

The Healing Properties of Chinese Cuisine

By Rachel Khanna

Chinese food is steeped in a rich history of cultural, religious and philosophical traditions. The Chinese believe in the concept of *yin* and *yang* and that life is about a balance between opposites, thus the food we consume should maintain a delicate equilibrium between flavours, textures and healing properties. As Eileen Yin-Fei Lo notes in her book *The Chinese Kitchen*, "What we Chinese eat to nourish ourselves we also eat to contribute to our interior balance and well-being. Food in China is to a great degree medicine." In effect, much of Chinese cuisine is based on balancing *yin*, *yang* and the five elements. Illness occurs when there is imbalance.

Emperor Shen Nong, who is thought to have lived around 3000 BCE, developed the theory of *yin* and *yang*, which represent opposing but dependent forces in the universe. Everything in the universe is either *yin* – cold, dark and introverted – or *yang* – hot, bright and extroverted. Emperor Shen Nong also developed the practice of using food and herbs as medicine. This was further developed in 2500 BCE with the writing of *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, which is still in use by students of Chinese medicine today.

As much of Chinese culture and philosophy is broken down into *yin* and *yang*, so too is Chinese food. Foods are classified as being *yin* or *yang*, depending on whether they heat or cool the body. *Yin* foods have a cooling effect on the body while *yang* foods have a warming effect. People need different types of food at different times, and when they consume too much of one type or another, they develop imbalances and subsequently illnesses.

A very general breakdown of *yin*, *yang* and neutral foods is as follows:

<i>Yin</i> Foods:	<i>Yang</i> Foods:	Neutral Foods:
Fruits	Beef	Rice
Vegetables	Lamb	Noodles
Seafood	Eggs	Whole Grains



Fresh fruit

At yet another level, the Chinese view the universe as being made up of five principal elements: Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, and Wood. Each of these elements influences the other and every living thing falls under one element. Foods can also be categorised as being "Earth" foods or "Metal" foods, etc. We need a combination of all these and when we consume too much or too little of one type of food, we create imbalance. These elements also correspond to parts of our body, therefore, an excess or a deficiency of certain foods can weaken the corresponding organs. For instance, an excess or deficiency of "Wood" foods can lead to liver and gallbladder problems because those are the corresponding organs.

Traditional Chinese cuisine views food as the key to maintaining health and vitality. Foods can help us achieve a state of balance and increase our *qi* (life-force). Therefore, to maintain a state of balance, it is important to eat a varied diet, rich in whole, seasonal foods.

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Photos by the author



Fresh fish



Various dried foods