

Review

Introducing Chinese food therapy: A review of origin, developing course and modern application

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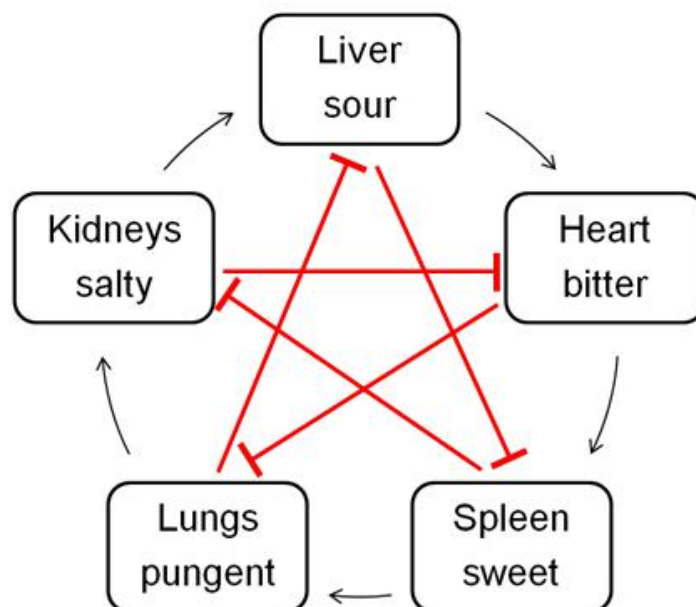
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Highlights

This review introduced the origin, developing course and modern application of Chinese food therapy in traditional Chinese medicine to enrich our understanding of relevant concepts and ways.

Editor's Summary

Chinese food therapy, an important part of traditional Chinese medicine. The origins of Chinese food therapy can be traced back to the "Sanhuanwudi" period. It is essential to know Chinese food therapy plays a more important role in clinics and family health care.



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This review introduced the origin, developing course and modern application of Chinese food therapy (CFT) in traditional Chinese medicine to enrich our understanding of relevant concepts and ways. **Methods:** PubMed, EMBASE, CBM, CNKI, VIP and Wanfang Databases were searched for papers on a range of terms relating to CFT. 41 references were finally selected for this review. **Results:** The development of CFT is comprised of five important periods in Chinese history. They are as following: the infancy period represented by the idea of homogeneity of medicine and food; theoretical development period represented by *Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor*, *Shennong's Classic of Materia Medica and Treatise on Febrile and Miscellaneous Diseases*; specialized volumes on CFT represented by *Dietotherapy Worth a Thousand Gold*; representative monographs on CFT represented by *Dietetic Materia Medica and Principles of Correct Diet* and the perfect period represented by integration of ancient food therapy practice and modern nutriology. **Conclusion:** CFT harbors a long and profound history, making great contribution to people's health maintenance and illness prevention. With the further development of integrative medicine, CFT may play a more important role in clinics and family health care based on integration of syndrome differentiation and disease differentiation.

Key words: Chinese food therapy, Developing history, Traditional Chinese medicine, Homogeneity of medicine and food

摘要

目的: 本文回顾了中医食疗的起源、发展历程和现代应用, 以增进我们对中医食疗中相关概念和方法的理解。

方法: 在 PubMed、EMBASE、中国生物医学威县数据库 (CBM)、中国知网 (CNKI)、维普及万方数据库中检索与中医食疗相关的论文。

结果: 本研究最终纳入 41 篇合格研究, 结果显示: 中医食疗的发展经历了五个重要时期, 分别是以“药食同源”的理念为代表的萌芽时期; 以《黄帝内经》、《神农本草经》、《伤寒杂病论》为代表的理论发展时期; 以《食疗本草》、《膳食正要》为代表的食疗专著期; 以辨证施食理论和现代营养知识有机融合的完美时期。

结论: 中国食疗历史悠久, 内涵丰富, 在维持健康、预防健康等方面做出了巨大贡献。随着中西医结合护理学的进一步发展, 基于辨病、辨证护理的有机结合, 中医食疗将在临床护理和家庭保健中发挥更重要的作用。

关键词: 中国食疗; 发展史; 中药; 药食同源

Abbreviations: TCM, Traditional Chinese medicine; CFT, Chinese food therapy.

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1. Introduction

Chinese food therapy, an important part of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), can be traced back to 3000 years ago [1]. Under the guidance of the basic theory of TCM, food can be used to maintain health, treat diseases and prolong life [2]. TCM holds that Qi, blood, essence, fluid and humor derived from food are the basic elements of human body and life-sustaining activities [3]. In ancient times, there was little difference between the application of foods and that of medicine. Recipes for foods were often similar to those for medicines [4].

A quote [5] by a great physician Bian Que describes the role of doctor: “Firstly, physicians should have an insight into the cause of the disease and determine which disharmony it prevails. The first and foremost measure is appropriate diet. One should never use medicine before the diet works.” Therefore, foods are mild therapeutic agents that help the body stay balanced, or bring it back into balance.

The theories, principles, approaches, and concepts of Chinese food therapy (CFT) scattered in voluminous ancient books and modern literature [6]. It is of great importance to fully understand the complete developing course of CFT. Only in this way can the practitioners have a comprehensive and systematic perception. So far, there is no review published on this topic, consequently, intensive and extensive literature mining is urgently needed to broaden the knowledge and systemize the developing course of CFT. The origin, development and present situation of CFT is shown in this review.

2. Data sources

This paper is based on a literature search using major relevant journals and databases to find out what have already been written in English and Chinese. Six major electronic databases were retrieved for articles published to April 2016, including PubMed, EMBASE, CBM, CNKI, VIP and Wanfang Data. Only articles in English and Chinese language were eligible. The following search terms were used: “Chinese food therapy”, “herbal cuisine”, “dietotherapy” “dietary nursing”, “homogeneity of medicine and food”, “*Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor*”, “*Shennong’s Classic of Materia Medica*”, “*Treatise on Febrile and Miscellaneous Diseases*”, “*Dietotherapy Worth a Thousand Gold*”. Conference proceedings and dissertations were also searched from CNKI and Wanfang databases. 153 articles and 5 books were initially identified. 78 articles were excluded after reviewing the abstracts. All the rest of articles and relevant chapters of the selected books were read in detail. 39 articles were eliminated because they are irrelevant to the topic. Finally, 41 articles were chosen.

3. Results

3.1 The infancy period represented by the idea of homogeneity of medicine and food

There is a common saying that medicine and food share

the same source since ancient times [7]. According to the record in *HuaiNanZi*, Shennong whose name literally means “divine farmer” tasted hundreds of herbs to search more edible herbs and was poisoned 70 times in a day while tasting various kinds of plants. During this process, the scope of food was expanded in a large part to meet the needs of more and more people and ShenNong finally discovered medicinal plants unexpectedly. At that time, there was little difference between the application of foods and that of medicine [8].

People began to eat cooked food instead of raw food since the discovery and usage of fire. Therefore, their brains acquired unprecedented development along with the striking improvement of nutritional condition and cooking techniques [9]. It is said that Peng Zu made five-flavor chicken soup to treat Emperor Yao’s severe anorexia successfully [10]. The brewing technique was invented in the era of Yu and then drinking wine became more and more prevalent. Ancient Chinese people deemed that wine with the effect of dredging blood vessels, was the cream of five cereals and occupied a prime position among medicines [11]. We can deduce that fish and Chinese-date were used to treat illness in Shang Dynasty from Oracle bone inscriptions and other unearthed relic [12].

In Zhou Dynasty, people began to attach great importance to diet rather than alcoholic drinks to avoid subjugation. Therefore, it had promoted the development of food therapy significantly [13]. *Zhoulitianguan* recorded the earliest nutritionists (Shi Yi) who were in charge of the emperor’s daily diet to prevent disease and preserve health. The nutritionists matched different kinds of food according to their nature and reconciled the tastes based on the replacement of seasons. Therefore, its rank was much higher than the physician (Ji Yi), the surgeon (Yang Yi) and the veterinarian (Shou Yi). Furthermore, physician and surgeon also thought highly of food therapy and it played a role of complementary treatment [14].

During pre-Qin period, contents on food therapy were found in non-medical books like *Zhuang Zi*, *Mo Zi*, *Guan Zi*, *Han FeiZi* and *LyShiChunQiu* [15]. The philosophical theories of *hundred Schools of Thought* advocated eating in a temperate manner and light diet instead of high-protein and high-fat diet. The idea of valuing life nurturing pushed the development of food therapy to a large extent [16-17]. *Prescriptions of Fifty-two Diseases*, the oldest prescription book ever found in China, recorded 61 kinds of food which was approximately a quarter of the total medicines. Most of them were commonly used in our daily life, such as milk, honey, salt and lard. Half of the fifty-two diseases could be treated or supported by food therapy [18].

3.2 Theoretical development period represented by a serial of masterpieces

(1) *The theoretical foundation of CFT represented by Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor (Huangdineijing)*. *Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor*, the first systematic Chinese medical book, was compiled from the clinical experience



and epidemiological observations of imperial physician during the Qin and Han periods (221 B.C.-220 A.D.) and regarded as the agglomeration of Chinese life science [19]. Although there were no chapters to discuss food therapy, the related content scattered in each chapter was comprehensive and systematic. It issued improper eating habits like over-eating and monophagia could lead to diseases. And it also emphasized that the five tastes (Table 1) of food should correspond to the function of five internal organs and thus maintained the harmony of five tastes (Figure 1). For instance, it pointed out that people with liver diseases should avoid pungent food, people suffered from heart diseases should avoid salty food, spleen diseases sufferers should avoid sour food and people who have kidney diseases should avoid bitter food [20].

Besides, foods were divided into five cereals, five vegetables, five fruits and five domestic animals. The idea of balanced diet and varied food is in accordance with that of modern nutriology. As it is said in the Chinese food guide pyramid, cereals, vegetables, fruits and domestic animals provide us carbohydrate, vitamins, minerals, dietary fiber, high-quality proteins, fat and water which are the most important nutrients for human beings [21]. In addition, the theory of meridian tropism also originated from this book and six out of the total 13 medicinal diet formulas were recorded [22]. Based on above-mentioned statements, *Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor* constitutes the basic theory of Chinese food therapy [20].

(2) *The Theory of Herbal Property Represented by*

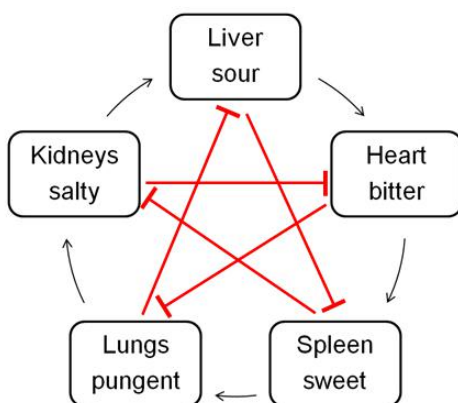


Figure 1: Organ-taste pattern in understanding the correlation between five organs and five tastes in *Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor*.

Table 1: Five tastes, their related function and representative foods in TCM

Five tastes	Function	Food
Pungency	Promote the flow of qi and blood Disperse wind; induce resuscitation	Ginger; black agaric
Bitterness	Promote defecation; clear heat; eliminate dampness	Lilium brownli; balsam pear
Sweetness	Tonify deficiency; relax tension; alleviate pain; harmonize the middle	Red dates; sticky rice
Sourness	Astringent; Promote the secretion of body fluid	Dark plum; orange
Saltiness	Soften hardness and dissipate binds; purgation	Laminaria japonica; sea cucumber

Shennong’s Classic of Materia Medica. *Shennong’s Classic of Materia Medica (Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing)*, the earliest monograph on herbs, classified 365 kinds of medicinal plants into superior, medium and low grades. At that time, edible herbs were not separated from medicinal herbs. People began to realize the importance of the medicinal effect of food. Among those, a seventh of them belongs to food and 36 kinds are listed as both medicine and food issued by National health and family planning commission [23]. For instance, *coix seed, chrysanthemum, rhizoma dioscoreae, poria cocos, ginger* and so on. Influenced by losing weight, resisting hunger, improving hearing and eyesight, prolonging life and

relieving uneasiness of mind, these edible herbs gradually become a part of daily diet for common people [24].

Shennong’s Classic of Materia Medica which laid a solid foundation for herbal property initiated the theories of four properties (Table 2) and poisonousness, and promoted the development of meridian tropism substantially [25].

(3) *Fundamental Principle of CFT Represented by Treatise on Febrile and Miscellaneous Diseases*. *Treatise on Febrile and Miscellaneous Diseases (ShangHan Za Bing Lun)*, a monumental book honored as the the originator of Chinese medical formulary, was written by the famous physician Zhang Zhongjing

(152A.D. - 219A.D.) in East Han Dynasty. It recorded the first two specialized chapters *Guo Shi Cai Gu Jin Ji* and *Qin Shou Yu Chong Jin Ji* which elucidated food sanitation and contraindications. It warned that “stale meal, rotten meat and stinky fish should be avoided. Eating too much plum will decay the teeth. The meat must be rotten and inedible if it floats on the water. The meat with white dots on it is inedible.” Furthermore, it

detailed up to 160 dietary contraindications and proposed the principle of seasonal food contraindications. Animal liver, heart, lung, kidney and spleen were not recommended to eat in spring, summer, fall, winter and long summer respectively [26].

Common food could be found in 15 percent of the overall 200 prescriptions. Some merely used food such as

Table 2: Four properties, their related function and representative foods in TCM

Four properties	Function	Indication	Food
Coldness & coolness	Clear heat; eliminate toxin; moisten dryness; engender fluid	Heat syndrome	Mung bean; watermelon;
Warmness & hotness	Warm the middle; dissipate coldness	Cold syndrome	Mutton; pepper;

Baihejizhuang soup, Mijiandao Fang and Decoction of Pig-skin (Zhufu soup). While others used food as well as medicine such as the noted medicated diet recipe Dangguishengjiangyangrou soup, Ganmaidazao soup, Guizhi soup and so on. Polished round-grained rice was used for several times in this book and perceived as the early application of congee therapy. In summary, the main idea of catering based on syndrome differentiation, was regarded as the fundamental principle of CFT [27].

(4) *Specialized Volume on CFT Represented by Dietotherapy Worth a Thousand Gold (Qianjinshizhi)*. Sun Simiao (581A.D. - 682A.D.) wrote a remarkable medical book named *Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold (Qian Jin Fang)*. Sun inherited the essence of worthy predecessor, integrated with his own clinical experience and proposed two special volumes called *food therapy (Shi Zhi)* and *diet for the senile (Yang Lao Shi Liao)* for the first time. It is worth mentioning that some precious content in the lost books such as *Shennonghuangdishijin*, *Bianqueshijin* and *Huatuoshilun* was well preserved. *Qianjinshizhi* was the twenty-sixth volume of *Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold*. It collected one hundred and fifty-four kinds of food and classified them into fruits, vegetables, grains and poultry and beasts. Moreover, it recorded the therapeutic and life-nurturing effect of food other than recipe or food prohibition. For instance, seaweed, beef and goat liver, grain husk had been mentioned to treat nutrient deficiency diseases such as goiter, nyctalopia and beriberi respectively. When caring patients with diabetes mellitus, Sun advocated the importance of diet and pointed out that “salty or starchy food should be used with caution [28].

Besides this, the 27th, 24th and 12th chapter specifically discussed the method of food intake, introduced the way of detoxication by food. In addition, food therapy formulas were attached as an appendix. The author concluded that food could eliminate pathogenic factors, stabilize the internal organs, rejoice emotion and nourish qi and blood. He held the view that dietotherapy took precedence over pharmacotherapy [29].

3.3 Monographs on Chinese Food Therapy

(1) *The Emerge of Monographs on CFT Represented by Dietotherapy of Materia Medica*. Meng Xian (612A.D.

- 713A.D.), the student of Sun Si-miao, was especially skilled in food therapy and life nurturing. He compiled the first monograph on food therapy named *Dietotherapy of Materia Medica (Shiliaobencao)* all over the world [30]. Compared with other books, it supplemented the therapeutic effect of animal offal, mushroom and alga food such as bottom moss and *Carex aridula*, and emphasized the dietary notes for pregnant women, puerpera and children. It increased the edible and medicinal parts of food for the first time. For example, persimmon was subdivided into fresh persimmon, dried persimmon and mashed persimmon. It also emphasized the source and the methods of preparing food. For example, dried dates could invigorate intestines and stomach and replenish Qi after being steamed while they could cause abdominal distention if they were raw.

It stated that pomegranate juice soaked in vinegar could treat diarrhea when taken on an empty stomach. Before the Tang Dynasty, siniperca chuatsi, weever, water convolvulus, spinach, asparagus lettuce and mung bean were recorded in medical book for the first time. It recorded the process, cooking and storage methods to maintain a good taste. However, the defect of this book was that it merely recorded the four properties and ignored the five tastes [30].

(2) *The Most Influential Monograph on Food Therapy Represented by Principles of Correct Diet (YinShan ZhengYao)*. The physicians attached more importance to health preservation, health care and diet regulation in Jin and Yuan Dynasties. Hu Si-hui, a royal doctor in Yuan Dynasty, wrote an influential book titled *Principles of Correct Diet (YinShanZhengYao)*. This book was of great academic importance and full of ethnic features. It went beyond the old concept of food therapy and perceived that laying more emphasis on nutrition to prevent diseases was far better than taking medicine when people fall ill from the angle of nutriology. Compared with the old concept of four properties, he subdivided it into 12 grades for the first time [31]. For example, coldness could be subdivided into great coldness, mild coldness, tiny coldness and minor coldness.

This book initiated various kinds of edible recipes of rare food and listed a wide range of food, both royal delicacy for emperor and common food for ordinary



people. It also described the cooking methods and attentions in details. When recorded each food, it emphasized its edible and tonic values related to the medicinal effect. For example, chicken cooked with Shengdihuang (*Rehmannia Glutinosa Libosch*) could be used to cure backache, the deficiency of bone marrow, fatigue and night sweat. Therefore, they were not only delicious food but also fine medicine for preventing and treating illnesses. Hu advocated that one should not eat until feeling hungry, never overeat especially in the night time, and not sleep when fully satiated [32].

3.4 The perfect period represented by integration of ancient food therapy practice and modern nutriology

Nowadays, a large number of academic works on CFT have been published such as *Family Herbal Cuisine*, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Dietotherapy*, *Diet Therapy of TCM*, *Dietotherapy Formula for Pregnant and Lying-in Women* and *Food for Preventing Cardiovascular Diseases* [33-34]. On the one hand, these books absorb the essence of ancient literature such as the theories of four properties, five tastes, meridian tropism and major function. On the other hand, they draw strength from modern nutriology and took fully account of the value of essential nutrients such as carbohydrate, protein, fat, vitamin, mineral, dietary fiber and water. Therefore, the integrated dietotherapy of syndrome differentiation in CFT and disease differentiation in western medicine should be given more attention to acquire better therapeutic effect or even become a complementary therapy to remedy certain diseases [35].

Recently, researchers have paid attention to the comparative study for integrated dietotherapy of TCM and modern nutriology with conventional nutritional therapy. Shen *et al.* [35] believed that foods with a cold property as well as rich in potassium, magnesium, calcium and dietary fiber were more effective to treat hypertensive patients with yin-deficiency. Dai *et al.* [36] found that the integrated diet for patients with hypertension could increase the therapeutic effect greatly. She recommended that both Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension diet and CFT based on syndrome differentiation should be taken into consideration. Zeng *et al.* [37] found that TCM nutritional support could improve the gastrointestinal function of patients with severe sepsis significantly by clearing toxins, tonifying Qi and soothing liver-gallbladder. Shen *et al.* [38] believed that medicinal diet formula could improve the nutritional status of patients undergoing peritoneal dialysis significantly. Li *et al.* [39] deemed that Chinese food therapy could lower blood lipids and regulate the phlegm-dampness constitution of patients with hyperlipidemia.

4. Conclusion

CFT, a significant branch of TCM, has its own unique feature. Its developing process accompanied with TCM throughout the history of China [40]. Ancient people concluded that food had mild bias featured as four

properties and five tastes. Therefore, apart from supplying basic nutrition, it has a therapeutic effect similar to medicine [41]. Generally speaking, the idea of homogeneity of medicine and food represents the origin of CFT [7]. Main contents in *Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor*, *Shennong's Classic of Materia Medica* and *Treatise on Febrile and Miscellaneous Diseases* constitute the major theories and basic principles of CFT. Specialized Volume in *Dietotherapy Worth a Thousand Gold (QianJinShiZhi)* indicates that food therapy and food nurturing were on the path driven by specialization [29]. Representative monographs, *Dietotherapy of Materia Medica* and *Principles of Correct Diet*, signify that contents on CFT do not need to attach to books on medicinal herbs any more and mark that food therapy was accepted by more and more people [30-31]. Last but not least, the organic integration of syndrome differentiation in CFT and disease differentiation in modern nutritional therapy guides us to draw up more practicable program to double the efficacy [41]. Based on the above statements, we have confidence in the bright future of this ancient but vital therapy. Further research is needed to reveal its biological foundation. With the further development of integration of western medicine and TCM, CFT will play an even more crucial role in clinical diet intervention and community-based family health care.

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