy)	<i>Jujubae Fructus</i>	Jujube Fruit, Chinese Red Date	4%
<i>Huang Lian</i> (deputy)	<i>Coptidis Rhizoma</i>	Coptis Rhizome	2%

GENERAL INDICATIONS / MODERN APPLICATIONS

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|--|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Alzheimer's disease | • Convulsions and seizures | • Gallbladder inflammation | • Nausea |
| • Angina | • Coronary heart disease | • Gallstones | • Neurosis |
| • Anxiety or fright | • Dementia | • Gastritis | • Palpitations |
| • Appetite, loss of | • Depression | • Hepatitis, chronic | • Schizophrenia |
| • Biliary diseases | • Diabetic microvascular complications | • Insomnia | • Seizure disorder |
| • Bipolar disorder | • Dizziness or vertigo | • Irritability | • Sputum, copious |
| • Bitter taste in mouth | • Drooling | • Meniere's disease | • Ulcer, duodenal or peptic |
| • Bronchitis, chronic | • Fright | • Mental illness | • Vomiting |
| • Chemotherapy, thoracic oppression or nausea from | | • Morning sickness | |

FORMULA ACTIONS

- Transforms phlegm and regulates qi
- Harmonizes stomach and settles rebellion
- Frees the the gallbladder and calms *shen*

TONGUE

Tongue will have a thick, frequently greasy coat, which may be white or yellow.

PULSE

Pulse can be slippery or wiry and may additionally be rapid.

CONTRAINDICATIONS / CAUTIONS

This formula should only be used when there are clear signs of phlegm. If the patient is yin deficient, **Poria and Bamboo Formula** should not be taken by itself for an extended period. If long courses are called for, combine with **Sheng Mai Formula**.

FORMULA DISCUSSION

Application of this formula can be confusing. Since the 6th Century, versions of **Poria and Bamboo Formula** or “Warm the Gallbladder Decoction” (*Wen Dan Tang*) have been used to treat “irritability and insomnia from deficiency,” yet it has been commonly used for many centuries for what is usually considered an excess condition: phlegm-heat in the upper and middle burners. And even though it is highly effective for treating phlegm-heat, one of the most common patterns this formula is associated with is called “gallbladder cold”. Let us try to sort through these apparent contradictions.

The gallbladder is a yang (*fu*) organ with yang functions. Physiologically, the gallbladder, as part of the *shaoyang*, helps to distribute yang qi from the *mingmen*; psychically, as the yang aspect of the wood element, the gallbladder is in charge of decision-making and is the organ most associated with courage. As one of the “curious organs” the gallbladder has a connection to the other “curious” structures. The curious structure warranting our attention in the present discussion is marrow. Note that GB-39 is the Influential Point of Marrow for the entire body; note also that the gallbladder channel enters the brain. It is this connection to the brain and to marrow, coupled with the *shaoyang* attribute of being a “pivot” which constitutes the gallbladder’s role in decision-making. The gallbladder also plays an important role in bringing the clear yang to the head. By these same connections and actions **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) is able to treat dizziness, vertigo, and seizure disorders, when accompanied by copious sputum. When the gallbladder is congenitally weak, or when its functions are constrained by a pathogenic factor, the benefits of the yang qi that this *fu* is supposed to distribute are diminished, most noticeably in two areas: 1) the support of the transformation/transportation function of the middle burner, and 2) the yang aspect of the *shen* that the gallbladder is responsible for, namely decision making and taking action. Both of these impairments involve stuck qi and phlegm accumulation.

In the middle burner, the stuck qi can take a few forms, each with its own etiology. In one, an accumulation of phlegm causes the qi to stagnate, further interfering with the transformation function of the middle burner, which, in turn, further interferes with the free flow of the qi. In this etiology, the stuck qi can begin to transform into heat and begin to bother the chest with a sensation of focal distention or palpitations in addition to the nausea and vomiting. This is the scenario behind the “phlegm-heat” pattern treated by **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*). It differs from other phlegm-heat patterns that afflict the middle and upper burners in the detail that the chest and epigastrium remain palpably soft. This is an important distinction, since in most phlegm-heat patterns the affected areas will present with lumps or distention. It is due to this soft quality that the associated irritability and insomnia are said to be “deficient”.

Another common etiology for the qi stagnation with phlegm in this discussion is in the sequela of a “severe wind-cold invasion.” In this scenario an attack of wind-cold penetrates to the *shaoyang* stage and becomes entangled in a kind of stand-off with the antipathogenic qi. Once the acute phase has passed, that is, once there are no more alternating chills and fever, the trapped qi hinders the stomach’s transformation/transportation function and phlegm begins to accumulate, leading to nausea and vomiting. The ability of the gallbladder to bring clear yang qi to the head is compromised and there can be dizziness or vertigo. This pattern usually becomes phlegm-heat, but can be simply “phlegm obstructing the stomach and gallbladder.”

Another important etiological category for **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) involves a congenitally weak gallbladder. A weak gallbladder cannot tolerate too much stress with decision making or demands for decisive action. Nor can it sufficiently nourish the marrow in the brain with clear yang if under stress. This can be the cause of an acute flare up of a seizure disorder or psychiatric episode. **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) can effectively treat many types of mental illness from neurosis and bipolar disorder to schizophrenia and depression by freeing the gallbladder to bring clear yang to the brain. Phlegm will always be a factor in such cases and always contribute to the stifling of the gallbladder’s function, especially during acute flare ups. The phlegm develops from taxation of the middle burner due to 1) poor diet, especially sugar, alcohol, and artificial ingredients; 2) stress, especially the stress involved in making a decision or taking decisive action, or 3) external cold penetrating to the middle burner. **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) can be used to treat seizures and mental illness when there is phlegm accumulation and signs of a weak gallbladder.

Clinically speaking there are shortcuts to knowing when **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) will be effective. The presence of phlegm is essential. If there are seizures, there must be obvious phlegm signs like copious sputum, drooling, or vomiting of phlegmy fluids. In most other conditions, a thick tongue coating, no matter the color, is sufficient to confirm phlegm accumulation. But, though essential for the confirmation of the pattern, phlegm signs are not enough in themselves. If the patient’s presentation is phlegm-heat, then one must palpate the affected areas (abdomen and chest) and confirm that these are actually soft to the touch, even if the patient feels subjectively that they are

distending. Arguably, the best corroboration, though not an essential sign, per se, is the presence of a bitter taste in the mouth. If both bitter taste and phlegm are present, it is a safe bet that **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) will be able to treat any of the conditions listed in the General Indications section at the beginning of this paper.

SYNERGY OF INGREDIENTS

Though not mentioned in the formula's name and not occurring in the highest (or even 2nd highest) percentage, the chief herb in **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) is actually prepared pinellia (*zhi ban xia*). Prepared pinellia (*zhi ban xia*) is so strongly associated with the resolution of phlegm obstruction and the correction of counterflow qi that its inclusion in the formula in a relatively high percentage indicates the emphasis on the treatment of phlegm. It is the strongest in its category to simultaneously resolve phlegm and correct the counterflow of qi. Another contender for chief in **Poria and Bamboo Formula** is bamboo shavings (*zhu ru*). It is usually considered the deputy herb, but bamboo shavings (*zhu ru*) is the only substance in the formula that enters the gallbladder and it is powerful in its own right to scour phlegm and stop vomiting. To further the argument in favor of bamboo shavings (*zhu ru*) as the chief, it can be pointed out that in addition to its action upon phlegm accumulation and its antiemetic property, there is also a mild effect in it to regulate the qi and to calm the *shen*. As noted in the Formula Discussion section, there are multiple ways of employing **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) in the clinic. The role of chief will depend upon the category of application. To treat mental/psychiatric disorders or insomnia, one would argue that bamboo shavings (*zhu ru*) was the chief, but the reputation of pinellia (*zhi ban xia*) is so well-established that in most cases where phlegm or phlegm-heat is the main focus of treatment, as it often is for dizziness/vertigo or gastro-intestinal issues, then it would be seen as the chief.

The other two deputies occur in much smaller percentages compared to bamboo shavings (*zhu ru*), and, in fact, did not occur in the original versions of the formula. Red jujube date (*hong zao/ da zao*) and coptis (*huang lian*) serve very different functions in **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*). Red jujube date (*hong zao/ da zao*) is included to help make the formula safe for long-term use by moderating harshness, fortifying the stomach and spleen and nourishing the qi. When combined with the assistant, licorice root (*gan cao*), the two are able to moisten all of the internal organs and help protect them from the drying properties of some of the other substances. Red jujube date (*hong zao/ da zao*) also nourishes the blood, and in this property, it has an implied nourishing action upon the liver/gallbladder. The same jujube date combines with another assistant, ginger root (*sheng jiang*) in multiple formulas to help harmonize the exterior with the interior. Specifically, it harmonizes the *wei* qi (the *sheng jiang* component) with the *ying* qi (the *da zao*-blood nourishing component.) In **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*), this harmonizing action assists not only with making the formula safe for long term use, but because it adds support to the proper relationship between interior and exterior (by harmonizing *ying* and *wei*), it helps with the formula's action to mitigate the fear and timidity associated with a constitutionally weak gallbladder. The other deputy, coptis (*huang lian*), is added to the original formula mainly to assist in clearing excess heat from the liver, gallbladder, and digestive tract.

The largest percentage held by any substance in the present version of **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) is the assistant, tangerine peel (*chen pi*). *Chen pi* has many actions similar to pinellia (*zhi ban xia*), but with different emphases. Whereas pinellia (*zhi ban xia*) excels at resolving phlegm, the strength of tangerine peel (*chen pi*) is to course the qi in the chest and stomach. But both substances possess

both actions. The main reason for its high percentage in this formula is that the actions of tangerine peel (*chen pi*) are moderate compared to pinellia's (*zhi ban xia*). The two are frequently combined to reinforce their actions. Tangerine peel (*chen pi*) is actually stronger at drying dampness than it is at resolving phlegm. Whenever phlegm is copious, there will be a dampness component. In its capacity to dry dampness, the tangerine peel (*chen pi*) combines with another assistant, poria (*fu ling*). These two also commonly appear in combination. The poria (*fu ling*) strengthens the spleen and augments the qi. It helps the spleen drain dampness out of the body after the tangerine peel (*chen pi*) has dislodged the accumulation of dampness. Additionally, poria (*fu ling*) helps calm the *shen* aspects of the patterns addressed by **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*).

Of the two remaining assistants, immature bitter orange (*zhi shi*) and polygala (*yuan zhi*), only bitter orange (*zhi shi*) appeared in the original formula. Bitter orange (*zhi shi*), like tangerine peel (*chen pi*), is from the "regulate qi" category and possesses the ability to transform phlegm. But whereas tangerine peel (*chen pi*) acts upon the chest and epigastrium, the action of bitter orange (*zhi shi*) starts in the epigastrium and descends through the colon. It therefore can be seen as connecting with the tangerine peel (*chen pi*) and prepared pinellia (*zhi ban xia*) in the middle burner and directing the accumulations further down and finally out of the body. It should be noted that dampness is typically voided from the body through the urine (here facilitated by *fu ling*), but phlegm is usually thought to exit through the bowels. The inclusion of bitter orange (*zhi shi*) assures the accomplishment of the latter.

The final ingredient to mention is a modification/ augmentation of the original formula. Polygala (*yuan zhi*) is in the "calm *shen*" category. It therefore assists in the mental/ emotional actions of **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*); but it also has a remarkable ability to transform phlegm. Specifically, it transforms phlegm in the chest to help free the lungs as well as the heart. It is thought to free the heart from phlegm encumbrance and open the heart orifices. It can guide the kidney qi upward, while dredging phlegm in the chest downward, helping to reestablish the heart-kidney connection. Polygala (*yuan zhi*) is an important addition when using **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) to treat insomnia, or mental/ emotional conditions.

MODERN APPLICATIONS

Circulatory

Cardiovascular disease, angina, myocarditis and pericarditis—Some cardiovascular diseases may be treated with **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) if the pattern involves phlegm-damp-heat with central burner disharmony.

Diabetic microvascular complications—Complications of long term diabetes that also involve stagnant qi and phlegm may be successfully treated with **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*). These include diabetic retinopathy, nephropathy, and diabetic foot.ⁱ

Gastro-Intestinal Disorders

Chemotherapy, thoracic oppression and nausea—Phlegm-heat congesting the upper and middle burners creating turbid phlegm and counterflow qi can result from radiation and chemotherapy treatments for many types of cancer. This may lead to all or some of the following symptoms: cough with yellow sputum, focal distention of the epigastrium, thoracic oppression, nausea/ vomiting, and poor appetite. The tongue may be red or pale red with a yellow, greasy coating and the pulse may be wiry and slippery. This presentation of symptoms may be successfully treated with **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*).ⁱⁱ

Psychological and Neurological Disorders

Alzheimers and senile dementia—The use of **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) in animal research was been found to be successful in slowing cell apoptosis in subjects suffering from degenerative Alzheimer’s disease. It was also found to attenuate the neurotoxic action associated with Alzheimer’s disease, thus slowing or halting the progression of the disease.ⁱⁱⁱ

One of the patterns associated with senile dementia that may be successfully treated with **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) is the upward disturbance of phlegm-heat. This pattern includes clinical indications of dementia, stubborn behavior, irritability, red face and eyes, poor memory, insomnia, excessive flow of saliva, red tongue with sticky, yellow coat, wiry, slippery and rapid pulse.^{iv}

Anxiety, depression, melancholia—In a clinical study, published by Beijing University of TCM in 1999, with 40 cases of melancholia/depressive disorder, **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) was found to have an effectiveness rate of 87.5%. The TCM diagnosis was liver qi stagnation affecting the heart and spleen leading to qi disharmony.^v

Mania and depression, bipolar disorder—**Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) is suggested for treatment of a wide range of mental and emotional disorders including; schizophrenia, manic-depressive psychosis, reactive psychosis, involuntional psychosis, obsessional neurosis, neurasthenia, and dementia. This formula works best when the symptoms include at least some of the following indications; stubborn insomnia, vivid dreaming, occasional heart palpitations, restlessness, stuffy feeling in the chest and epigastrium, bitter taste in the mouth, regurgitation of phlegm, dizziness. Tongue may be red, with a yellow sticky coating and the pulse may be slippery.^{vi}

Difficulty swallowing, belching, the sensation of stricture in the esophagus all may accompany this disorder. The pulse of this patient is generally deep, indicating confinement of the qi by yin factors.

FORMULA COMPARISONS

Poria and Bamboo Formula and Gentiana Drain Fire Formula

The actions of **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) are directed to harmonizing the relationship between the gallbladder and

the stomach, while clearing stagnant heat and transforming phlegm to harmonize the middle burner. The actions of **Gentiana Drain Fire Formula** (*Long Dan Xie Gan Tang*) are directed to clearing heat from the liver and gallbladder channels and draining damp-heat, primarily from the lower burner.

Poria and Bamboo Formula and Ease Digestion Formula

Poria and Bamboo Formula (*Wen Dan Tang*) acts on harmonizing the gallbladder and stomach and secondarily transforms phlegm dampness in the middle burner to restore harmony between the stomach and spleen functions. **Poria and Bamboo Formula** (*Wen Dan Tang*) acts on resolving internal phlegm dampness.

Ease Digestion Formula (*Jia Wei Kang Ning Wan*) disperses wind dampness, while also resolving phlegm-damp of the spleen and stomach. **Ease Digestion Formula** (*Jia Wei Kang Ning Wan*) also resolves exterior and interior dampness.

Poria and Bamboo Formula and Stomach Harmonizing Formula

Poria and Bamboo Formula (*Wen Dan Tang*) acts to harmonize the gallbladder and stomach to rectify the middle and upper burner flow of qi. **Stomach Harmonizing Formula** (*Jia Jian Bao He Wan*) harmonizes the actions of the stomach and intestines. **Stomach Harmonizing Formula** (*Jia Jian Bao He Wan*) is focused on resolving food stagnation, moving stomach qi in order to harmonize the stomach and intestines, thus restoring the correct flow of qi between the middle and the lower burners. Both formulas are focused on harmonizing the flow of qi and resolving excess conditions.

Poria and Bamboo Formula and Resolve the Middle Formula

Poria and Bamboo Formula (*Wen Dan Tang*) focuses its actions on harmonizing the gallbladder and stomach to return proper flow of qi to the middle and upper burners in order to transform phlegm dampness. Whereas, **Resolve the Middle Formula** (*Jia Wei Ping Wei Fang*) is much stronger to resolve and drain dampness while supplementing the spleen. This formula works best when damp encumbrance is more severe than spleen qi deficiency and the excess condition must be resolved before the root condition of spleen qi deficiency can be addressed.

USEFUL COMBINATIONS

For post-surgery nausea or chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting ^{vii}	Combine with <i>Xuan Fu Dai Zhe Shi Tang</i> .
For gallstones and cholecystitis accompanied by excessive phlegm damp heat in the gallbladder and stomach.	Combine with Lysimachia GB Formula .
For constitutional weakness or a presentation of yin deficiency with phlegm, or when taking Poria and Bamboo Formula for more than 6 weeks	Combine with Sheng Mai Formula .

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Gao, L., “Qi Promoting and Phlegm Resolving Method for Treatment of Diabetic Microvascular Complications”, *Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Vol. 20:4 pp. 104-9, 2000.

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