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# UNDERSTAND THE FOOD CURE WITH CHINESE YIN-YANG THEORY

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### **Understand Food Cure with Chinese Yin-Yang Theory**

#### **Synopsis:**

The traditional Yin-Yang theory is the Chinese way to understand and explain the natural world, including medicine, health, and food, etc. Food cure, to cure certain illnesses with food rather than medicine, is very common among the Chinese. The way food can cure some illnesses can be explained with the Yin-Yang theory. One example is why locally produced bee honey can cure pollen allergy. The Chinese Yin-Yang theory can provide an easy and straight forward explanation for the cure.

# Understand Food Therapy with Yin-Yang Theory – a case study

Hsiao-chih Chang

## Abstract

The traditional Yin-Yang theory is the Chinese way to understand and explain the natural world, including medicine, health, and food, etc.

Food cure, a practice to cure certain illnesses with food rather than medicine, is very common among Chinese, but is also widely seen elsewhere than China, and probably more familiar for us to phrase as “home remedy.” Since in American culture home remedies are usually not taken seriously by medical scientists and professionals, people would tend to know what works but don’t know why and how it works. One interesting example is the common remedy probably known nationwide—locally produced bee honey can cure pollen allergy. So far, modern (Western) medical science fails to explain why and how this works. Chemical analyses did not discover anything special in the local honey that would do the cure. However, with the Chinese Yin-Yang theory, there is an easy and straight forward explanation why only the local honey, not honey from elsewhere, would be able to perform the cure.

This discussion does not attempt to belittle the importance of modern medicine, but only to open up a new perspective for people to understand how food and medicine may benefit our health.

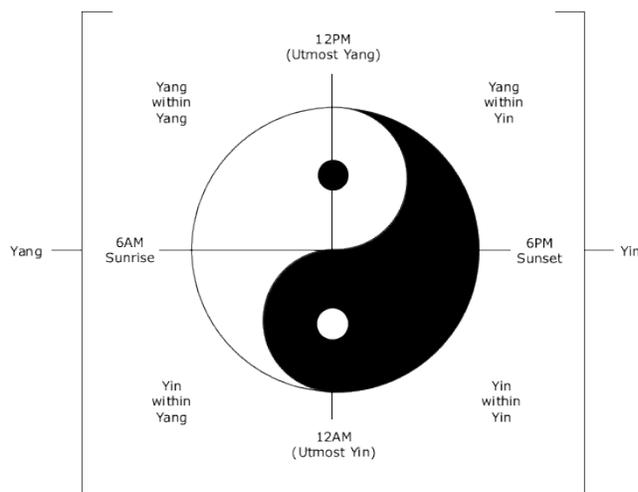
## What is Yin-Yang

The Yin-Yang theory is no longer entirely unfamiliar to us. This theory that was founded in ancient China, since the Chinese view the world dialectically, holds that all phenomena consist of two opposite aspects, Yin and Yang, which are variously defined as: up and down, left and right, light and dark, hot and cold, stillness and movement, substance and function, etc. The movements and changes of Yin and Yang give impetus to the development of everything. According to Yin-Yang theory, everything in the universe can be divided into these two opposite but complementary aspects of Yin and Yang. (Anderson 1988; Lu 1989; Holland 2000; Barnes 2013)

The original meaning of Yin-Yang was the bright side-dark side. Yang is the bright side and Yin is the dark side. Everything in the world can be described, explained and further divided into the Yin-Yang phenomena. The basic properties of heat, brightness, activeness, outwardness, upwardness, hyper function belong to Yang. The basic properties of coldness, darkness, stillness, inwardness, downwardness, hypo function belong to Yin. Yin and Yang oppose each other and

at the same time have an interdependent relationship. Without Yang there is no Yin, without Yin there is no Yang. (Anderson 1988; Lu 1989; Holland 2000; Barnes 2013)

The nature of Yin and Yang is relative. Yin and Yang represent two opposite aspects of every object and its implicit conflict and interdependence. Generally, anything that is moving, ascending, bright, progressing, hyperactive, including functional disease of the body, pertains to Yang. The characteristics of stillness, descending, darkness, degeneration, hypo-activity, including organic disease, pertain to Yin.



### **Yin-Yang theory in Chinese Medicine**

Traditional Chinese medicine applies Yin-Yang theory in medical practice. The basic principle is that when a person's Yin and Yang are balanced, he is healthy. When Yin and Yang are not balanced, he is ill. (Lu 1989; Holland 2000; Barnes 2013)

There are many factors that may affect this Yin-Yang balance, such as food, climate, personal habit, etc. For example, cold wind may invade the body with too much Yin to weaken Yang of the body resulting in an imbalance, which is what is commonly said as catching cold.

To be more specific, there should be four possible states of imbalance: preponderance (excess) of Yin; preponderance (excess) of Yang; weakness (deficiency) of Yin; weakness (deficiency) of Yang.

For the Chinese medical doctor, his job is to first make diagnosis in order to determine what type of Yin-Yang imbalance the patient is. Next, based on the diagnosis, the doctor may decide a treatment. In general, every treatment modality aims to: tonify Yang; tonify Yin; disperse

excessive Yang; disperse excessive Yin. In practice, depending on the condition, the strategies may be combined, e.g. disperse excessive Yin and tonify Yang. (Lu 1989)

The doctor's prescription should contain herbal medicines to fulfill those above-mentioned purposes.

### **Yin-Yang theory in food**

Chinese medicine defines the energy of food as hot, cold, warm, cool, and neutral. Hot and warm foods are Yang foods while cool and cold foods are Yin foods. It is the same definition as our body constitution.

**Yang**                      **Yin**  
**Hot < Warm <Neutral> Cool > Cold**

Knowing the body's constitution and the energy of foods are necessary to eat right for one's type. If the body is more Yin than Yang or it is during the cold season with external Yin, the person should eat more Yang food in order to reach the balance. If the body is more Yang than Yin or it is during the hot season with more external Yang, one should eat more Yin food to regain the balance. When the body's Yin-Yang is in balance, it is in good health and is more resistant to disease and external problems. (Lu 1989)

The following is an example regarding Yin-Yang balance. Crab is one of the foods with "cold" energy which is Yin. Eating too much "cold" food may weaken a person's Yang and thus cause imbalance of Yin-Yang.

There was a TV episode from People's Court program around 1990. A Californian woman sued a restaurant owner for selling spoiled food because she ate crabs ordered from the restaurant and, soon after, started having diarrhea. She believed that she had food poisoning due to the crabs. However, the judge found that the woman ordered two dozen crabs to take home. The plaintiff and her roommate shared the crabs. The roommate ate two, and the plaintiff ate the rest, seemingly twenty-two crabs. What is more is that the plaintiff did not eat breakfast, nor did she eat any lunch, so she was having an empty stomach but ate a lot of crabs for dinner. The roommate was fine after eating two crabs, but the plaintiff fell ill. The judge pointed out that eating a lot of crab on an empty stomach was the cause for the problem. So the plaintiff lost this suit.

Apparently, the judge understands that too much crab meat causes symptoms for the woman, even though he does not offer why and how for the problem. According to Chinese medicinal theory, crab meat is a food with "cold" energy, and "cold" energy is Yin. When a person intakes a great amount of Yin food, his Yin-Yang balance will be affected. The symptoms the above-mentioned plaintiff was suffering were caused by this imbalance.

The Chinese, on the other hand, has a traditional preventive advice on crab eating since crabs were always consider a delicacy in China. From the 18<sup>th</sup> Century novel Dream of the Red Chamber, there was one episode describes the family, in the fall, having a crab eating party, and, just like what would happen to a literati party, people compose poems for the occasion. The following is two lines in a poem by a young lady named Xue Baochai.

《红楼梦》薛宝钗“讽蟹”诗：

酒未敌腥还用菊，性防积冷定需薑。

Wine alone not enough to offset the odor,

Chrysanthemum is then added.

To prevent coldness to accumulate,

One must need ginger.

Note that the second line emphasized that ginger is necessary to accompany crab eating in order to prevent coldness to accumulate in one's system. Ginger is a food with hot energy, therefore, it can offset the coldness caused by crab.

The Chinese also suggest drinking rice wine, served warm, when eating crab, since warm rice wine is also carrying “hot” energy which can offset the excessive Yin caused by crab meat. Meanwhile, it is also interesting that though the Chinese always love crab, they do not consider eating a lot of crab meat a good idea.

There was a Ming dynasty literati named Zhang Dai (1597-1679) who was a famous gourmand. In the tenth lunar month, Zhang Dai would offer “crab parties.” The party had an interesting rule – each party participant could eat no more than six crabs. The crabs in Zhang Dai's parties were the Chinese fresh water mitten crabs. The mitten crabs are rather small. Each weighs three to four ounces, about the size of blue crab from the East Coast. The reason there was a six-crab rule was based on the concern that crab was a “cold” food and one should not eat too much of it.

## Food Cure

In the Chinese culture, there is no definition clearly separating food from medicine because the Chinese diet is mainly grains and vegetables while the medicines are mostly herbs.

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**Food**

**medicine**

Even though some foods would never be considered medicine, such as rice and Chinese cabbage, and some medicines may never be consumed like food, such as ginseng, there are many edibles

that can be both food and medicine, such as ginger and jujube, just to name a couple. (Barnes 2013; Flaws 1995a)

### **Case One** – treating common cold with ginger solution

This is a very common treatment for common cold in China. At the beginning stage of catching cold, one may have symptoms such as headache, fatigue, and fever. One should cut a few slices of ginger which should be added two cups of water. A little bit of brown sugar may be added as well. Boil the water with ginger and brown sugar for ten minutes. Drink the solution when it is warm. The patient, then, should lie down in bed with an extra blanket, and expect to have a thorough perspiration. If he can fall asleep, it would be even better. Usually, as he wakes up, the fever should be gone.

A cold, explained by a Chinese medical doctor, is caused by cold wind that invades the body and weakens the person's Yang. Ginger, which is a type of food with "hot" energy, falls into the category of Young food. Therefore, ginger can increase and strengthen weakened Yang, and cure the patient. (Anderson 2013; Lu 1989; Simonds 1999)

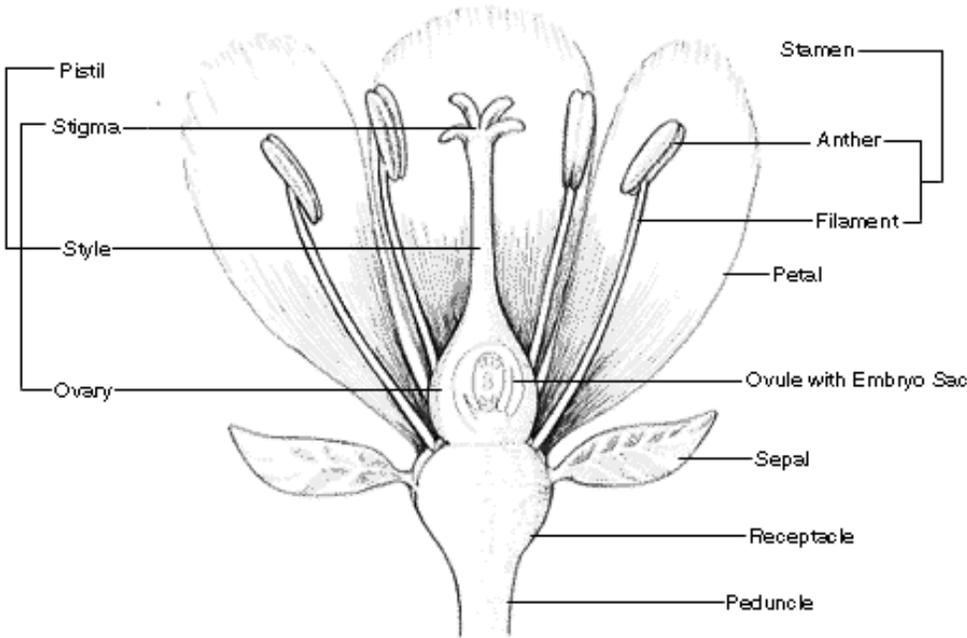
### **Case Two** – treating pollen allergy with locally produced bee honey

This is a very popular home remedy known in the United States. People know that locally produced bee honey can cure pollen allergy but no one can explain why and how local honey works while honey from elsewhere will not work. There have been a number of hypotheses but none offers anything convincing. Chemical analyses cannot tell the difference between honey produced in a region and honey from elsewhere.

Without scientific inquiry, there are only hypotheses about how honey could reduce allergies. The prevailing hypothesis is that it works like a vaccination. The idea is somehow like gradually vaccinating the body against allergens, a process called immunotherapy. Honey contains a variety of the same pollen spores that give allergy sufferers so much trouble when flowers and grasses are in bloom. Introducing these spores into the body in small amounts by eating honey should make the body accustomed to their presence and decrease the chance an immune system response like the release of histamine will occur. (UNICEF)

With Yin-Yang theory, however, there are cases somehow similar to the pollen-honey situation showing parts of the same plant may carry opposite characteristics. One example is ginger and ginger skin. Ginger is a hot food, which is Yang, with diaphoretic function while ginger skin is cool, which is Yin, with diuretic function. Another example of this opposition in a unity is Chinese pepper corn, which fruit, a common ingredient used in Sichuan cuisine, is hot, which is Yang, with pungent flavor, and it has pain relief function and is antidiarrheal. The seed of

Chinese pepper corn, on the other hand, is cold, which is Yin, with bitter flavor, and has asthma relief function. These cases simply mean that parts of the same plant may display different even totally opposite Yin-Yang value. So is the pollen-honey case.



First it is necessary to understand how pollen would cause allergy based on Yin-Yang theory. The flower, in fact, is the reproductive organ of the plant, where there are both male and female sections. The male part includes stamen, of which the stem is filament and the head is called anther. Pollen is produced from anther. The female part, somehow resembling a flower vase, has ovary and stigma that resembles the opening of the vase. When pollen, which works like sperm of animals, leaves the flower and fall on stigma, it enters the vase and goes all the way to the ovary where it pollinates the embryo, which is like an egg. Apparently, pollen carries those features such as male, upward, outward, so it is Yang; ovary, which is female, should be in the Yin category. Nectar, the sugary syrup produced from the flower in order to attract insects that carry pollen from other flowers, is also Yin. When a good amount of airborne pollen enters one's respiratory system, it brings excessive Yang to the body and breaks the Yin-Yang balance. The symptoms, such as sneezing, nasal congestion, running nose, itchy and watery eyes, etc., are caused by excessive Yang. Honey, which is made from nectar by bees, is Yin. Eating honey, therefore, according to the Yin-Yang theory, can offset the excessive Yang caused by pollen, therefore, it can cure pollen allergy.

Now we need to understand why the honey has to be local. Say, honey from New Zealand may not cure pollen allergy in Boston. What is important in this belief is that the word "local" is actually misleading. Just like one type of medicine treats one illness, the key that honey treats pollen allergy in fact is that the honey can treat the allergy caused by pollen from the same type

of plant. For example, allergy caused by, say, clover pollen can be cured by honey made from nectar produced by the same kind of clover. The reason people keep referring to “local” honey is because the closer the distance, the more plants that may be the same that produce both allergy causing pollen and honey treating it.

If, let us assume, one’s allergy is caused by pollen from ten different plants, and he eats honey that is made from nectar from the same ten plants. In such a case, the allergy should be cured completely. However, this is not likely in reality. One may have allergy caused by pollen from X number of plants, and the local honey he eats may be made from nectar from Y number of plants. X and Y may overlap, which we may call a Z number. As the distance gets shorter, Z gets greater, and as the distance gets farther, Z becomes smaller. In reality, however, X and Y will never overlap each other completely. In other word, Z will never equal X or Y or both. This is what leads people to believe that only local honey can cure pollen allergy. This is also the reason why in most cases, eating local honey can only reduce the symptoms but will not lead to an instant and complete cure.

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