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## Foreword

For thousands of years, within the pantheon of revered Chinese culinary practices, the school of herbal cooking has always been cherished for its restorative elements and hearty prescription for every human ill. Soups, stews and teas that have curative promise are legion and deemed to effectively restore [ ] and to correct any bodily imbalance. The founding tenet of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), under which herbal brews are a respected and revered school, points to this very imbalance that causes many human ills. Herbal foods may be regarded as being primarily preventative, underscoring the adage “prevention is better than cure”. It is by this dictum that we should regard herbal cooking — as an ancient and time-honoured branch of Chinese cuisine that fathoms the efficacy of a multitude of herbs, barks, roots, nuts and seeds when paired with meat, poultry, vegetables or seafood. Even for skeptics chary of this claim, there is the undeniable fact of sheer tastiness.

A distinction is to be made between specific medicinal preparations in TCM and herbal ones that transform everyday dishes into powerhouses of sustenance. While the former can be distasteful to those unused to strong and even foul flavours, the range of herbs used in this book are generally milder and used in judicious tandem with familiar meats and vegetables.

In this school of cooking, little is added by way of artificial flavourings as the intention is to let the herbs do the work. Those unaccustomed to such dishes may initially find them strange, but when the healthy promise behind each blend has been felt, a willing acceptance will follow. Rest assured that there are no dire consequences to be feared in enjoying duck with bitter apricot kernels; chicken with Chinese wolfberries; or pork with Chinese angelica, or *nkxq'q€s* as it is better known in Mandarin. With this book, it will be possible for even the most diffident of cooks to produce a wide spectrum of delicious and wholesome dishes, not to mention there is much room for adaptation and innovation even within the fairly rigid framework that governs herbal mixes. Regard this book as a vital entry to your library of good eating tomes, adding to the richness that is Chinese cuisine. It will certainly enrich your table, whatever the efficacious promise.





# Introduction

Setting out to write this book proved a formidable challenge. Up until that point, the little I knew about herbal mixes was mostly limited to what my parents once coaxed me to drink or eat in a bid to restore my balance of Yin and Yang (see *cs'Zkxq'Zr sy}yzr...: kxn'Pyyn*). The prospect of rooting out recipes from old aunts, herbalists, friends and seasoned practitioners of herbal cooking was excitingly delicious, if uphill some of the way. Some herbalists to whom I spoke were not exactly forthcoming, although many others were. Over many months, I learnt to appreciate the profound and tasty promise of such dishes as chicken with ginseng soup; braised duck with lotus seeds; and mutton with the somewhat mystical cordyceps (*nyxq'tryxq', sk'nmky*). That said, there is really no deep mystery about Chinese herbal cooking. One need only have faith in an ancient discipline that millions of Chinese already subscribe to with fervour.

In revamping my original publication, I have had the distinct advantage of receiving advice from Dr. Geng Yu Ling (M.Sc.), a TCM practitioner and herbalist registered with the TCM Association (UK) and based in London for the past eight years. Dr. Geng is also a medical doctor and specialist in internal medicine. She sought TCM training in Beijing University after completing her clinical studies in her hometown of Hubei. I had first seen Dr. Geng for a pesky bladder problem.

Despite several specialists in London, I was still like a leaky bucket and had been for more than two decades. She diagnosed my problem as “dysfunctional kidneys” and prescribed a course of treatment involving cordyceps. Within two months, my problem vanished. I have always had faith in TCM and this served only to reinforce it. Dr. Geng has also been instrumental in providing much background information on every dish in this book. From her, I have learnt so much more about herbalism.





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The Chinese herbal ingredients used in this book are without overpowering odours that characterise many blends and poultices often slapped on festering sores. Neither are they evil-smelling brews from a fuming cauldron frothing with medicinal mixes. The world and a half today have come to realise that many of the thousands of dried barks, seeds, nuts and herbs traditionally used in TCM treatment also lend themselves to a range of everyday dishes that are the better for their inclusion.

It is not easy for those uninitiated to fully learn all the health implications in each blend of herbs, complex or simple, as most of such knowledge has been handed down by word of mouth over centuries. What is of paramount importance, then, is that herbal brews are concocted according to individual body constitutions, as well as physical and emotional states. The TCM practitioner seeks to get at the root of the problem rather than the symptom and believes that there can

be no panacea for all ills.

TCM dictates that illnesses can be caused by one factor or a combination of several; externally, these are heat, dampness and dryness, and internally, they encompass more than just physical dysfunction to include the effects of happiness, anger, anxiety, grief, fear and trauma, as well as injuries, minor wounds, and over-indulgence. It is, therefore, wise to avoid foods that are extreme in taste, be they spicy, salty, sweet and etc.

In TCM, individual foods are also believed to have characteristics that affect the human constitution. The list here is long and has been broken down into notes preceding the relevant recipes. Suffice to say, for now, that herbal cooking is classically categorised according to poultry, meat,

seafood and vegetable dishes, as well as soups and teas.

Poultry such as duck and goose provide meat that is protein-rich but also overly fatty, and so should be eaten sparingly by people who suffer from obesity, hypertension, and heart or cholesterol problems. Chicken is regarded as neutral in energy and when combined with either 'hot' or 'cold' herbs take on the characteristics of the accompanying herbal blend. Of all the meats used in herbal cooking, mutton or lamb is oft used for its stimulating and strengthening properties. For seafood, fish is rich in protein but many types of shellfish have the added nuisance of being cholesterol-rich and, hence, should be avoided or used judiciously.

The study of herbs goes back some 3,000 years to the second dawn of Chinese civilization, when history was beginning to be chronicled and ancient analects recorded. In those early writings, references were made to cooked herbs, and hundreds believed to have curative and restorative powers were named. It was not until 1518, during the Ming Dynasty, however, that medicinal knowledge accrued from research and experimentation performed in centuries past were compiled into one book, and by one man. Li Shi Zhen spent most of his adult

life endeavouring the onerous task of recording the preventative, diagnostic and curative principles of natural medication. His efforts resulted in the first ever encyclopaedia of Chinese herbs — *Lox 'Mky 'Qkxq 'WE'* or the *Mjwz oxn£w' yp Wk -o/sk 'Wonsk*. Li's admirable work detailed the use of some 1,800 herbs, roots, barks, seeds, plants and nuts, and remains to this day the guiding light for all Chinese physicians. By the seventeenth century, the learned tome had found its way to Japan via traders and seafarers, and some years later, it was translated

into Japanese. To date, it has been translated into languages including German, French, Korean and Russian.

In as early as the Tang Dynasty, a medical training institute known as the Imperial Medical College, the first of its kind, was set up in the Middle Kingdom. Since then, a legion of men and women have been schooled in diagnosis based on the principles of universal balance and the application of herbal medicine for a wide spectrum of human ills.



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When interest in Feng Shui swept over parts of the world in recent years, in its shadow resided, more basically, principles of Yin and Yang. Yin-Yang theory has long since informed Chinese thought and beliefs, although some strict modernists will continue to regard it as mystical nonsense. In traditional Chinese culture, everything boils down to the opposing forces of Yin and Yang. The former, in broad strokes, represents the Moon, Earth, female gender and darkness, as well as the negative properties of coldness, passivity and softness. The latter, at the other end of the spectrum, represents the Sun, Heaven, male gender and light, as well as such properties as heat, activity and hardness. The ultimate and deceptively simple objective is to strike a perfect balance between the opposing forces by aiding their mutual interaction. In a crass generalisation, then, a person harbouring elements or a state of 'coldness' can counter the condition by eating 'hot' foods and, likewise, elements of 'heat' can be countered by drinking 'cooling' brews, or brews made from 'cold' herbs.

Creating a blend of herbs that complements everyday ingredients to achieve balanced Yin and Yang is an art a lot more complex than many realise. Good herbalists know not only how to make blends that have all the right herbs in

the right proportions, but also how much of meat, poultry, seafood or vegetables to use in relation to each blend. Bearing in mind that the counteracting properties of the herbs have to mesh perfectly not only with one another, but also with those of the common ingredients, and altogether with the body that consumes them to produce the internal, Yin-Yang equilibrium that is so craved.

So pervaded is Chinese food and nutrition by concepts of Yin and Yang, however, that regard for the opposing forces is not limited to the relationship between one's body and the ingestion of categorically 'hot', 'cold' and 'neutral' foods. In fact, the influence of Yin-Yang extends to cooking and the creation of tastes. By the laws of Yin and Yang, the flavour of a dish should be the balanced sum of opposites and no one flavour should be unabashedly forward. It would be nearly impossible now to not mention the universally loved sweet-and-sour formula, arguably the Big Mac of Chinese food in the world. In it, vinegar, which is considered a negative element for its sourness, is countered and harmonised with some sugar. It is this insistence on balance that makes Chinese cuisine what it is — a totally logical school of cooking that encompasses many sub-schools, including herbal cooking.