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# The TAO of Healthy Eating

Dietary Wisdom  
According to  
Chinese Medicine

SECOND EDITION



Bob Flaws

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## Preface

This is the third revised edition of a book on Chinese dietary therapy that began its life titled *Arisal of the Clear: A Simple Guide to Healthy Eating According to Traditional Chinese Medicine* back in the early 1990s. In 1998, this book was retitled and expanded to become *The Tao of Healthy Eating*. However, it has been a full 10 years since its last revision. So we thought it could use a bit of sprucing up. Thirty years after writing my first book on Chinese dietary therapy, I still believe that the common sense of the Chinese medical approach to healthy eating makes as much or more sense as any available in the world today. In a time when a new diet seems to be touted by the popular media every few month or so, Chinese dietary therapy is based on 2,500 years of documented, continuous, evolving experience. Based on my 30 years experience as a clinician, I believe that up to 70% of all chronic, noncommunicable disease is due to faulty diet and improper lifestyle, and this is not just my belief. In 2002, the World Health Organization published a white paper titled "Diet, Nutrition and Chronic Disease" which outlined the relationship between faulty diet and such increasing common diseases as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and stroke.<sup>1</sup> There is even a strong relationship between faulty diet and cancer. In the same white paper, the authors state, " For populations in developed countries,

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<sup>1</sup>WHO, "Diet, Nutrition and Chronic Disease," [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO\\_TRS\\_916.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_916.pdf), last retrieved 1/17/2008

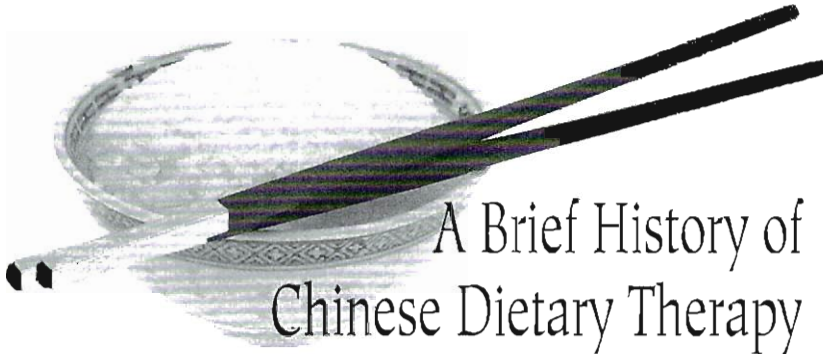
where cancer rates are highest and account for approximately one-quarter of all deaths, some epidemiologists estimate that 30-40% of cancers in men and up to 60% of cancers in women are attributable to diet.<sup>2</sup> According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 80 percent of heart disease and stroke, 80 percent of type 2 diabetes, and 40 percent of all cancers could be eliminated by simply correcting diet, increasing physical activity, and stopping smoking, with correcting diet number one on this list.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, if one wants to live a long, healthy, enjoyable, and productive life, we need to pay attention to what we eat. If this book helps shine some light on this subject, then bon appetit and wan sui, good eating and may you live 10,000 years.

Bob Flaws, L.Ac., FNAAOM (USA), FRCHM (UK)  
Boulder, CO  
Feb. 7, 2008

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., [http://www.mcspotlight.org/media/reports/who\\_rep.html](http://www.mcspotlight.org/media/reports/who_rep.html), last retrieved 1/17/2008

<sup>3</sup> "The Growing Crisis of Chronic Disease in the United States," <http://fightchronicdisease.org/pdfs/ChronicDisease-FactSheet.pdf>, last retrieved 1/17/2008



# A Brief History of Chinese Dietary Therapy 1

One of the reasons for learning about Chinese medical dietary therapy (*yin shi zhi liao fa*, 饮食疗法) is its long recorded history. Chinese dietary therapy is not some passing fad. It is a time-tested system of theory and practice at least 2,000 years old. Therefore, before immediately jumping into what Chinese doctors suggest about healthy eating, I think it is useful to take a brief look at its history.

By no later than 200 BCE (Before the Common Era), one or more unknown medical scholars compiled what has become the fundamental canon of Chinese medical theory, the *Huang Di Nei Jing* (*The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic*). Although this two-volume compendium<sup>1</sup> mainly deals with yin-yang, five phase, qi-blood, and 12 channel theories and their applications to acupuncture-moxibustion, it also contains a number of references to the principles of healthy eating. For instance, in the *Su Wen* (*Plain Questions*) chapter on the relationship between the five viscera and the seasons, it is stated that, "Medicinals are used to fight evils, [while] grains are used to nourish the body, and fruits, meats, and vegetables aid in this effort—all [five] flavors working together to supplement the qi and essence."<sup>2</sup> This statement implies that grains should

<sup>1</sup> The two "volumes" or books of the *Nei Jing* are the *Su Wen* (*Plain Questions*) and the *Ling Shu* (*Miraculous Pivot*).

<sup>2</sup> Liu Jilin, *Chinese Dietary Therapy*, Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh, 2005, p. 16 with slight retranslation by Bob Flaws. The five flavors are sweet, acid or pungent, salty, bitter, and sour.

be the mainstay of the diet, while meats, vegetables, and fruits should be eaten to complete and support that basis, and most Chinese doctors today would agree with that statement. Similarly, in another chapter in the *Su Wen (Plain Questions)* on the five principles, it reiterates this point of view by saying, "Grains, meats, fruits, and vegetables must all be eaten to provide nutrition."<sup>3</sup> In other words, man cannot live by bread alone. Further, it was the authors of the *Nei Jing (Inner Classic)* or their ultimate sources who ascribed correspondences between the five flavors, cereals, fruits, vegetables, and meats, the five viscera, and the five phases.<sup>4</sup> Thus even today, most Chinese doctors believe that sweet foods have a special effect on the spleen, sour foods, especially, af-

"Medicinals are used to fight evils, [while] grains are used to nourish the body, and fruits, meats, and vegetables aid in this effort—all [five] flavors working together to supplement the qi and essence."

fect the liver; salty foods "go to" the kidneys, acrid foods especially affect the lungs, and bitter foods have a special effect on the heart. It should also be mentioned that other books found in early Han dynasty (circa 150 BCE) tombs also contain dietary recipes for the treatment of disease and the promotion of good health. Therefore, the materials on dietary therapy found in the *Nei Jing* were not limited to that text alone but appear to be widely disseminated at the time.

By the end of the Han dynasty (220 CE or Common Era), another pillar of Chinese medical theory and practice had come into existence. This was the *Shang Han Lun/Jin Kui Yao Lue (Treatise on Damage [Due to] Cold/Essentials of the Golden Coffer)* by Zhang Zhong-jing. The *Shang Han Lun/Jin Kui Yao Lue* is considered the first classic of Chinese medicinal prescriptions. Its several hundred prescriptions are still in use today and form the backbone of most practitioner's clinical repertoire. In this book, Zhang used both medicinal herbs (*cao yao*, 草药) and commonly eaten foods in combination in many of his formulas. Some of the commonly eaten foods found in these prescriptions include ginger (both fresh and dried), cinnamon, jujubes or red dates, licorice, Job's tears barley, malt syrup, malted bean sprouts, rice (both glutinous and non-glutinous), fermented soybeans, vinegar, honey, alcohol, mandarin oranges (both ripe and unripe), orange peel, lard, gelatin, egg yolk, lamb, seaweed, Sichuan pepper, and scallions. To this day, almost 2,000 years later, there is the saying in Chinese medicine, "Medicine and food [share] the same source" (*Yao shi*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 16

<sup>4</sup> The five major viscera of Chinese medicine are the liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys which correspond to the wood, fire, earth, metal, and water phases respectively.



*tong yuan*, 药食同源). This means that there is no hard and fast line between medicinal substances and foods and, by extension, that every food has its impact on the health of the body. In addition, Zhang devoted the last two chapters of the *Jin Kui Yao Lue* (*Essentials of the Golden Coffer*) to specific recommendations on dietary therapy.

The next two historical periods in Chinese were the Three Kingdoms period (220-265 CE) and the Jin dynasty (265-420 CE), and one of the most famous medical texts written during those times was Ge Hong's *Zhu Hou Bing Ji Fang* (*Formulas [to Keep] Behind the Elbow for Emergencies*). In this book, Ge recorded a number of simple, proven prescriptions, many of which are dietary in nature. As a Taoist adept, Ge was very interested in health and longevity techniques, including what to eat and what not to eat in order to live an especially long time. In another of his books, the *Bao Pu Zi Nei Pian* (*Bao Pu-zi's Inner Writings*), Ge explains a long list of activities one should regulate if one wants to live to 100 years.<sup>5</sup> As part of this list, he counsels, "Don't overemphasize any on the five flavors when eating, for too much sour damages the spleen, too much bitter damages the lungs, too much acrid damages the liver, too much salt damages the heart, and too much sweet damages the kidneys." As we will see in Chapter 3, these same kinds of prohibitions against overeating any of the five flavors are still a foundation of Chinese medical dietary therapy.

In the Southern and Northern period (420-589 CE), another Taoist by the name of Tao Hong-jing compiled his famous *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (*The Divine Husbandman's Materia Medica Classic*). This book contains the medicinal uses of 365 substances—vegetable, animal, and mineral—and many of these medicinals are also commonly eaten foods, such as Job's tears barley, jujubes, chicken meat, honey, lotus rhizomes, lotus seeds, sesame seeds, kelp, kombu, pears, carp, red beans (a.k.a. aduki or azuki beans), cow's milk, wheat, and grapes. Each ingredient in this book is described according to the five flavors and the four natures. The four natures are the four temperatures of foods. These are cold, cool, warm, and hot. (Of course, there is a "fifth" nature or temperature, the neutral which is neither cool nor warm.) Even today, when a Chinese doctor talks about the effects of a food on a particular person, he or she will take into account that food's nature or temperature. In this case, someone who is pathologically cold will be told to eat more warm and hot foods and to avoid cool and cold foods,

<sup>5</sup> Ge Hong, *Bao Pu Zi Nei Pian*, translated by James R. Ware, appearing in *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1966, p. 224, with slight retranslation by Bob Flaws.

while someone who is too hot will be told to eat more cool and cold foods and avoid warm and hot foods.

Next we come to the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) and the great Sun Si-miao. Sun was also a Taoist hermit and healer who lived in what is now Shanxi province in the very heart of China. Similar to both Ge Hong and Tao Hong-jing above, as a Taoist, Sun was very interested in longevity techniques and this led him to a special interest in dietary therapy for good health and long life. In his masterwork, *Qian Jin Yao Fang* (*Prescriptions [Worth] a Thousand [Pieces of] Gold*), Sun categorized the dietary properties and uses of a large assortment of fruits, vegetables, grains, fish, fowl, insects, and other animals. In addition, in the Preface to the *Qian Jin Yao Fang*, Sun discusses the importance and principles of dietary therapy to the point that many Chinese doctors cite Sun as the real fountainhead of contemporary Chinese medical dietary therapy. In fact, if one visits Sun's hermitage today, one can buy several books made up of Sun's precepts on healthy living, including dietary therapy, written in simplified characters which are easy to read by modern Chinese. In the summer of 2006, I visited this hermitage and purchased several of these booklets. In one titled *Yang Sheng Chang Shou Zi Mi* (*Secrets of Nourishing Life & Longevity*), Chapter 3 out of eight chapters is devoted to Sun's views on and prescriptions for dietary therapy for those wishing to live a long and healthy life. In this chapter, Sun discusses balancing the five flavors and well as the principles for regulating the diet in general. The fact that Sun lived to 100 years of age suggests he practiced what he preached and it worked well for him.

According to Liu Shi-lin, by the Song dynasty (960-1129 CE), it was common practice to use foods in both the prevention and treatment of disease.<sup>6</sup> Two of the most important works of that period were the Imperial Medical Department's *Tai Ping Hui Min He Ji Ju Fang* (*Imperial Grace Formulary of the Tai Ping [Era]*) and the *Sheng Ji Zong Lu* (*Complete Collection for Holy Relief*) which was also compiled under the official auspices of the imperial government. Both of these widely circulated books contained separate chapters on dietary therapy which include over 100 different recipes. Also in the Song dynasty, Chen Zhi published a book titled *Yang Lao Feng Qin Shu* (*A Book on Nourishing the Elderly [based on] Filial Piety*). This book deals specifically with geriatric dietary therapy and also includes many specific recipes.

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<sup>6</sup> Liu Jilin, *op cit.*, p. 17

During the Yuan dynasty (1206-1368 CE), interest in dietary therapy in China continued. Among the number of books on Chinese dietary therapy published during this dynasty, the most famous of all was Hu Si-hui's *Yin Shi Xu Shi* (*A Handbook of Dietetics*) in 1330. Hu was a Chinese doctor at the imperial court who came from the Muslim minority. He primarily ministered to the imperial family's health via adjusting their diet. Hu put special emphasis on rationally combining daily foods as well as the addition of herbal medicinals to foods both for the prevention and treatment of disease. His book is still in print in China to this day; it is considered *that* important. It should also be mentioned that, around this same time, Li Dong-yuan, in his monumentally important *Pi Wei Lun* (*Treatise on the Spleen & Stomach*) shifted the emphasis in terms of the causation of chronic diseases from externally contracted pathogens to such internally engendered causes as emotional stress and faulty diet and lifestyle. This sea-change within the Chinese medical literature served to only place more emphasis on proper diet within the world of Chinese medicine. Further, it was Li who really stressed the importance of the "clear, bland diet" which we will talk about in Chapter 3.

In the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE), Li Shi-zhen described over 500 individual foods and their medicinal effects in his *Ben Cao Gang Mu* (*Detailed Outline of Materia Medica*). Other typical works from this period devoted specifically to dietary therapy include Lu He's *Shi Wu Ben Cao* (*A Materia Medica of Foodstuffs*), Ning Yuan's *Shi Jian Ben Cao* (*Verified Food Materia Medica*), Wu Lu's *Shi Pin Ji* (*A Collection of Foods & Drinks*), and Gao Lian's *Yin Zhuan Fu Shi Jian* (*Notes on the Use of Foods & Drinks*). Thus we can see that there was both quite an interest in and a growing literature on Chinese dietary therapy by this time.

In the Qing dynasty (1616-1911 CE), the role and practice of dietary therapy within the larger realm of Chinese medicine were accepted by essentially all high-class practitioners of Chinese medicine. The Qing dynasty was a time of growth in the professionalization of medicine as well as the development of the scholar-doctor. Thus we see more and more books being published during these centuries on all aspects of Chinese medicine and no less dietary therapy. Some of the most important books on Chinese dietary therapy from this dynasty include She Li-long's *Shi Wu Ben Cao Hui Zuan* (*A Compendium of Foodstuff Materia Medica*), Wang Shi-xiong's *Sui Xi Ju Yin Shi Pu* (*The Food & Drink Recipes of Sui Xi-ju*), Zhang Mu's *Tiao Ji Yin Shi Bian* (*A Study of Food & Drink [for] Regulating Diseases*), and Yuan Mei's *Sui Yuan Shi Dan* (*Food Elixirs*

[from] *Sui Yuan [Garden]*). These books cover the principles of both preventive and remedial diets and are filled with many recipes for the treatment of disease as well as for daily consumption.

Since the end of the Qing dynasty, every succeeding generation of Chinese doctors has produced new manuals of Chinese medical dietary therapy. On my shelf, I have at least a dozen such manuals published in China during the last 30 years, and this is just a random selection. There are a number of comprehensive textbooks on Chinese medical dietary therapy as well as many smaller, more specialized books on tea therapy, medicinal wines and tinctures, medicinal porridges, and even vinegar eggs. There

*... Chinese dietary therapy has been proven to work in a very diverse group of people from sea level to the heights of the Himalayas, from the cold tundra of the north to the tropics of Hainan in the south, and from damp coasts on the China Sea to the deserts of Chinese Turkistan.*

are also numerous materia medica or "dictionaries" of individual foods which give each food's flavor(s), nature, organ tropisms,<sup>7</sup> functions, indications, contraindications, and sample uses or recipes. Therefore, when it comes to Chinese dietary therapy, there is a relatively vast repository of time-tested knowledge.

Further, I would also like to point out that China is a huge country containing many different ethnic groups (or gene pools), many different geographic climates and environments, and many different cultures with their various lifestyles. Thus, Chinese dietary therapy has been proven to work in a very diverse group of people from sea level to the heights of the Hi-

malayas, from the cold tundra of the north to the tropics of Hainan in the south, and from damp coasts on the China Sea to the deserts of Chinese Turkistan. While some traditional diets, such as the Inuits' (or Eskimos'), may be too localized in its application both in terms of physical environment and applicable gene pool, I feel confident that, when modified to fit individual needs, the basic principles of this 2,000-year-old system of dietary therapy are workable for most people in most places.

<sup>7</sup> Organ tropism is typically referred to as "organ entry" or "channel regrouping" in Chinese medical texts. Under this heading, the various viscera or bowels a food primarily "enters" and effects are specified.



## The Basics of Good Health According to Chinese Medicine 2

In the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), the famous Chinese doctor Sun Si-miao<sup>1</sup> said that when a person is sick, the doctor should first regulate the patient's diet and lifestyle. In most cases, these changes alone are enough to effect a cure over time. Sun Si-miao said that only if changes in diet and lifestyle are not enough should the doctor administer other interventions, such as internal medicine and acupuncture. Although most patients coming for professional Chinese medical treatment today do need internal medicine and/or acupuncture as well as changes in their diet and lifestyle to effect a more rapid cure, it is most definitely my experience that without appropriate changes in diet and lifestyle, herbs and acupuncture will not achieve their full and lasting effect.

### **Form & Function**

Based on my 30 years of clinical practice, I believe there are four basic foundations of achieving and maintaining good health. These are diet, exercise, adequate rest and re-

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<sup>1</sup> Sun Si-miao is regarded as one of the most important teachers on health and longevity within Chinese medicine. He studied with Confucianists, Buddhists, and Taoists and lived to 100 years of age. In the summer of 2006, I had the opportunity to visit his hermitage in Shanxi province and bow to the image of this great Chinese medical practitioner.

laxation, and a good mental attitude. Chinese medical theory is based on the concepts of yin and yang.<sup>2</sup> In terms of medicine, yin means form or substance (*xing*, 形) and yang means function (*yong*, 用). This is similar to the Western medical dichotomy between form and function. Form and function are interdependent. Substance or form is both the material, anatomical basis of function and its fuel. Function, on the other hand, activates and motivates form and also repairs, builds, and maintains it.

To help make this clearer to my patients, I often say the human organism is like a candle. A candle's function is to burn and, therefore, shed light. The flame of the candle is dependent on its form. At the same time, the candle's form, its wick and wax, is the fuel for the candle's function. Similarly, our various activities and consciousness are dependent upon our form, our physical body. Our functional activities are a product of consuming and transforming or metabolizing this substance. When we are young, we produce more substance than we consume and thus we are able to grow, repair, and keep our bodies youthful in shape and appearance. However, past a certain age, due to a decline in our bodily organs' efficiency, we no longer produce an excess of fuel or substance and so we begin to consume our own form. When we have consumed all of our yin substance, our organism no longer has sufficient fuel for function and so it ceases or dies.

*In relationship to diet, exercise is yang to diet's yin. Exercise keeps function performing at peak efficiency. However, in Chinese medicine, exercise and rest/relaxation are seen as the yin/yang aspects of a single issue.*

Unlike the candle which is endowed with a finite, nonreplenishable form at the moment of its making, we humans are capable of taking in new form or substance. We do this by breathing, eating, and drinking. It is eating and drinking which provide us with the substance which fuels our day-to-day activities and which is transformed into our body's material basis. Therefore, from the point of view of morphology or yin substance, we most definitely are what we eat, drink, and breathe.

Exercise is a type of function. It is activity (*dong*, 动, literally "stirring"). In relationship to diet, exercise is yang to diet's yin. Exercise keeps function performing at peak efficiency.

<sup>2</sup> Yin and yang are not any particular things as such. They are the two poles of all possible dichotomies. This means that something is yin only in relation to something else which, in terms of that relationship, is yang. Determining the yin and yang of any situation is one of, if not the main problem-solving methodologies and organizational systems within Chinese medicine.

In Chinese medicine, there are two types of essence. There is *xian tian zhi jing* (先天之精) or former heaven essence which is innate at birth. We inherit this former heaven essence at the moment of conception from our two parents. We are born with a finite amount of this former heaven essence. It is our endowment from our parents and the universe at large, and it is stored in the kidneys. However, this former heaven essence is supplemented by what is called *hou tian zhi jing* (后天之精) or latter heaven essence. This latter heaven essence is manufactured out of a combination of the air we breathe and the food and drink we consume similar to how a candle's flame is a combination of heat, oxygen, and fuel. Nutritive essence derived from food is transformed into qi (pronounced *chee*) and blood. Qi empowers function and blood nourishes form. As we move through each day, our activities consume both qi and blood. If, when we go to sleep at night, we have manufactured more qi and blood than we have used that day, this excess is transformed into acquired or latter heaven essence. Some of this latter heaven essence is stored in each of the five major organs or viscera (*zang*, 脏) of Chinese medicine—the heart, lungs, spleen, liver, and kidneys. However, the major portion of this acquired essence is stored in the kidneys which then become the Fort Knox of the body. This is summed up in the Chinese medical statement of fact, "The kidneys store the essence." (*Shen zang jing* 肾藏精.)

Every metabolic activity, every transformation within the organism requires both some life fire and some essence to act as catalyst and substrate respectively. If there were no acquired essence, we would be just like a candle. We would only be born with so much fuel and that would be used up fairly quickly. But, because latter heaven essence, derived from our diet, supplements our innate former heaven essence stored in our kidneys, this former heaven essence is capable of lasting a lifetime.

### Longevity, Diet & Lifestyle

Chinese medical theory believes that the human organism is built to live 100 years. According to the first chapter of the *Nei Jing* (*Inner Classic*), the "Bible" of Chinese medicine,<sup>5</sup> most people have enough essence to last five-score years. Barring accidental death or infectious disease, we are designed to last 100 years as long as former heaven essence is not squandered by excessive consumption *and* as long as latter heaven or

<sup>5</sup> The *Nei Jing* was compiled by a variety of authors some time in the Warring States period (476-221 BCE). It contains the fundamental theories that are still the bedrock of contemporary Chinese medicine. It is divided into two sections: the *Su Wen* (*Simple Questions*) and the *Ling Shu* (*Miraculous Pivot*).

However, in Chinese medicine, exercise and rest/relaxation (*jing*, 静) are seen as the yin/yang aspects of a single issue. If we are too active, i.e., hyperfunctional, we consume too much fuel or substance. Therefore, rest and relaxation are the flip side of the coin of activity. Because the fundamental view of Chinese medicine on health and disease is based on the Doctrine of the Mean (*zhong yong*, 中用),<sup>3</sup> functional activities should be moderate—not too much and not too little. If there is too little exercise, form or material substance is not adequately consumed and transformed and starts to accumulate and gum up the works in the form of phlegm, dampness, turbidity, and blood stasis. If there is too little rest, hyperactivity, be that physical, mental, or emotional, consumes too much substance and overheats the organism leading to burnout (qi and yin vacuity).<sup>4</sup> This means that diet on the one hand must be balanced by adequate activity and rest/relaxation on the other.

## Fire & Essence

The use of a candle as an analogy is actually quite accurate according to Chinese medical theory. Life is seen in Chinese medicine as a series of warm transformations (*wen hua*, 温化). Living qi (*sheng qi*, 生气) or energy in the body is yang and yang is inherently warm. The root yang of the entire body is called the *ming men zhi huo* (命门之火) or the life-gate fire. This life-gate fire is ultimately responsible for all activities and transformations in the body. We live only as long as this fire of the life-gate burns within us and we are stone-cold dead when it burns out irrevocably.

This life-gate fire is associated with or has its material basis in the Chinese medical idea of the kidneys. In Chinese medicine, the kidneys (*shen*, 肾) are the fundamental, first organ. They are called the *xian tian zhi ben* (先天之本) or former heaven root. This means they are the prenatal foundation of the organism, both its form and function. The original source of function is the life-gate fire or original qi described above. Whereas the most essential material basis or pure substance is referred to as the essence (*jing*, 精) or kidney essence (*shen jing*, 肾精).

<sup>3</sup> The Doctrine of the Mean is the cornerstone of Confucianism. It basically teaches moderation in all things both the health and well-being of the individual and the community at large. Therefore, within Chinese medicine, health is the maintenance of balance and moderation in the body/mind's physiological activities, and disease is conversely a state of something within the body/mind being either too much (replete, *shi*, 实) or too little (vacuous, *xu*, 虚).

<sup>4</sup> Qi and yin vacuity is one of the professionally identified disease states or patterns in Chinese medicine. It is characterized by fatigue and lack of both mental and physical vigor on the one hand and restlessness, scanty sleep, mental agitation, and possible recurrent hot feelings on the other.



acquired essence is manufactured and stored to bolster and slow the use of former heaven essence. Since latter heaven essence is manufactured from the food and drink we ingest, it is no wonder that Chinese medical theory places such great importance on proper diet and promoting good digestion. Likewise, since acquired essence is stored in the kidneys at night when we sleep, it is no wonder why proper rest and sleep are important as well.

Here again I find an analogy helpful. Former heaven essence is like a patrimony or trust fund we inherit at birth. Latter heaven essence is like money which we save in the bank. It is that part of our daily economy above and beyond our operating expenses. When we store it as acquired essence, it and our former heaven essence together become our body's capital. It is said in alchemy that it takes gold to make gold and that the more gold one has, the more one can make. When applied to our inner alchemy, our original gold is our essence, both former and latter heaven. When these two essences are full and abundant, organ function is strong, metabolism is efficient, and we generate a profit each day. Therefore, it takes essence to make essence and the more essence we have, the more we can make. When we age, however, instead of living on our interest, we run a negative daily balance and are forced to dip into our capital. Eventually, we consume all our capital and we go bankrupt or die.

*Former heaven essence is like a patrimony or trust fund we inherit at birth. Latter heaven essence is like money which we save in the bank. It is that part of our daily economy above and beyond our operating expenses.*

## Essence, Qi, & Spirit

It is said in Chinese medicine that essence (material basis) becomes qi (气, functional activity)<sup>6</sup> and when qi accumulates it becomes *shen* (神) or spirit. Spirit in Chinese medicine refers to the qi accumulated in our heart which then manifests as our consciousness and our mental/emotional activities. Excessive thinking or excessive emotionality (i.e., mental-emotional activity) consume great stores of qi and, therefore, essence. That is why the fourth basic foundation of good health is a healthy mental attitude. What is meant by a good attitude in Chinese medicine is spelled out fairly

<sup>6</sup> The concept of qi defies easy definition. While it is often referred to as energy by Westerners and many modern Chinese, traditionally, it is defined as the "finest material substance" in the world. In any case, qi has five functions within the human body and these are to warm, defend, move, transform, and contain. In general, in Chinese medicine, qi always describes function.

exactly. When the seven affects—joy, anger, grief, melancholy, thinking, fear, and fright—are appropriate to their stimuli, these are natural subjective experiences and their experience is the purpose of life. Nonetheless, their experience does consume essence. Essence without spirit or mental activity is meaningless in human terms just as a candle which does not shed light is also useless. The consumption of essence through our conscious experience is what is called in Chinese medicine our spirit brilliance (*shen ming*, 神明). *Ming* (明) means brilliance or light. Thus essence's ultimate purpose is to be transformed into the light of consciousness.

However, just as physical activity or stirring may be excessive, so may mental-emotional stirring. Therefore, in Chinese medicine, it is very important that we each get enough physical rest and mental relaxation and that we not let our minds and emotions run away with us. Otherwise, we burn through our qi and its ultimate fuel, our essence, too quickly. When that happens, we age prematurely, heal more slowly, and are also prone to disease-causing malfunctions within and invasion by disease-causing entities from without. Thus it is said in Chinese medicine,

[Keep] a constant, regular lifestyle  
[And] suitable amounts of work and rest.

As well as,

Be happy with a light, open view;  
Guard against being seized by sudden changes in emotion.

I opened this chapter invoking the wisdom of the great Chinese doctor Sun Si-miao. In the Qing dynasty (1644-1911 CE), Sun Xi-miao said:

To live long, people should take care not to worry too much, not to get too angry, not to get too sad, not to get frightened, not to do too much, not to talk too much, and not to laugh too much. One should not have too many desires nor face numerous upsetting conditions. All these are harmful to the health.

Conversely, this Dr. Sun went on to say:

One who knows how to conserve one's life is one who thinks less, worries less, has fewer desires, is less active, talks less, is less upset, has less joy

[here meaning less excitement] and less anger, and does less wrong. These 12 lessons are the key to conserving one's life.

In other words, we need to cultivate a broad, open mind with a happy mood and avoid all unnecessary worries and stress.

We must remember that we all get old and we all die. We all experience pain as well as pleasure. These are inevitable. When we fail to recognize the naturalness of this condition and rather take it as a personal affront or attack, we run after pleasure and its means in order to avoid suffering at all cost. Paradoxically, this ceaseless running towards pleasure and running away from pain consumes essence and causes the very disease, suffering and death we seek to avoid. It is transcendence of this rat-race which the wisdom of the East posits as a good, healthy mental attitude.

Because of the inter-relationships between essence, qi, and spirit, it is easy to see why diet, exercise, rest, and the development of a good, healthy attitude are so important to achieving and maintaining good health. This book focuses on dietary therapy. That does not mean that diet is more important than the other three; in truth, I would say that the chronic, non-infectious diseases of this time are due to a lack of wisdom in all four of these crucial areas. Although contemporary Western diet has shown some signs of improving in recent years, it is basically out of balance. In addition, we all tend to be too sedentary and, at the same time, too mentally and emotionally stressed.

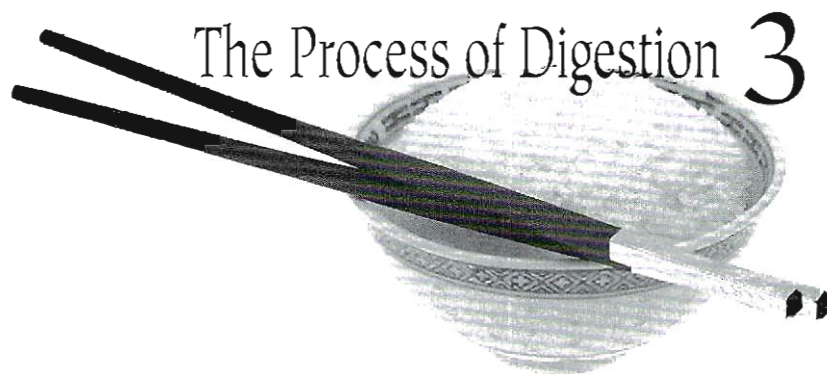
It is relatively simple to say that one should get enough exercise and rest. In fact, we are constantly bombarded in the media by one simple fix or another from a running shoe manufacturer; a health club chain or a drug company; a simple fix that really doesn't fix anything but often pushes too far one way or the other. And although Buddhists, Daoists and Confucianists have filled libraries on how to achieve a true mental balance, this is not easily conveyed or the intent of this book. Diet, on the other hand, although seemingly open to a great deal of difference of opinion and confusion, is something that the Chinese have written about simply and clearly for centuries. I believe that these ancient, time-tested teachings on diet found in Chinese medicine

*Diet, although seemingly open to a great deal of difference of opinion and confusion, is something that the Chinese have written about simply and clearly for centuries. I believe that these ancient, time-tested teachings on diet found in Chinese medicine can provide, simple, clear, common-sense guidelines to a healthy diet.*

can provide, simple, clear, commonsense guidelines to a healthy diet. It is my hope that this summary of all those writings will greatly benefit the quality of life of everyone who reads this book.

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## The Process of Digestion 3



In Chinese, the digestive system is called the *xiao hua xi tong*. The words *xi tong* (系统) simply mean system, but the words *xiao* (消) and *hua* (化) are more pregnant with meaning. *Xiao* means to disperse and *hua* means to transform. In Chinese medicine, digestion equals the dispersion of pure substances to be retained and impure substances to be excreted after these have undergone transformation. Therefore, the digestive tract is called the *xiao hua dao* (消化道) or pathway of dispersion and transformation. In Chinese medicine, we mostly describe the process of digestion in terms of the functions of the Chinese spleen and stomach. Once one understands the functions of the spleen (*pi*, 脾) and stomach (*wei*, 胃) according to Chinese medical theory, Chinese dietary theory becomes very clear and logical.

### Three Burners (*san jiao*, 三焦)

The spleen and stomach are a yin-yang pair. The stomach is one of the six bowels (*liu fu*, 六腑) and is relatively yang. The spleen is one of the five viscera (*wu zang*, 五脏) and is relatively yin. The stomach's function is to receive food and liquids and to "decompose and cook" these. In Chinese medicine, the stomach is likened to a pot on a stove. As mentioned in the previous chapter, all physiological transformations in Chi-

nese medicine are warm transformations. The trunk of the body is seen as three alchemical retorts called *jiao* (焦) or burners. There is an upper burner containing the heart and lungs, a middle burner containing the spleen and stomach, and a lower burner containing the kidneys, intestines, liver, and reproductive organs.

### The Stomach as a Pot

The stomach is the pot of the middle burner and the spleen is both the fire under this pot and the distillation mechanism to which this pot is attached. Just as a mash rots and ripens in a pot, so foods and liquids decompose and are cooked within the stomach.<sup>1</sup> In Chinese medical terms, this means that, as foods and liquids decompose

*The stomach is the pot of the middle burner and the spleen is both the fire under this pot and the distillation mechanism to which this pot is attached.*

and are cooked, the pure or clear (*qing*, 清) and impure or turbid (*zhuo*, 浊) parts of these foods and liquids are separated. It is then the spleen's function to distill or drive upward the purest parts of foods and liquids, the so-called finest essence of liquids and foods (*qing wei zhi yin shi*, 精微之饮食), sending the pure part of foods up to the lungs and the pure part of liquids up to the heart. The pure part of foods, called the *five flavors* (*wu wei*,

五味) becomes the basis for the creation of qi within the lungs. The pure part of liquids becomes the basis for the creation of blood within the heart. The sending up of the pure part of the foods and liquids by the spleen is called the *upbearing of the clear* (*sheng qing*, 升清) and is the Chinese medical spleen's main function.<sup>2</sup>

The stomach then sends down the impure or turbid part of foods to be further transformed by the large intestine, and the impure parts of liquids to be further transformed by the small intestine. In Chinese medicine, the large intestine's function is to reabsorb the pure part of the impure foods or solids. This becomes the postnatal or latter heaven fuel for kidney yang or the life-gate fire. The small intestine's function is to reabsorb the pure part of the impure parts of liquids. This is transformed into the body's thick liquids (*ye*, 液).

<sup>1</sup> In Chinese, the word for decompose is *fu* (腐) which literally means to rot or putrify. The word *shu* (熟) means to cook and also to ripen. Therefore, some English language texts on Chinese medicine talk about the stomach's "rottening and ripening." However, such a translation obscures the simile of the stomach being likened to a fermentation tun or vat.

<sup>2</sup> The Chinese medical concept of the organs is quite different in most cases from the biomedical concept of the same English name. Therefore, the Chinese medical spleen should not be seen as identical to the spleen we all learned about in high school biology. For a more complete discussion of these differences and their medical implications, see Ted Kaptchuk's *The Web That Has No Weaver*.

such as cerebrospinal and intra-articular fluids, and nourishes postnatal kidney yin. The large intestine conducts the impure of the impure solids down and out of the body as feces. The small intestine conducts the impure of the impure liquids to the bladder from whence they are excreted as urine. This sending down of the impure part of foods and liquids initiated by the stomach is called the *downbearing of the turbid* (*jiang zhuo*, 降浊).

So we can see that in Chinese medicine, digestion is spoken of as the separation of the clear and turbid. This separation is dependent upon the *qi hua* (气化) or qi-transformation of the middle burner or spleen-stomach and upon the spleen qi's ability to move or transport foods and fluids. Hence, Chinese spleen function is summed up in the two words *yun* (运, movement) and *hua* (化, transformation). Since movement implies dispersion, the concept of movement and transformation is simply an older, more traditional way of describing the digestive system's dispersion and transformation.

The analogy of the cooking pot introduced above is very important. It is said in Chinese that the stomach has an aversion to dryness (*wei e zao*, 胃恶燥). In other words, stomach function is dependent upon the creation of a mash or soup in its cauldron or pot. It is also said in Chinese that the spleen fears dampness (*pi e shi*, 脾恶湿). Since spleen function is likened to a fire under a pot distilling the essence from the mash held in the stomach, it is easy to understand that too much water or dampness can douse or damage this fire.

Using this analogy, it is both simple and crucial to understand that, according to Chinese medicine, the digestive process consists of first creating a 100° F soup in the stomach,<sup>3</sup> remembering that body temperature is 98.6° F. Whatever facilitates the creation of such a 100° soup in the stomach benefits digestion, and whatever impedes or impairs the creation of a 100° soup in the stomach impedes or impairs digestion. This is basically true even from a Western medical perspective. Most of the insights and principles of Chinese dietary theory and therapy are logical extensions of this commonsense and irrefutable truth.

## The Implications of This Process

### Cooked vs. uncooked foods

First of all, Chinese medical teachings suggest that most people, most of the time, should mostly eat cooked food. Cooking is predigestion on the outside of the body to

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<sup>3</sup> Or 38°C.



make food more easily digestible on the inside. By cooking foods in a pot on the outside of the body, one can initiate and facilitate the stomach's decomposition and cooking in its pot on the inside of the body. Chilled (*leng*, 冷) and uncooked (*sheng*, 生) foods require much more energy to transform them into warm soup within the pot of the stomach. Since it takes energy or qi to create this warmth and transformation, the net profit from this transformation is less. On the other hand, if one eats cooked foods at room temperature at least or warm at best, less spleen qi is spent in the process of digestion. This means that the net profit of digestion, i.e., qi or energy, is greater.

As you may have already thought, the idea that eating cooked food is more nutritious than uncooked food flies in the face of some current schools of Western nutritional belief. Because enzymes and vitamins are destroyed by cooking, some people think it is healthier to eat mostly raw, uncooked foods. This makes apparent sense only as long as one confuses gross income with net profit. When laboratory scientists measure the relative amounts of cooked and raw foods, they are not taking into account these nutrients' post-digestive absorption. However, here let's be clear that what we are talking about cooking is primarily grains, beans, and meats. In Chinese medicine, we think that vegetables should only be lightly cooked and fruits may be eaten uncooked if desired. More specifics about cooking will be discussed later.

*Let's say that a raw carrot has 100 units of a certain vitamin or nutrient and that a cooked carrot of the same size has only 80 units of that same nutrient. At first glance, it appears that eating the raw carrot is healthier since one would, theoretically, get more of that nutrient that way. However, no one absorbs 100% of any available nutrient in a given food. Because the vitamins and enzymes of a carrot are largely locked in hard-to-digest cellulose packets, when one eats this raw carrot, they may actually only absorb 50% of the available nutrient. The rest is excreted in the feces. But when one eats the cooked carrot, because the cooking has already begun the breakdown of the cellulose walls, one may absorb 65% of the available nutrient. In this case, even though the cooked carrot had less of this nutrient to begin with, net absorption is greater. The body's economy runs on net, not gross nutrient value. It is as simple as that. [Of course, we are talking about light cooking, and not reducing everything to an overcooked, lifeless mush.]*

This is why soups and stews are so nourishing. These are the foods we feed infants and those who are recuperating from illness. The more a food is like 100° soup, the easier it



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