Traditional Chinese Medical Nutrition and Western Nutrition

Keywords: Traditional chinese medical nutrition; Western nutrition; Yin-yang; Five-elements; Epidemiological; Proteins; Carbohydrates; Fats; Vitamins; Minerals; Dietary Recommendations; Rye; Buckwheat; Quinoa

Introduction

Although both Western and Chinese nutrition share the similar belief that proper nutrition is essential for achieving optimal health, their view about nutrition is different. Western nutritionists study food compositions – proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, and minerals and make dietary recommendations based on scientific experiments and epidemiological studies. Such as My Plate icon from the new United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the key nutritional messages of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans are “balance, variety, moderation and adequacy.” In addition, the progress of Western nutrition towards personalized diets based on one’s genetic components.

While in the language of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), food is considered as both nutrients and medicine for the purpose of achieving balance and harmony within the body. The expression of Yin-Yang and Five-Elements characterize both the person and the food. Yin-Yang allows for the description between two extremes – hot and cold, the Five-Elements give the further illustration by providing shape, character, and hue. Furthermore, foods are selected to correspond to an individual’s pattern and modified based on other important factors including lifestyle, environment, climate, and season. Together, these properties determine which foods are the most beneficial for each individual.

Yin-Yang Theory in Traditional Chinese Medical (TCM) Nutrition

The theory of yin and yang is the most fundamental concept of traditional Chinese medicine. One of the major beliefs of TCM is that everything in the universe is either yin or yang, they combine in a complementary manner. Usually, yang is associated with functional aspect of an object and has more energetic qualities such as hot, ascending, bright. Yin, on the other hand, is associated with an object that has less energetic qualities such as cold, descending, dark. However, nothing is totally yin or totally yang, but a balance between the two forces.

The yin-yang symbol consists of a circle, divided by a curved line into a black (yin) and white (yang) side. The curve symbolizes the constant change of balance between yin and yang. Each side contains a small circle of the opposite color. This demonstrates the belief that nothing is never really all yin or all yang. The symbol is as Figure 1.

Viewing the body as a whole, all the portions and organs can be generalized and explained by the yin-yang relationship. And the sum total of yin and yang will be in balance. The following are the examples of yin-yang pairs in the body [1] (Table 1):

Table 1: Examples of yin-yang pairs in the body.

| Yin          | Yang     |
|--------------|----------|
| Interior     | Exterior |
| Front        | Back     |
| Body         | Head     |
| Below the waist | Above the waist |
| Blood and body fluids | Energy (Qi) |
| Liver        | Gallbladder |
| Heart        | Small Intestine |
| Spleen       | Stomach  |
| Lung         | Large Intestine |
| Kidney       | Bladder  |

“Hot and cold” are two terms in which characterizing the properties of food with yin-yang theory. Note that these terms do not literally signify the physical temperature. Instead, they denote the effects of the food on body functions: hot foods promote the generation of heat within the body while cold foods stimulate the release of heat from the body.

a. Examples of hot foods: Rye, buckwheat, quinoa, millet, oat, celery, alfalfa, turnips, radish, bean sprout, cabbage, red bean, kelp, seaweed, bamboo shoot, asparagus, garlic, beet, eggplant.

b. Examples of cold foods: Watermelon, cantaloupe, walnut, sesame, figs, peas, grapes, pineapple, pomegranate, black bean, seafood, mint, chrysanthemum tea, chamomile tea, barley, cucumber, bitter melon, aloe, oyster, clam, basil.

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Two Languages of in Western and TCM Nutrition: Obesity

In the Western nutrition, obesity is considered as excess fat within the body and tissues. There could be many reasons, which may include genetics, diet habit and environment. The main goal for western treatment for obesity is eating fewer calories and having physical exercise. In extreme cases there could be surgery and also weight loss medications [2,3].

In the TCM area, obesity was first mentioned in Chinese medicine in the Yellow Emperor’s Internal Classic of Medicine. The main factors that cause obesity in Chinese medicine are phlegm and dampness. The spleen is responsible for transportation and transformation. When there is a dysfunction of the spleen, there will be an accumulation of dampness and phlegm causing weight gain. There are two different treatments for obesity in TCM. One is herbal treatment. The plan will be based upon each individual’s constitution and differentiation of syndromes. The main focus is to transform dampness and phlegm, and facilitate the free flow of qi (energy) and blood in the body. Another treatment is acupuncture, which is a way to unblock qi (energy) and help it flow back into balance by putting very thin needles into your skin at anatomical points. The principal for weight control is that acupuncture not only promotes the flow of (qi) energy but also regulate hormones levels such as insulin, leptin, ghrelin and Cholecystokinin (CCK) [4].

Conclusion

While the Western nutrition is scientifically based, traditional Chinese medical nutrition has evolved over thousands of years upon the basis of empirical evidence. Nevertheless, neither system is perfect but instead both have much to learn from the other, blending together to make nutrition global. Allowing all the individuals find their favorite ways to achieve optimal health.

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