



China's Diet and Health Maintenance

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IF you turn on the TV at 5 p.m. in China, you will find a multitude of programs about diet and health maintenance, and such programs are becoming increasingly popular.

The high audience rating of these shows in China is far above what is expected in France for the same type of program, despite its own culinary global influence. Among the best-known Chinese food programs, which are well received by all ages of the population, are Hubei Satellite TV's *Gourmet*, CCTV International's *Traditional Chinese Medicine* (usually ranked first among health programs), Hunan Satellite TV's *Encyclopedia* (presented sometimes by foreigners, and often occupies second place in national audience ratings), as well as BTV's *Yangshengtang* (health maintenance lecture).

Many of these programs are sponsored by brands of medicines or tonic foods, a mark of their great influence.

In addition to television programs, there are in China a large number of books and websites about health maintenance and eating well as a preventative therapy against diseases. Discovering the secrets to healthy living through these media is very popular with Chinese people; *Gourmet*'s official microblog has more than 110,000 followers, for example. In a manner of speaking, making the right food and lifestyle choices are inseparable in China.

“What Is It Good for?”

Chinese health-food programs present a new topic every day, for example rules for healthy eating or how to prevent seasonal diseases. The shows' guests are often veteran doctors of traditional Chinese medicine or health experts, who introduce what food is good for what type of symptoms, for what time of year and even whether food for men and women need to be differentiated in a particular case. Of course, the aim is to inform which foods can help you improve your health.

When Chinese people try something new for the first time, many may ask, “what is this good for?” rather than, “what does it taste like?” This is totally different from dietary habits in the West. Some foods that are “good for one's health” in China are considered unusual by some Westerners – the thought of eating sea cucumber, silkworm chrysalis,

locust, loach, soft-shelled turtle or scorpion, for example, is hard to swallow for Western palates.

Moreover, Chinese people tend to focus on the balance between meat and vegetables. If one is sick, Chinese people pay even more attention to what they eat and drink. Therefore, programs introducing “food as medicine” are well received in China. For example, if you catch a cold, have a sore throat or come down with a fever, Chinese people will tell you that you are suffering from “excessive internal heat” (comparable to inflammation in Western medicine) and your Chinese friends or doctors will advise you which foods can help you recover fast without having to take too much medicine.

Under these circumstances, eating is not to have one's fill, but rather to prevent or cure diseases.

To avoid exacerbating a cough or throat irritation, doctors will advise you against eating foods that are spicy, salty and greasy. Similarly, they will instruct you not to eat mutton, beef or seafood because it is believed these foods cause excessive internal heat. So, in these cases, Chinese people prefer to eat green vegetables or fruit with a high water content to help reduce fever and soothe irritation.

Chinese people divide fruit and vegetables into three kinds: “cold,” “warm” and “mild.” Pears and melons, for instance, are considered cold fruit and are best eaten in the summer or to decrease internal heat in the conditions described above. Mandarins, lychees and longans are considered hot fruit and are best eaten during the winter unless you are suffering from excessive internal heat.

To combat fatigue, the Chinese will choose high-energy foods such as cereals, beef, potatoes and spicy food. Some people avoid eating meat in the evening, as it is not good for the digestive system and is thought to accelerate aging. Another guideline is to eat soup before meals to line the stomach and thereby protect it from the acidity of certain foods.

Extraordinary Therapeutic Effects

Some foods that may sound inedible to Western ears have a very important, almost sacred, place in Chinese diets. For example, lotus root helps soothe inflammation and clean the lungs, its starch, therefore, is a popular tonic food for senior citizens. Black fungus and lily bulb served with rice porridge have the same function. Moreover, rice is good for digestion and stomach problems and grains are seen as a great source of energy.

To go on, bamboo shoot and chili are also used to



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aid digestion and can help clear away toxins; ginger, ginseng, medlar and garlic strengthen the immune system and fight colds and other respiratory infections; peanuts are eaten to maintain a healthy stomach and prevent heartburn; and nuts and pig brains are good for the brain.

In China there are all kinds of herbal teas with various functions, like chamomile tea to calm the nerves, rose tea for maintaining beauty and youth, and honeysuckle tea that

aids digestion and soothes inflammation.

Alcohol is also seen as a kind of medicine in China and it is often said that regular drinking in moderation is good for the health. Especially in winter, alcohol can warm the body. There are all kinds of medicinal liquors often made from a combination of alcohol and traditional Chinese medicinal ingredients such as ginseng, Chinese caterpillar fungus, or even snakes and crickets.

Popular Tonics

It is also possible to buy all kinds of tonics in China. Different from most supplements and vitamins that are sold in Western countries, Chinese tonics are natural in that they are made from plants, animals, or minerals. For example, donkey-hide gelatin can be mixed with sesame seeds, red dates, walnuts and yellow rice wine to make “Guyuangao,” or vim-preserving paste, a popular tonic for women during winter. According to historical records, Empress Dowager Cixi of the Qing Dynasty was a fan of this tonic during her later years because it was believed to enrich the blood and maintain beauty.

Tonics can be divided into several categories according to their functions. Some are especially for the elderly, and some only for women. Some of them carry a high price tag, such as ginseng, sea cucumbers, and edible bird's nest, and others are more affordable. Restaurants specializing in nutritious soups and tonic foods are increasingly popular among China's expanding middle class. It is also the latest trend to give tonic foods as holiday gifts to families and friends.

The sources of knowledge on tonic foods are varied and extensive. Some experts base their views using the philosophy of the five elements, others by the seasons and the common symptoms during seasonal changes, and still others on gender and age. Our knowledge about diet and health maintenance is ever deepening, seeming sometimes like an information overload. But despite the extent of ideas, one attitude overrides: Chinese health food culture is definitively “eat to live.”

