

# Chinese Nutritional Therapy: A Simple Framework For Prescribing Dietary Recommendations

## Abstract

Chinese nutritional therapy is often underutilised by modern practitioners of Chinese medicine. In this article, Chinese nutritional therapy and biomedical nutritional therapy are briefly compared to highlight the effectiveness of a personalised dietary plan based on Chinese medicine theory versus a dietary plan based solely on a biomedical diagnosis or the latest dietary trend. A simple framework is then presented to illustrate the ease with which a practitioner may prescribe dietary recommendations based on the patient's Chinese medicine differential pattern diagnosis and seasonal considerations.

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calendar

'People who practice medicine must first thoroughly understand the source of the disorder and know what has been violated. Then, use food to treat it, and if food will not cure it, afterwards apply drugs.'

Sun Simiao, *Essential Prescriptions for Every Emergency Worth a Thousand in Gold* (Bei Ji Qian Jin Yao Fang, 備急千金要方 - see Wilms, 2010)

Due perhaps to a lack of confidence on the part of practitioners, in the author's experience prescribing nutritional therapy based on Chinese medical principles is greatly underutilised. This is unfortunate because Chinese dietary therapy - relative to modern nutrition therapy (particularly those therapies driven by the latest research or diet book) - has enormous potential and has been successfully alleviating and preventing disease for millennia.<sup>1</sup> This article has been written to encourage practitioners of acupuncture and Chinese medicine to make use of Chinese dietary therapy. After the relatively challenging task of forming a Chinese medical differential diagnosis, prescribing nutritional guidance is relatively easy because it is mainly determined from the diagnosis and the added therapeutic results are considerable.

## What is a healthy diet?

When considering the role of nutrition in health and illness, we should initially broaden our perspective as wide as possible and ask, 'What is a healthy diet?'. Food scientists and nutritionists have many answers to this question. A decade ago their answer would likely have been a diet low in fat.<sup>2</sup> Currently, many nutritionists are gravitating towards recommending

a diet low in carbohydrates (Atkins, paleolithic, ketogenic etc.).<sup>3</sup> In the next several years we are likely to witness a low protein diet craze, simply because that is the only remaining macronutrient that has not yet experienced a popular diet fad. The discipline of modern nutrition is so new that it has not established roots and instead often tends to swing wildly following the latest research.<sup>4</sup>

*The discipline of modern nutrition is so new that it has not established roots and instead often tends to swing wildly following the latest research.*

Even relatively effective Western dietary strategies<sup>5</sup> that target specific diseases, like the low glycaemic index diet plan for managing type 2 diabetes<sup>6</sup> or the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) plan for lowering blood pressure<sup>7</sup> do not take into account individual characteristics. These guidelines are recommended for everyone that fits into the disease category and do not allow for modification based on the individual's overall health, age, gender, activity level or season to make them more effective.

So what is a healthy diet? From the perspective of Chinese dietary therapy there is no simple answer to this important question. Or rather the answer lies in two counter-questions: 'A healthy diet for who?' and 'A healthy diet when?'. Indeed, these same counter-questions should be asked across all other branches of Chinese medicine as well: Is this a good herb? For

| Name                                                                                           | Comments                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bussell, J. (2009). <i>The Asian Diet</i> . Findhorn Press: Forres                             | <i>The Asian Diet</i> is the book I most often recommend to patients. It includes all the standard Chinese nutrition recommendations (such as 'Cooked food is better than raw', 'Eating brown rice is like eating a walnut with the shell still on it' etc.) presented along with basic Chinese nutritional theory and food qualities, all aimed at a Western audience. This is an ideal resource to give to patients who want more than just a list of foods to eat or avoid and want to understand some of the theory that informs the recommendations.                                                                                                                        |
| Daly, T. (2014). <i>Chinese Nutritional Strategies</i> [App]. Apple and Android platforms      | This 'App' was developed by the author to enable the practitioner to quickly and easily turn a diagnosis into a list of dietary recommendations. In order to accomplish this the App contains a comprehensive database of foods according to their temperature, flavour, actions and indications etc.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Flaws, B. (2008). <i>The Tao of Healthy Eating</i> . 2nd Edition Blue Poppy Press: Boulder, CO | <i>The Tao of Healthy Eating</i> includes Chinese nutritional theory, a historical overview of food therapy, a list of food qualities and - unique to this book - a preliminary list of the qualities of vitamin and mineral supplements. For example the entry for Vitamin D reads as follows: 'Supplements the kidneys and invigorates yang, strengthens the sinews and bones, brightens the eyes and calms the fetus'.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Jilin, L. (1995). <i>Chinese Dietary Therapy</i> . Churchill Livingstone: New York             | <i>Chinese Dietary Therapy</i> contains the most particularly Chinese food selection (such as pork spine, turtle, shark's fin and lotus root). It is also the most meticulously referenced book, with each entry clearly denoting from which text the food qualities are derived.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Kastner, J. (2009). <i>Chinese Nutrition Therapy</i> . Thieme: Stuttgart and New York          | <i>Chinese Nutrition Therapy</i> is perhaps the best overall text to use in the clinic. It contains a section on nutritional theory, food qualities, and food recommendations based on clinical indication and pattern differentiation. For example, if a patient presents with a chronic dry cough and the pattern diagnosis is Lung yin deficiency with dryness, this book not only presents specific food recommendations (duck, pork, pears, aniseed, honey, watercress, butter, cream, almond butter, pine nuts, sesame, walnuts with honey, peanuts, tofu, soy milk and chicken eggs) but also food preparation methods (boiled, steamed or baked) to address the pattern. |
| Lu, H. (1999). <i>Chinese Natural Cures</i> . Black Dog & Leventhal: New York                  | The unique strength of <i>Chinese Natural Cures</i> is its helpful table of foods scored on a yin-yang continuum from +8 (extreme yang) to -8 (extreme yin) and is the only book I know of that presents foods in such a clear gradation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

Table 1: Recommended resources for dietary guidelines

Who? When? Is this a good acupuncture point? For Who? When? Is this a good Qi Gong routine? For Who? When?

## A healthy diet for 'Who'?

'If [a physician] is brilliant in his considerations and perfect in his skills, he will adapt his [treatment] to the [individual] circumstances [of each illness]. And, since the circumstance of an illness may vary one thousand fold, he will establish ten thousand different [therapeutic] patterns.'

Xu Dachun, *On the Origins and Development of Medicine* (Yixue Yuanliu Lun, 醫學源流論學, see Scheid, 2014)

The 'Who' of this question is characterised by a patient's salient signs and symptoms distilled into a pattern identification. Since the practitioner of Chinese medicine will generally formulate a pattern to perform other therapeutic modalities, this step simply involves matching the person's patterns with foods that are recommended and foods that should be avoided. There are two main factors in implementing this step. The first and most crucial factor is to determine the willingness of the patient to follow dietary recommendations. The

second is to determine from which resources the dietary recommendations will be drawn.

Highly motivated patients may request - or at least be open to - a full set of dietary recommendations. The motivation to change their diet often comes from a serious diagnosis like cancer or by a strong aspiration, such as the desire to overcome infertility. There are several good quality and reliable resources that can be used to look up recommendations in such cases (see Table 1). However, practitioners should be aware that patients who request dietary recommendations for less urgent disorders, such as weight loss, can often appear extremely motivated but in the author's experience often fail to follow-through on recommendations. Henry McCann, DAOM addresses this in the forward to the five element-based emotional healing book *Twelve Characters: A Transmission of Wang Fengyi's Teachings*. According to Dr. McCann, this lack of motivation is often due to a disharmony within the Heart:

'Changing a diet can be a profound thing, and it is at the same time one of the easiest and the hardest of things to change. In theory, it is easy to drastically alter one's health by simply eating differently. All you have to do

is put something different in the mouth and diet change is done. However, diet change is one of the hardest to accomplish because people have emotional attachment to eating certain things, or emotional patterns of eating. Thus, while the diet itself is easy to change, the person's Heart is not.' (in Foreword to Wilms, 2014)

To address Heart disharmony, consider employing other Chinese medical modalities, especially meditation techniques, before providing or resuming dietary advice. The case of a long-standing patient with a diagnosis of stage III melanoma two years ago illustrates this well. Ever since the melanoma diagnosis, the patient had been eager to discuss dietary recommendations but was unable to consistently implement them. He would change his diet for a few days at most and then slip back into his same unhealthy habits. However, after a meditation retreat that I had encouraged him to attend, he reported that something in him 'just clicked', and he felt ready to follow the dietary advice diligently. So far he has been diligent, and it has been more than three weeks of faithful adherence to his dietary recommendations.

Many patients may not wish to receive a complete dietary plan but may ask your opinion on single foods. These inquiries are straightforward to field and the resources suggested above can be used as a quick reference to answer such questions. Even if a patient does not ask specifically about diet, it can be useful to initiate a discussion about the Chinese medicine approach to nutrition by briefly explaining the patient's diagnosis and how that diagnosis determines which foods are appropriate and inappropriate. The patient can then be asked to consider adding or removing a single key food or beverage in light of their diagnosis. For example, the author recently used this strategy for a patient who was experiencing insomnia stemming from yin and blood deficiency. She was a self-professed coffee addict who routinely consumed up to seven strong cups of coffee daily, and was keenly aware that caffeine was contributing to her insomnia. By taking the time to briefly explain her diagnosis of yin and blood deficiency and how the drying nature of coffee was not only contributing to her insomnia (Heart yin deficiency) but also affecting her digestive system (Stomach yin deficiency), the dryness of her skin (Lung yin deficiency) and the brittleness of her hair (Liver blood deficiency), this afforded her a more complete understanding of the systemic effects of her addiction. This in turn motivated her to make the change that her previous simplistic narrative of 'caffeine = bad' had not facilitated. Her insomnia is now negligible, and she has had less coffee in the last six months than she used to have in a single day.

## A healthy diet 'When'?

'He who does not know what a year contributes to man's state of health, how the qi abound and weaken, and why repletion or depletion emerge, he cannot serve as a practitioner.'

*Huangdi Neijing Suwen*, Chapter 9 (in Unschuld et al., 2011)

Applying temporal considerations to dietary advice can be as simple as recommending seasonally grown local foods and as sophisticated as consulting the traditional Chinese calendars (see below). Temporal considerations can be divided into three broad categories: seasonal, astrological and climatic. Examples of how each category can influence the selection of food recommendations are discussed below.

Chinese civilisation has been fascinated with the movement of time since at least the development of the water clock in the 6th century BCE (Needham, 2000) and it has employed a dizzying variety of calendars is testament to this deep fascination. The calendars based on the systems of the Ten Heavenly Stems (十天干, Shi Tian Gan) and Twelve Earthly Branches (十二地支, Shi Er Di Zhi) are the most straightforward systems to apply to dietary recommendations. For example, 2015 was a yi wei (乙未, yin wood goat) year and the overall quality of the year was therefore influenced by deficient dryness.<sup>8</sup> To counteract this influence, a practitioner might include more moistening and yin supplementing foods (dairy products, most fruit, pork etc.) than usual in their recommendations, especially if these types of food are supported by the patient's pattern dynamic.

The Four Seasons, Five seasons, 24 Solar Terms (節氣, Jie Qi) and 72 Pentads (候, Hou) are the ways the ancient Chinese divided a year based on solar and lunar cycles. Dr. Heiner Fruehauf and his research team have looked into some of the associations of the ancient calendars with dietary recommendations. One focus of their research correlates the yearly lunar cycles with the twelve organ cycles. Based on this research, they have been able to match recommendations for medicinal vegetables that correspond to the lunar months. For example, the research team recommends consuming shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*),<sup>9</sup> snake gourd and snake gourd root (*Trichosanthes cucumeroides*) in the fourth lunar month of every year.<sup>10</sup> Another Chinese astrological system, the Eight Characters (八字, Ba Zi) system, has been applied to dietary recommendations by Master Hyunoong Sunim, Abbot of the Sixth Patriarch Zen Center in Berkeley, California. I have personally reviewed the dietary lists of several patients of Master Hyunoong Sunim and have been amazed at how similar his recommendations (based solely on birth date) were to my own (based on differential pattern diagnosis).

| Seek Out      | 'Who'                                                     | 'When'                                                                                                                            |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sardines      | Augments yin, fortifies the yang, indicated for impotence | Augmenting yin is recommended in a yin wood goat year (2015).                                                                     |
| Pumpkin seeds | Moisten dryness, indicated for impotence                  | In season at the time of consultation; moistening is recommended in a yin wood goat year and to counteract the dryness of Autumn. |
| Chestnut      | Benefits the kidneys, indicated for impotence             | In season at the time of consultation and available for wild harvesting.                                                          |
| Venison       | Augments Kidney yang, indicated for impotence             | In season at the time of consultation and available.                                                                              |

Table 2: Example of patient recommendations

Finally, we turn our attention to the climate, which simply means paying close attention to the current weather and tailoring dietary recommendations to it in real time. According to the author's experience, the climate is often more clinically significant than calendrical and astrological considerations. The author practises just north of San Francisco and the summer mornings are often damp and cold, despite the season being associated with fire.<sup>11</sup> To counteract the foggy mornings I often recommend including drying and warm-natured foods like cinnamon, cloves, ginger, onion, millet and Job's tears barley for breakfast, even in the summer.

### A healthy diet for 'Who' and 'When'?

A recent case from the author's clinic illustrates several of these concepts and how to apply them. In this case, the 'When' was late Autumn 2015 and the 'Who' was a 67-year-old male who presented at my office with the allopathic diagnoses of high blood pressure, pre-diabetes and erectile dysfunction. The most concerning symptom for the patient was the erectile dysfunction, which was a major factor in the increasing estrangement from his wife, who was 20 years younger than him. He was the owner of a successful winery that he had built over the previous 40 years. In order to maintain the high quality of his wines he would arrive at work before 4:30 AM for five to six long working days a week so that he could personally oversee the dozen or so tasks that the winery was engaged in at any given season. These long work hours (draining the reserves from his Kidneys) and associated poor eating habits (overtaxing his Spleen and Stomach) over several decades had taken a heavy toll on his health. He was highly motivated to recover his health and, in addition to acupuncture, herbal medicine and qi gong, he readily agreed to follow a full set of dietary recommendations, which targeted his Chinese pattern dynamic of Spleen and Stomach qi deficiency accompanied by Kidney yin and yang deficiency.

When I provide a full set of dietary recommendations, I make it valid for the current season at the time of the consultation (usually based on a five-season model). Approximately 300 common foods are divided into one of three categories labeled 'Seek Out', 'Moderation' or

'Avoid'. I advise the patient to consume as many different foods as possible from the Seek Out category, consume foods from the Moderation category no more than once a week, and avoid everything in the Avoid category completely. In Table 2 are a few of the foods from the patient's Seek Out list that specifically addressed the erectile dysfunction, along with the rationale for their selection (based on Kastner, 2009; Jilin, 1995; Daly, 2014; Brown et al., 2015):

Patients who are given a full set of dietary recommendations will likely have many questions regarding the selection of foods provided. Fortunately, there are a few good Chinese nutrition books that are geared toward the layperson that answer many common questions (e.g. Flaws, 2008 and Bussell, 2009). These books also include abbreviated food quality lists that are helpful in explaining the reason foods may be included or excluded from dietary recommendations. These books are especially helpful provided that a discussion of the patient's pattern dynamic has taken place. Of course, some patients may wish to go beyond a simple list of foods to seek out or avoid, and there are several cookbooks geared towards Chinese medical theory that fulfill this need (Leggett, 2014; Simonds, 2011; Wang, 2010). Delicious recipes are a great way to ensure patient compliance.

### Conclusion

Considering the 'Who' and the 'When' when providing Chinese dietary therapy yields a highly personalised, temporally appropriate and clinically effective list of dietary recommendations. The practitioner should have confidence in the recommendations because they are derived from classical sources that have withstood the test of time. This is in stark contrast with making recommendations based on the latest health headlines that invariably change at some point after they are announced. Practitioners of Chinese medicine are in a unique position to provide appropriate and effective dietary advice for modern patients.

Practitioners are recommended to prescribe dietary guidelines to patients on a consistent basis. They should bear in mind that, once the diagnosis is complete, only a small effort is necessary to match diagnostic and temporal considerations to a list of foods, but this can make an

enormous impact on the patient's health. The author offers dietary recommendations to nearly all his patients and it has become clear that those who follow them invariably recover faster and more completely than those who do not. From the author's experience, utilizing or neglecting nutritional therapy can be the difference between clinical success and failure.

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### Endnotes

- The use of dietary therapy for preventing and alleviating disease has been addressed in most of the classic texts of Chinese medicine: *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen* (Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic, Basic Questions - Chapters 3, 22, 23, 40, 46, 60, 63 and 71) and *Ling Shu* (Divine Pivot - Chapters 18, 30, 63 and 71), *Nan Jing* (Classic of Difficulties - Chapter 49), *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (Divine Farmer's Classic of Materia Medica), *Bei Ji Qian Jin Yao Fang* (Prescriptions Worth a Thousand in Gold for Every Emergency), *Pi Wei Lun* (Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach) and *Ben Cao Gang Mu* (Compendium of Materia Medica).
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- 'Years of Yin Wood (乙) are ruled by the 2nd tone, which invokes images from the cosmos of the color white, dryness and Metal. This is explained in *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen* 67, where we see that during these particular years there is a white color emanating towards the eastern constellations associated with Yin Wood. This manifestation of the minor tone of Metal and dryness also indicates a delayed arrival of seasonal changes, inviting the domination of Fire to arise.' Brown, B. & Givens, M. (2015). *Classical Chinese Almanac with Ephemeris for 2015-2016* Shenming Press: Portland
- Shepherd's purse is widely distributed and available for wild harvesting in Great Britain, North America, China, the Mediterranean and North Africa ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capsella\\_bursapastoris](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capsella_bursapastoris)).
- All three of these medicinal vegetables are available as concentrated powders: see Fruehauf, H. (2011). "Classical Pearls Herbal Formulas Clinical Users Manual" p. 88.
- 'The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco' - Unknown source but often attributed to Mark Twain.