

The Asian Diet

Simple secrets for eating right,
losing weight, and being well



Jason Bussell

MSOM, Licensed Acupuncturist



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By Jason Bussell, MSOM, L.Ac.



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Preface



Welcome to my book, which I hope you will enjoy. I also hope you learn many things that will help you for the rest of your life.

Have you ever noticed the shape of the average American compared to that of the average Asian? There are more obese people in America than any other country and the problem is growing rapidly. This trend is the result of poor diet and inappropriate lifestyles. Fortunately, we are finally waking up to what the Asian cultures can teach us in terms of health care (acupuncture, herbology, tai chi, etc.); now it is time to learn what they have discovered about eating and living in balance.

The material that is contained in this book is information I try to instill in all my patients. At the onset of treatment, I give them all a talk about adjusting their diet, lifestyle, and attitudes in order to improve their health, mood, and longevity. Many of my patients have asked where they could get this information in written form and as I was unable to find such a resource, I wrote this book.

About me

I am an acupuncturist and herbalist, trained in the United States and I also completed advanced training and an internship in China. I am the President of the Illinois Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine and have a private practice, together with my wife, in Wilmette, Illinois. Many astute people have noticed that I am not Asian and often wonder how can a white guy practice Oriental Medicine?

I earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and worked in psychiatric hospitals for several years before returning to school to study pre-med. As I was applying to med schools, I was dismayed to learn how unhappy the doctors with whom I worked were. I kept hearing "Don't go into medicine. Do anything else. The money is not there, the autonomy's not there, the respect's not there, and even the patient contact isn't there anymore. There's no good reason to be a doctor."

The first 20 times I heard it, I shrugged it off; but I kept hearing it and eventually it got to me. Then a nurse with whom I worked told me about the acupuncture program in town and though I had been interested in Eastern philosophy since taking a course in high school, I had never considered Oriental Medicine (OM) as a career.

I read some books about OM and found the whole paradigm pretty strange and even a little suspect. I come from a family of physicians and was already pre-med myself and I understand things like bacteria and viruses; but the Chinese talk about things like “wind-cold invading the lung” and Qi. It was all so foreign and different and I didn’t know if I could ever believe in the system. I figured I could make a living at it because enough other people would believe. My skepticism was very short-lived once I saw how effective this medicine is and how much sense the philosophy makes. Now I love what I do. I get to spend a lot of time with my patients, and I get to help them. In psychiatry, I worked pretty much with a chronic population where very few people ever improved. With Oriental Medicine, I am able to help almost all of my patients safely. Oriental Medicine is the acquired wisdom of thousands of years of experimentation, observation and documentation and with this historical perspective, much has been learned about what works and what doesn’t. I am a grateful recipient of these lessons and now I want to share this knowledge to help people take better care of themselves and live longer and happier lives.

I have presented this information with many groups and patients and I know that this system will be difficult for many people to work with at first. This book presents guidelines and suggestions, but it does not tell you what to do. It is up to you to decide how to implement the suggestions and create your diet. The South Beach Diet was so successful partly because it told people exactly what to do. Many of us like being given a strict structure to follow . . . for a while. But after about 60 days we get tired of having no freedom and break from a prescribed regimen. So I am just planting seeds; how they germinate is up to you. And, it is not an all-or-nothing proposition. If you have a bad day, don’t give up, start again so you can have more good days.

The opinions expressed in this book are just that – opinions and the book makes no claims to being definitive or authoritative. The principles are written, as I understand them, from my years of studying Oriental Medicine and Asian culture. The ideas come from many different authors, speakers, researchers, teachers, folk teachings, plus my own ideas of what makes sense. Other authors and disciplines may disagree with some or many of the tenets I will present in these pages. Therefore it is up to you, the reader, to decide whether or not this makes sense to you. As far as I know, the Chinese have been studying nutritional therapy

longer than anyone else, so I tend to believe that they have figured some things out in the past 4,000 years. The principles are simple:

- Balance and Moderation
- Cooked foods are better than raw
- Vegetables are better than fruit
- White rice is better than brown, but a variety is best
- Diet should be mostly plant-based, with grains and a little of everything else
- Simple foods are better than processed food
- Dairy is not necessary and can be harmful
- Do not over-fill your stomach
- Don't stress too much
- Exercise every day, but not too much
- Keep a wide perspective and don't sweat the small stuff

All these principles will be explained in more detail as you read the book.

What this book is and what it is not.

This is **not** a weight-loss book, but it **is** about getting into balance by eating appropriately. Some of my patients who do not need to lose weight are still very much out of balance. If they are over-weight, that is in itself an imbalance. As you get into balance, you will naturally shed the excess pounds and become more fit. But even those who do not need to lose weight still need this information and **eating right** will prevent or correct all types of disease and disorders. Our diet choices are the most important and influential thing we can do to affect our daily, and long term, functioning.

Chinese Dietary Therapy is a highly developed science and many people spend their whole lives studying and practicing this. There are food cures for all types of ailments, but that is not what this book is about. If you want to learn how to address a certain ailment with diet therapy, please consult *Chinese Nutrition Therapy* by Joerg Kastner and Anika Moje or *Chinese System of Food Cures* by Henry C. Lu (unfortunately out of print but maybe you can find a second-hand copy). There is also a great deal of information about the foods that we commonly eat and how bad they are for us (and I could cite many studies on the subject), but that is not what this book is about either. I present the basic guidelines for eating right and most of us could greatly benefit from these simple changes. If you want to learn what foods to eat to treat a particular disease, or if you want to know everything there is to know about a particular food, read *Healing with Whole Foods* by Paul Pitchford. To learn how we have been misinformed about diet and to peruse

many studies on how harmful our standard food choices are, read *The China Study* by T. Colin Campbell. To learn the basics of eating right and being well, however, read the book you hold in your hands right now.

Acknowledgments

Chinese medicine would be nowhere without building upon the work of others. I would like to thank the entire lineage of Chinese medical practitioners for amassing this wisdom and passing it on; from the Yellow Emperor Huang Di, to Dr. Hui-Yan Cai. I would also like to thank the Midwest College of Oriental Medicine, my alma mater, for educating me and facilitating my study in China. Among the modern-day authors who deserve a lot of the credit for the content of this book are: Henry Lu, Bob Flaws, Kim Barbouin and Rory Freedman, T. Colin Campbell, Joerg Kastner, Anika Mole, Ted Kaptchuk, Dan Bensky, Michael Pollan, and many more. I would also like to thank my family for supporting my career choice, and my wife for making me so much more than I ever was before her.

Chapter One

Introduction to the Asian View on Diet



Asian medicine, like Asian philosophy, is all about balance, that is, finding and maintaining balance as the goal of life. All pathologies can be thought of as some type of imbalance; if you have a fever, you have too much heat; if you have the chills you don't have enough heat. It gets much more complicated than this, but everything can be viewed as too much or too little of something. Oriental Medicine (OM) can help bring a person back to balance. But my greater job as a practitioner of OM is to teach my patients how to live in balance so that they will not need continued treatment. The three greatest factors that get us out of balance are our: Diet, Lifestyle, and Attitudes. The typical Westerner is almost always out of balance in all three areas, sadly and our habits are spreading around the world.

An ancient Chinese doctor once wrote that "In cases of disease and disorder, the physician should first address the diet and lifestyle. If that fails, then you proceed to the more heroic modalities of acupuncture and herbs." Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine wrote, "Let your food be your medicine and your medicine be your food." These days we have lost the sense of connection between what we put in our bodies and how our bodies then function.

Oriental medicine is meant to be a preventive medicine and in the old days it was common to pay the physician on a monthly basis; if, however, you became sick, you would get a refund, for the doctor's job was to keep you healthy, not to help you recover from sickness. If you developed an illness or a disease, the doctor had already failed you. Part and parcel of this agreement was the understanding that the patient would follow the doctor's orders. However, in the West, we are not very good at following our doctor's recommendations. In China they know that if they follow the suggestions, then the problem will not become worse; and if they don't, then the problem will almost certainly progress. Today not enough attention is paid to preventing disease and health disorders; but if we eat right, act right, and think right, we can improve our health for our whole lives. We should all be able to live to 100 years old and not suffer from obesity, heart disease, cancer, arthritis,

osteoporosis, Alzheimer's, diabetes, high cholesterol, enlarged prostate, and all the disorders that plague American seniors.

(Some people point out that many Asians do not live to be 100 years old. However, they have other problems such as poor sanitation, parasites, and poverty; and many do not follow the teachings. More and more Asians are embracing the American lifestyle and diet . . . with regrettable results; but if more people followed the principles outlined in this book, many more would reach the century mark.)

The first thing we need to do is change the way you think about food. We have a dangerous disconnect in understanding how the things we put in our bodies affect the way our bodies function. This is partly due to purposeful misinformation in the advertising from the food manufacturers and partly due to our own denial. It is time to take responsibility for your health for you are literally what you eat. Our cells are constantly dying and new ones are being made and those cells are made from the food we eat. If you were to build a house, you would choose to use the best-quality lumber you could find. You will be in your body a lot longer than any external structure, so when you are thinking about what to eat, ask yourself, "What kind of a house am I going to build today?"

We cannot continue to ignore our bodies' needs. Most of us pay more attention to the maintenance needs of our cars than the needs of our bodies. If you put cheap gas in your car and your car starts breaking down, you would change the gas. But, when our bodies break down, we continue to use the same gas. The body's needs are very simple, requiring primarily a plant-based, varied, and mostly cooked diet. There is no magic bullet. **The keys are balance and moderation.**

Western Dietary therapy is still in its infancy, so this is why people keep getting fooled into believing that there **is** a magic bullet. "Everyone should eat granola!" we were told, and then further research showed that too much granola was bad. "Avoid fat and cholesterol and you will prevent heart disease!" but then we found that some types of cholesterol are good and that a low fat diet does not prevent disease. "Eliminate carbohydrates and eat meat to lose weight!" but we learned that this type of diet causes long-term damage to the body. The Chinese have been studying this for thousands of years and have learned that **it is not any one thing that we all need to eat or avoid** – it is finding the proper balance of all things. And they have found that this proper balance can be maintained by eating mostly cooked vegetables, simple grains, plus a little bit of almost everything else.

Let me be clear: there is no one thing that is the key—not fat, calories, sugar, grapefruit, protein, carbs, sodium, trans-fat, supplements, nor any one thing; it is all things and how they combine to form a whole.

Chinese dietary recommendations differ from those that we learn here in the West and some of the recommendations in this book may seem like blasphemy

after what you have been taught. I am sorry, but you cannot trust what the government and what your doctors tell you about nutrition. The food industry is thoroughly in bed with the government and makes sure that all dietary recommendations that are released promote their foods. There are conflicts of interest at all levels of the FDA, USDA, National Institute of Health, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Education. From kindergarten through senior year of high school, most children have two choices for a beverage with their lunch – milk and chocolate milk. And the dairy board gets to decorate the cafeterias with its ads portraying milk as a healthy food. What other industry is allowed such access to directly lobby our children?

And they get to educate our doctors too. In the entire four years in medical school, the average doctor receives just 21 hours of education in nutrition, and the educational materials are often created and provided by the dairy, meat, and snack food industries. What do you suppose these industries want to teach doctors about their products? When scientists stand up to the system and fight for what is right, they are discredited and bullied out of the industry. Doctors are not being evil or negligent, they just tell you what they were taught by those who have products to sell. For example: “Diet does not affect health”, “Dairy is good”, “Eat a lot of meat”, “Supplements can replace whole foods”, etc., and the doctors are usually unaware that their education has been provided by special interest groups.

Chinese culture has state-supported health care, so it is in their best interest to teach the people how to be well. In America, health care is a for-profit endeavor and the more sick people there are, the more money there is to be made. I don’t mean to sound alarmist or conspiracy-inclined, but it is true; the food and health care industries have so much money and they have tainted the systems that we count on to ensure our safety. You cannot blindly trust their recommendations.

The food choices you make are probably the most influential things you can do to help or hurt yourself on a daily basis. People say they don’t have time to cook, or to shop, or prepare good food and they argue that poor nutrition is one of the sacrifices of a modern lifestyle. **We have to make it a priority.** I also hear, “Everything will kill you, so let’s enjoy ourselves now.” However, I plan to enjoy my life for a full 100 years and I don’t want to be saddled with excess weight and health problems. Let’s face it, eating bad and artificial food is not the only thing we are here to enjoy.

The development of Asian Dietary Therapy

A long time ago, humans found themselves here on this planet. A couple of hours later they found themselves here and hungry, so they started eating things. Then

they noticed that different foods affected them in different ways: “That leaf makes me tired, this one make me feel awake; this seed gives me diarrhea, this fruit stops the diarrhea,” etc. The real treasure of the Chinese culture is that it is a 4,000 year long experiment with careful record keeping and dissemination of the lessons learned through written language. They never had a Dark Age. Throughout their history, the Chinese have experimented with different dietary and lifestyle choices. When they found things that worked, they spread the word; when they found things that didn’t work, they also spread the word. We are the fortunate recipients of the knowledge gained over 4000 years of experimentation, observation, and documentation of the lessons learned by some of the greatest minds in Asia’s history. Most of the West’s classical knowledge was lost with the fall of the Roman Empire. It is only since the Renaissance that we have started rebuilding our knowledge base, so our knowledge is only about 400 years old.

At its core, Oriental medicine is all about balancing Yin and Yang. This concept will be explained further in Chapter 18, but for now you should know that Yin and Yang is a way of understanding everything in the universe as lying between two extremes: Yin is the cool, quiet, dark energy of things while Yang is the hot, active, light energy. Too much or too little Yin or Yang are forms of imbalance and can manifest as all types of symptoms, including obesity.

You do not need to eat Asian food to follow these principles. In Asian cultures, a great variety of foods, spices, and preparations are included in each country’s diet. But there are some commonalities and you can and should adapt these concepts to fit your environment. For instance, look at the way typical Asians behave:

- They eat a lot of grains
- They eat a lot of vegetables
- They don't eat a lot of raw foods
- They don't eat a lot of meat
- They eat a lot of whole foods
- They have few sweets except for a little bit of fruit
- They have soup with most meals
- They have tea with most meals
- They have few baked and processed foods
- They do not consume dairy
- They exercise every day
- They do not get too emotional or stressed

If we incorporate these principles, we will develop the physique of the typical Asian, which is lean. Unfortunately, when Asians come to America and adopt our dietary ways, they develop the shape (and health problems) of the typical Ameri-

can. Diet is more important than genetics in determining our size, shape, mood, health, and longevity.

Don't let your tongue dictate your diet

Food stays on your tongue for one to two minutes but your digestive organs wrestle with that material for 48 hours (normally), and the tissues that are created from that food stay in the body for weeks or months. So the tongue can have a vote, but it shouldn't have the only vote. We all tend to include plenty of sweet and salty tastes in our diet, and sweet has a tendency to create dampness (which is how the Chinese understand excess weight) and salty causes water retention. The Chinese recognize five flavors: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and acrid. Each flavor has a distinct effect on the individual, and each one corresponds to an internal organ. We have to feed all the organs in our bodies, not just our taste buds. If we don't have enough of all the tastes represented, we will be pulled out of balance.

All foods and herbs have properties and some properties are warming, cooling, moistening, activating, or sedating, etc. Through the considerable study of these properties and the continual recording of results over the centuries, the Chinese have come to understand the actions of food. So, in Asia, the properties of foods are taken into account when planning meals. In addition, there are some foods that are not eaten at certain times because they are contra-indicated; for example, women will not eat cold or raw foods after childbirth because digesting it steals too much of their body energy. Also, some foods are only consumed in certain seasons.

A note about calories: Calorie counting is a flawed concept and I can't believe that no one has pointed this out yet. Calories are different from energy and we want to get all the energy from the food we can and thus we'll then be animated and active and able to burn the calories. But we don't really have to concern ourselves with the calories at all.

In the West, calories in a particular food are determined by burning it in a laboratory with a device called a calorimeter. Then the amount of energy that is released as it is burned is measured. The theory is that the amount of energy released by breaking it down via fire in the lab is the same as would be released by breaking it down with enzymes and digestion in the body. Now these are two very different processes and could most likely yield different results, as many things behave differently in a lab. Even though I'm not convinced that the calorimeter gets a valid assessment of the energy we get from the food, let's assume it is true. So if a bagel has 200 calories worth of energy in the lab, eating that same bagel will put 200 calories into you according to this theory. The thing is, not all of that bagel

stays in you. When we move our bowels, we excrete the leftover, unused portion of the food and this has caloric value as well. If we burn the feces, we can measure how many calories we have passed. So the true measure of calories retained would be: calories put in minus calories passed minus calories burned. I am not suggesting that we all start burning our feces; I am just pointing out that the number of calories ingested is not the whole story. For instance, if someone is suffering from dysentery, it doesn't matter how much food they eat, they'll not hold on to any of it. The average Chinese person consumes from 25-40% **more** calories than the average American; even the most sedentary office workers consume more calories and are less obese than we are. You do not need to count calories and you should never go hungry. **The goal here is efficient digestion.**

A key difference between Eastern and Western thought

Western philosophy tends to be reductionistic, i.e., breaking everything down to its smallest parts, while Eastern philosophy is holistic, understanding how things relate to the whole. Each has advantages to offer, but each has limitations. Imagine trying to understand the hand by chopping off the arm and studying the hand alone on a table. It would not make a whole lot of sense without knowing about the muscles and nerves and tendons and blood supply necessary to make it work. Western dietary therapy treats food as nothing more than the sum of its parts, whereas Eastern nutritionists understand that it is how things are combined that matters. So we don't worry about the grams of fat, protein, carbohydrate, sugar, etc., we simply think about the whole food and how it fits into the whole diet.

By the way, it is only recently that we have looked to science to tell us how to eat. Coincidentally, since then we have become more obese and have more diet-related disease. The interactions of complex foods with our complex bodies is much more intricate and involved than we can understand easily. Therefore, we should trust what thousands of years of culture have taught us. We should eat what our mothers and their mothers ate.

Some people say, "Our diet must be OK because we have a longer average lifespan than some countries in Asia". Do not confuse lowered infant mortality and life-prolonging medical care with wellness. We now have more diet-related illness than we have had in the past 200 years.

A note on whole foods

"Whole foods" means using the entire food as opposed to just a single part and this is how the term is used to describe brown rice as a whole food. Oftentimes,

one part of a food will have a particular action and the other part will have the opposite reaction. For example, Ephedra stem *encourages* sweating, while Ephedra root *stops* sweating. Citrus fruit *engenders* phlegm and dampness in the body and the peel of a citrus fruit *resolves* phlegm and dampness. I don't expect people to start eating citrus rind, they don't in China either; but you can put it into a tea and absorb its benefits that way. I find the case of grapes very interesting, because for years now, the growers have manipulated the grapes to grow with no seeds. Yet, the main ingredient in antioxidant pills is grape seeds! If we were not taking grape seeds out of our diet, we would not need to put them back in. Every food is balanced and has both Yin and Yang aspects and if we only eat part of a food, we are eating an unbalanced food. This is fine in moderation, but over time our bodies become out of balance.

Whole foods can also refer to an entire part of the plant that is unprocessed. Corn is corn. Corn that is ground down and mixed with soy lecithin, oil, salt, colors, additives etc, is no longer corn and is not a whole food. Nowadays we tend to think (and talk) about a food as nothing more than its constituent parts. "You need some Vitamin C; you should eat more protein, eat less fat, etc." Instead, we should start talking more about the whole foods. "You should have some nuts, you should have an orange, you should eat less meat and dairy, etc." Whole foods are balanced. They are immensely complex and work best when in their whole form.

Fortified foods are foods that have been stripped of their natural nutrients but have had a select few re-introduced. Western, reductionistic science thinks that only a few parts of the whole are important (and therefore worth the cost of re-introducing). The analogy I have for this is a wardrobe: I am going to raid your wardrobe and take everything out of it, but I will only put back three items. Now, that's basically the same, isn't it? Of course not. So we must eat more whole foods. Fortified is better than non-fortified, but the whole food is far, far, superior.

Simple foods are better than those that are man-made and engineered. Tostitos® are made with corn, corn oil and salt, but to add the "touch of Lime," about a dozen ingredients have to be used. Lays® potato chips have sliced potato, oil, and salt. Baked Lays potato chips again require the addition of about a dozen more manufactured ingredients. Now, chips are not good for you and you shouldn't have them often and I only point this out to illustrate how a pretty simple recipe can be bastardized. I'm sorry, but we all need to start reading labels.

And I think it should go without saying, but please **Avoid Fast Food**, which is so processed, artificial, and unhealthy that to have it any more than once a month is too much. Even if they say it is low fat, or even "organic," don't be fooled into thinking it's healthy. Fast food is not healthy and it will make you fat, so it is best to avoid it completely.

However you change your diet or lifestyle, you should do so slowly and gently. If you try to change too much too fast, you will set yourself up to fail and you'll also shock your system. Detoxifying diets, liquid diets, fad diets, fasting diets, Atkins, South Beach, the chicken diet, etc., are neither balanced nor moderate. **The best way to get into balance is to live a little more in balance today than yesterday, and not to grossly overcompensate for yesterday's mistakes.** You did not get out of balance overnight, and food changes will not show improvement for a while. You do not need to detox, you just have to stop toxing. The toxins will work their way out of your system eventually as long as you stop replacing them. Do not make drastic changes; just try to do a little better this week than you did last week.

There are five main branches of Oriental Medicine: Acupuncture, Massage, Herbology, Dietary Therapy, and Exercise (tai-chi and Qi-gong). Dietary therapy is the best one to focus on because it is the most profound way we influence our bodies each and every day, whether we are aware of it or not. Most of my patients do not come to me in a state where a simple food change will be enough to correct their problem. But if we recognize that the diet, lifestyle and attitudes are at least partial causes of our disorders, then there is more we can do to help ourselves. Plus, if diet and lifestyle contributed to the development of a problem, then things will surely get worse if we do not change.

NOTE: For more in-depth information on Oriental Medicine, please see Chapter 18, where I elaborate on this topic.

Chapter Two

Grains



If carbohydrates were bad, most of Asia would not be thin. There is much research to show that a diet high in complex carbohydrates is the healthiest diet and one that is capable of reversing heart disease and diabetes. Most of our carbohydrates should come from grains, fruits and vegetables. Complex carbohydrates come from whole food products and break down appropriately in the body. Refined grains, such as white flour, are stripped of their nutrients and deliver sugar too fast to our bodies. Crackers, cookies, breads, and pastas (made with refined and/or bleached white flour) are not good sources of carbs.

Of the grains, **white rice is the best**. White rice has been much maligned in the public consciousness lately and has been lumped in with white bread, white sugar, and iceberg lettuce as a food devoid of value. Meanwhile, brown rice has been getting all the positive press. In general, I advocate eating whole foods with rice as somewhat of an exception.

Brown rice is white rice, with a thick coating around it. This shell is known as the germ layer, or bran, and this layer is what is “polished” off in making white rice. When analyzed in the lab, this germ layer is found to have some fiber and vitamins; but they have a poor bioavailability and most of it will just pass through us. Fiber is indigestible and just adds bulk to your stool. You can, and should, get all the vitamins and fiber you need from vegetables and fruits. Brown rice and white rice have roughly the same number of calories, but brown rice has more fat.

Eating the rice with this germ layer is a little like eating a walnut and not taking off the shell. Of course, nature had to put some nutrients into that coating to create it, but those nutrients are not very accessible to us. Our bodies will spend a great deal of time (largely unsuccessfully) trying to break through the covering and most of the material will eventually pass through us resulting in a loss of energy and a slowing of our metabolism. A little bit of brown rice can be helpful for certain types of constipation because the extra fiber helps bulk up the stool; but too much brown rice can actually exacerbate constipation by slowing the metabolism.