

# EATING FOR LONG LIFE: SUN SIMIAO ON DIETETICS

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### Introduction

The importance of eating and cooking in Chinese culture is a popular truism, demonstrated by the fact that you can find a Chinese restaurant in practically every corner of the world. If you were to judge only on the basis of the often-questionable health value of meals served in such establishments, however, you might be surprised to learn of the close connection that has existed between food and medicine throughout all of China's long history. A common expression in Chinese medical theory states that "medicine and food share the same origin" (藥食同源). Already the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic (*Huangdi Neijing*) from the Han dynasty explains the difference between food and medicine as one not of substance but of context: "Eaten on an empty stomach, it is food. Eaten when suffering, it is medicine" (*Neijing, Taisu*). Many texts recount the famous story of the Divine Farmer (*Shennong*) in the ancient past tasting a hundred herbs a day to find out which ones were safe to eat for humans and which ones had to be avoided. And when the Yellow Emperor asks Qi Bo whether to restrict the intake of toxic medicinals, his trusted advisor replies:

"There are diseases that are chronic, and diseases that are newly acquired; there are prescriptions that are large, and prescriptions that are small; and [there are medicinals] that are toxic, and [medicinals] that are non-toxic. You most certainly have to observe the common restrictions. When treating disease with greatly toxic [medicinals], get rid of 60 percent [of the disease, and then stop taking medicine]. When treating disease with [medicinals of] ordinary toxicity, get rid of 70 percent [and then stop]. When treating disease with mildly toxic [medicinals], get rid of 80 percent [and then stop]. When treating disease without any toxic [medicinals], remove 90 percent [and then stop]. Finish up the treatment with grains, meats, fruits, and vegetables to nourish the patient with food. Do not allow these [restrictions] to be exceeded or the patient's right qi will be damaged" (*Suwen 70*).

This intimate connection between food and medicine has endured unbroken all the way to modern China, where countless books, websites, advertisements, and products today fan the flames of yet another craze of "eating for longevity," in both popular and medical markets. And because of the growing recognition and popularity of Chinese medicine across the globe, this view of food as

medicine is highly significant also for the ways in which Chinese medicine practitioners treat, inform, and consult their patients everywhere else in the world. It is medical advice that is simple, cheap, effective, and universally applicable, regardless of social, economic, or geographical context. Last but not least, it is a welcome message for many in this age of factory farms and fast foods.

### Sun Simiao, the Qianjinfang, and "Nurturing Life"

The following pages will introduce the reader to the classical Chinese approach to "treating with food" (*shizhi* 食治), as elaborated in volume 26 of the famous medical encyclopedia called *Beiji qianjin yaofang* (*Essential Formulas Worth a Thousand in Gold to Prepare for Emergencies*, below abbreviated as *Essential Formulas*).<sup>\*</sup> But before we look at the content of this text, which was composed around 652 CE, I would like to contextualize this information by discussing its author's approach to health, to medicine, and to the art of "nurturing life" (*yangsheng* 養生).



**Wooden statue of Sun Simiao 孙思邈 as the Medicine God, seated on a tiger and holding a dragon above him (19th century)**

My fascination with Sun Simiao, the famous “King of Medicinals” (藥王) who lived in China during the early Tang dynasty, dates back a good two dozen years now, when I first delved into his three volumes on gynecology. Trying to find the source for his insightful teachings on the female body, and his reasons for so consciously emphasizing women’s healthcare over all other aspects of medicine, I have been investigating Sun Simiao’s views on medicine and health ever since.

Several centuries after his death, he was celebrated as a man of exceptional longevity (born c. 581, died c. 682), if not immortality, and supernatural powers, with deep insights into cosmology, philosophy, religion, literature, and esoteric arts like divination and calendrical calculations, all skills typical of a prestigious member of the early Tang elite with a Daoist inclination.



**Qing Dynasty illustration of Sun Simiao (center) demonstrating his complete control of the tiger and dragon**

His official biographies in the dynastic histories reveal few but significant details about his life. Commonly imagined and venerated as one of China’s greatest physicians who spent his days as a hermit on a mountain top in the company of a tiger and a dragon, historical evidence suggests a different story. Sun Simiao appears to have reluctantly joined the first Tang emperor in 618 in the capital at what was then already an advanced age, after a personal invitation from the emperor. He remained at the Tang court for more than half a century as an imperial advisor until he was granted retirement in 674 and once again disappeared into obscurity.



**White Cloud Temple to Sun Simiao, Beijing**

What stands out is not what we find in written accounts about Sun Simiao but what we do not find. Nowhere in his own writings or in accounts about him that were composed within a few centuries of his lifetime is there any mention of medical training, a medical lineage, a transmission of medical texts, a professional medical practice in the modern sense of that term, or of successful treatments and happy patients. Given Sun’s eminent social status with close connections to the highest members of the Tang court, I find it highly unlikely that any medical activity of his would not have been transmitted in the written accounts about him. In that case, how are we to explain the fact that he is celebrated as one of China’s greatest physicians and has his name associated with one of the most important texts in the history of Chinese medicine?



**19th Century painting of Sun Simiao (left) in dialogue. He sits on a tiger and a dragon is held in his left hand**

The answer to this question, and the reason why I raise it in the context of an article on dietetics in the first place, is, I believe, to be found in Sun Simiao's approach to medicine as the practice of "nurturing life" (*yangsheng* 養生). In other words, to understand Master Sun's writings about "medicine" (*yi* 醫), we first have to understand the meaning and significance of this term for Sun and his contemporaries. As Sun Simiao himself states in the introduction to volume 5 on pediatrics, "The present collection of treatments is arranged by placing the treatments for women and children first, and those for husbands and the elderly afterwards. The significance of this structure is that it venerates the root."

This statement expresses a concern with nurturing not just the individual life of the practitioner engaged in the arts of *yangsheng* as a personal program of health-cultivation, but with promoting life in a much larger sense, as the life of the extended family, of the state and country, and ultimately of the entire universe, intimately connected in a web of not only correspondences but correlations expressed in the notions of yin-yang and the five dynamic movements (*wuxing* 五行). In this context, it becomes a logical step to want to nurture life in this larger sense by furthering the wellbeing of one's family and ensuring reproduction, which obviously begins with the health of women and children as the root of the family. And I believe it is according to this logic that Sun Simiao structured his *Essential Prescriptions* by placing the prescriptions for women and children first, followed by general medical prescriptions for a broad variety of internal and external conditions, and then a volume each on "treating with food" (*shizhi* 食治) and "nurturing the inner nature" (*yangxing* 養性), to conclude with discussions of pulse diagnosis, acupuncture, and moxibustion.

To shed more light on this obviously deliberate structure and on Master Sun's choice of content for his monumental encyclopedia, not least the fact that it includes an entire volume on dietetics, let us turn to the text itself.

Sun Simiao's masterpiece is inspired by two concepts, which are also central to his approach to dietetics and may therefore help the modern reader appreciate the sections on dietetics that I have translated below.

### Treat disease before it arises

As Sun mentions in several places throughout the book, "To be skilled at nurturing life is to treat disease before it arises" (*zhi wei bing* 治未病, *Essential Prescriptions*, Vol. 27). In other words, Sun's writings, just like much of the wisdom

contained in other Chinese medical classics like the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic*, express a vision of medicine that is far more ambitious than our current practice of going to the doctor when we experience dis-ease or know that there is something wrong. In a statement that would drive the booming market for supplements, whether natural or pharmaceutical, into bankruptcy and collapse most modern economies were we to put it into practice, he goes even further: "...Even if you constantly ingest alchemical preparations but do not know the art of nurturing life, it will still be difficult to extend your lifespan. The way of nurturing life is to constantly strive for minor exertion but never become greatly fatigued and force what you cannot endure!" The benefits of prevention over treatment, of slowing down and getting rest over collapsing, of not pushing yourself too hard, are obvious not only to each of us on an individual level but also to health insurance corporations and governments.

### The microcosm as a reflection of the macrocosm

The second concept that is central to Master Sun's vision of medicine is the recognition that the body is just one microcosm among many, which all change in accordance with the same principles, principles that also govern the changes that occur in the macrocosm. Understanding the changes, positive or negative, that take place in one microcosm then facilitates one's insights into the operation of the macrocosm at large or of any other microcosm. The prime example of this interconnection is the conversations between the Yellow Emperor and his medical consultant Qi Bo. Sun Simiao includes a lovely account of this equivalence, identified as a quote from another early Chinese text:

"A quote from the *Baopuzi*: The human body is just like a country. The chest and abdomen are like the imperial palace, the arrangement of the four limbs like the outskirts, the divisions of the bones and joints like the hundred offices. The shen (spirit/s) is like the gentlemen, the blood like the servants, and the qi like the general population. Knowing how to treat the body, you hence know how to rule the country. By loving your people, you keep the country in peace. By cherishing your qi, you keep the body complete. When the population scatters, the country perishes. When the qi is used up, the body dies."

And this ideal of "cherishing your qi to keep your body complete" is exactly what Master Sun's writings on "treating with food" are concerned with.



## “Treating With Food”: The Intersection of Prescription Collections and Materia Medica

Without taking etymology too far here, it is significant that the term that is used to express the notion of dietetics in this section, namely what I have been translating as “treating with food” (*shi zhi* 食治), includes the character 治. In addition to its meaning as medical treatment in such standard compounds as 治病 (*zhi bing*, “to treat disease”), the same character is used just as frequently to convey the sense of “govern” or “rule,” as in the compound from the quote above, 治國 (*zhi guo*, “to govern the country”). What does the medical management of the body have in common with the political management of a country? The original meaning of the character, as explained in the oldest Chinese dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi*, centers on the control and management of water, specifically the dredging of canals to channel flood waters that the ancient culture hero Yu carried out to facilitate the establishment of civilization. The character 治 thus includes the concept that the forces of nature cannot be stopped completely (Yu’s father was, after all, sentenced to death, for trying just that) but must be directed and managed in such a way that they do no harm to humans but are allowed to flow without obstruction and are ultimately able to pour into the ocean that is their final destination.

The implications of this attitude toward nature for medical treatment and more specifically for the topic of this article, the management of the human body by means of food, shall become clear in the following paragraphs.

Literature on “treating with food” is situated at the intersection of two literary traditions in classical Chinese medicine: prescription texts (*fangshu* 方書) like the *Treatise on Cold Damage* (*Shanghanlun* 傷寒論) and *Essentials from the Golden Cabinet* (*Jingui Yaolue* 金匱要略) on the one hand, and materia medica (*bencao* 本草), like the *Divine Farmer’s Classic of Materia Medica* (*Shennong Bencaojing* 神農本草經, below abbreviated as *Divine Farmer’s Classic*) on the other. As Zhang Zhongjing’s preface to the *Treatise on Cold Damage* shows, the first of these, prescription collections, originated in the practical experience of physicians. Inspired by the desire to alleviate the suffering of humankind, these texts aim at the treatment of disease by means of formulas with medicinal efficacy, with the ultimate goal of restoring the balance of yin and yang, the smooth flow of qi and blood, and the proper functioning of the five *zang* and six *fu* organs in the body by supplementing deficiency and draining excess.

The classics of Chinese materia medica literature, on the other hand, do not come from the milieu of professionally practising physicians but of practitioners of the arts of nurturing life. They aim

not at treating disease but at cultivating health to promote longevity, if not immortality, by sharing knowledge about the effects of natural substances on the human body.

The Chinese term for “materia medica,” *bencao* 草本, means literally translated “[knowledge that is] rooted in herbs.” The earliest extant example of this literature, the above-mentioned *Divine Farmer’s Classic* from the Han dynasty, is a direct manifestation of this world view. It discusses 365 natural substances, ranked in three hierarchical grades that correspond to the trinity of Heaven, Humanity, and Earth. As the preface explains, the “gentlemen” (*jun* 君) nurture the heavenly mandated life-span (*yang ming* 養命), correspond to Heaven, are non-toxic, can be taken for a long time without damaging the body, and have the effect of lightening the body, boosting qi, and prolonging life. In the second category, the “ministers” (*chen* 臣) nurture the inner nature (*yang xing* 養性), correspond to humanity, are partly toxic and partly non-toxic, and are used to prevent illness and supplement vacuity and emaciation. Substances in the lowest category, characterized as “assistants” (*zuo* 佐) and “couriers” (*shi* 使), treat disease (*zhi bing* 治病), correspond to earth, are toxic, may not be taken over a long time, and are used to “expel the evil qi of cold or heat, break up accumulations, and cure disease.” To present an example, *gancao* (licorice, the root of *Glycyrrhiza uralensis*) is classified as a substance of the highest grade, with a sweet flavor, neutral nature, and no toxicity. “It rules the evil qi of cold and heat in the five *zang* organs and six *fu* organs, hardens the sinews and bones, grows flesh, and doubles strength. [It is indicated for] incised wounds and swellings, and it resolves toxin. Taken over a long time, it lightens the body and extends the years.”

## Volume 26 in the *Essential Prescriptions*

### A. The Preface

Mirroring the ideals expressed in the *Divine Farmer’s Classic*, Sun Simiao’s volume on dietetics takes a similarly cautious approach to the question of medical intervention. In five sections, it offers some general ideas and rules in a preface and then discusses the effects of fruits, vegetables, grains, and animal substances on the human body. For the purposes of this article, I present here a translation of excerpts from the Preface and merely outline the information in the other four sections:

“Zhang Zhongjing said: ‘When a person’s body is balanced and harmonious, you must merely nurture it well.’ Do not recklessly take drugs, because the strength of drugs assists only partially and causes the person’s visceral qi to be imbalanced, so that they easily contract external trouble. All things that contain qi provide food and thereby preserve life.

Nevertheless, eating them unawares has the opposite effect. The common people use them daily without awareness, and so they hardly recognize when water and fire draw near. I sigh deeply about this situation and, relying on the leisure of brush and ink, have composed this chapter on the benefits and detriments of the five flavors in dietary therapy, to expose this childishness. Diligently carrying out this [advice] will yield shadow- or echo-like results.

Wei Fan from Hedong recorded Bian Que as saying: 'The physical body is what people rely on; disease is what disorders harmonious qi; drugs are what regulate vexing poisons; and the physician is who rescues life and provides support in crises'. To make the root of the body safe, you must provide it with food. To rescue from the speed of disease, you must rely on drugs. If you do not know the appropriateness of specific foods, you will be unable to preserve life. If you do not understand the avoidances of drugs, you will be unable to eliminate disease. To differentiate between these two types is essential for anything with spirit. To disregard and fail to study this is truly lamentable. For this reason, food is able to expel evil and secure the *zang* and *fu* organs, to please the spirit and clear the will, by supplying blood and qi. If you are able to use food to stabilize chronic disease, release emotions, and chase away disease, you can call yourself an outstanding artisan. This is the special method of lengthening the years and "eating for old age", and the utmost art of nurturing life.

To practice medicine, you must first thoroughly understand the source of disease and know what has been violated. Then, use food to treat it, and if food does not cure it, afterwards apply drugs. The nature of drugs is harsh and unyielding. This is just like managing soldiers. Soldiers being fierce and violent, how could you allow them to recklessly set out! ...

The highly esteemed Wang Shuhe said that foods should not be combined because combined foods may contain some that clash with each other. If they clash, they may cause damage, or if not causing suffering right at that time, accumulate over time to give the person trouble.

Furthermore, in indulging in a diet of seafood, strive for simplicity and scarcity. In fish and fruit, choose only those that are beneficial for human consumption. In all the common drinks and foods, be frugal. An insatiable appetite, excessive feasting, and severe overeating will cause a feeling of distention in the abdomen and shortage of qi after the meal, possibly even fulminant sickness and sudden upheaval. Furthermore, after the apex of the summer

season when entering fall, you must beware of fatty and slimy foods, cakes and meat broths, butter and oil and the like. These substances are further obstructed by alcohol and fermented foods, by melon and fruit.

The reason for the presence of increased sickness in the body is always related to the excessive consumption of cold substances and by immoderate eating and drinking in the spring and summer. Furthermore, fish, minced fish, and malodorous and cold substances mostly harm a person. To stop taking them is of great benefit. Frequent consumption of milk, koumiss, and similar substances gives a person strength in the sinews, great courage, and a body glistening with health. But if eaten in excess, they can also cause upper abdominal distention and diarrhea and gradually cause damage.

The Yellow Emperor said: 'The five flavors enter through the mouth. Each has a destination where it proceeds to, and each has a disease associated with it. Sourness proceeds to the sinews, and the overconsumption of sour foods causes dribbling urinary block. You don't know why this is so?' Shao Yu said [advising the Yellow Emperor]: 'Regarding sourness entering the stomach, its qi is astringent and therefore contracts. Above, it proceeds to the two upper burners and if the qi of the two upper burners is astringed, it is unable to exit or enter. Failing to exit, it lodges in the stomach, and if the stomach is warm and harmonious, it pours down into the bladder. The bladder proceeds to the womb, which is thin and therefore soft. Exposed to sourness, it shrinks and curls up, becomes constrained and stops flowing. The pathway of water is inhibited, which causes dribbling urinary block. Yin is the final gathering place of essence and the sinews. Therefore when sourness enters the stomach, it proceeds to the sinews.'

The following sections similarly discuss the effect of eating too much salty, acrid, bitter, and sweet foods, followed by more information on correlating foods with colors, flavors, internal organs, etc., in accordance with the doctrine of the five dynamic movements as expressed in the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic*. It then offers food-related medical advice, such as to eat hemp, dog meat, plum, and Chinese chive for liver disease, but wheat, mutton, almonds and shallots for heart disease....

"If the heart suffers from slackness, quickly eat sour foods to contract it, but if you want to soften the heart, quickly eat salty foods. Use sweet foods to drain it, and avoid warm foods and thick clothing. If the spleen suffers from dampness, quickly eat bitter (or in another edition, salty) foods to dry it. If you want to relax it, quickly eat sweet foods to relax it, use bitter foods to drain it, and avoid warm foods

and overeating, damp ground and moistened clothing. ...

The reason for these [methods above] is that toxic medicines attack evil, the five grains provide nourishment, the five meats provide benefit, the five fruits provide assistance, and the five vegetables provide fullness. *Jing* essence uses the qi of food. Qi nourishes essence and thereby gives a flourishing complexion. The body uses the flavor of food. ...

If the qi of different foods are averse to each other, this damages essence. The body receives flavor to mature. If the flavor of foods is not balanced, it injures the body. For this reason, the sage first uses food avoidances to preserve the inner nature and afterwards prepares medicines to guard the natural lifespan. Therefore, if the body is insufficient, warm it with qi; if essence is insufficient, supplement it with flavor. Qi and flavor warm and supplement, thereby preserving the body and essence.... Yin flavor exits from the lower orifices, while yang qi exits from the upper orifices. Thick flavor is yin, and thin flavor is yang within yin; thick qi is yang, and thin qi is yin within yang. When the flavor is thick, it drains out; when it is thin, it flows freely. When qi is thin, it effuses; when it is thick, it becomes clogged. ...Acrid and sweet flavors effuse and dissipate, constituting yang; sour and bitter flavors gush and drain, constituting yin. When yin prevails, yang is diseased; when yang prevails, yin is diseased. When yin and yang are balanced and harmonious, the person is stable and quieted.

In the 72 days of spring, be sparing with sourness and increase sweetness, in order to nourish spleen qi. In the 72 days of summer, be sparing with bitterness and increase acidity, in order to nourish lung qi. In the 72 days of autumn, be sparing with acidity and increase sourness, in order to nourish liver qi. In the 72 days of winter, be sparing with saltiness and increase bitterness, in order to nourish heart qi. In the 18 days of the last month of each season, be sparing with sweetness and increase saltiness, in order to nourish kidney qi."

## **B. Chapters Two to Five: Fruits, Vegetables, Grains and Animal Products**

The next chapter in Sun Simiao's volume on "Treating with Food", entitled "Fruits and Seeds", includes entries on nuts, berries, fruits, and fruit pits, from areca nut to pomegranate and walnut. With the exception of *xingren* (apricot pit) and pear, all other fruits are classified as non-toxic. Descriptions commonly include information like boosting qi, lightening the body, lengthening life, strengthening the spleen, and expelling dampness or pain, but also warnings, such as in the case of fresh jujube: "Eating excessive amounts will give

the person heat, thirst, and qi distention. People with hot-cold emaciation must not eat it. It will injure them." Warning against overconsumption of a single substance, walnut, for example, "must not be eaten in excess. It stirs phlegm-rheum and causes nausea and vomiting of fluids and food."

The entries on vegetables include various greens and their seeds, melons and gourds, alliums, tree leaves and barks, seaweeds, ginger, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, etc. To cite just a few examples, prolonged consumption of cilantro (coriander) causes forgetfulness, while the consumption of hollyhock (flower and leaf) after getting bit by a dog will prevent the bite from healing. Interestingly, the only toxic substances are cucumber and bottle gourds, *shujiao* (zanthoxylum), and *cangerzi* (cocklebur, xanthium). To give just two examples that you won't have to go far to find, perilla (also known by its Japanese name *shiso*) is described as "acrid and warm in flavor and non-toxic. It is indicated for counterflow cough, precipitates qi, warms the center, and supplements marrow. Its leaf is indicated for balancing the center and getting rid of bad body odor. Pick in the ninth month and use shade-dried. The oil can also be used to make oiled cloth."

For an even more common substance, readers will be happy to learn the following about tea leaves: They are "bitter, salty, sour, cold, and non-toxic. They can be consumed over long periods of time and give a person energy and please the will. They stir qi slightly. According to the Yellow Emperor, 'you must not consume them together with Chinese chive, because this makes the person's body heavy.'" The section on vegetables concludes with yet another quotation from the Yellow Emperor:

"On the fifth day of the fifth month, do not eat any vegetables, or the hundred diseases will break out. Always thoroughly cook the various vegetables and eat them warm. After recovering from seasonal disease, eating the various types of meat with garlic and having sexual intercourse after eating will cause the disease to break out and invariably leads to death. Eating raw greens when you have not yet fully recovered from seasonal disease invariably makes the hands and feet turn green-blue and swell. Having sexual intercourse after eating green vegetables when you have not yet fully recovered from seasonal disease makes the disease erupt again and invariably leads to death. In the tenth month, do not eat vegetables that have been exposed to frost. This causes a lusterless facial complexion, dryness and pain in the eyes, and malaria outbreaks, heart pain, and lumbar pain, possibly to the point of heart malaria with outbreaks that turn all the finger and toe nails blue-green, and encumbrance and wilting."

The next chapter, titled "grains," covers much more than what most people would think of as such, namely all sorts of seeds, sprouts, legumes, liquor, vinegar, and, a little surprisingly, even salt, in addition to such standard grains as rice, millet, wheat, and buckwheat. The only toxic entry in this category is liquor, which is described as follows:

"Bitter, sweet, and acrid in flavor and greatly hot. It is toxic. It stirs the force of [other] medicinals and kills the malign qi of the hundred evils... According to Bian Que, 'Drinking liquor for a long time putrefies the intestines and erodes the stomach, ulcerates the marrow and steams the sinews, damages the spirit and harms longevity.'"

Last but not least, the discussion of animal products provides information on milk and milk products from different sources, from human breast milk to sow's milk and yak butter, on all sorts of animal parts like meat, gall, hooves, skulls, marrow, teeth, steer urine, penis of wild stallions, dogs, boars, dog brain, hare's liver, raw mice, elk fat, different varieties of fowl (do not eat meat from a chicken or wild bird that has died without stretching the feet!), swallow droppings, honey and wax, and insects and fish.

To cite just one example:

"Deer's head meat is neutral. It treats dispersion thirst, profuse dreaming, and visions, engenders blood, and treats welling-abscesses. The penis is indicated for taxation detriment. The hoof meat is neutral and governs pain in the feet and knee bones preventing the person from stepping on the ground. The bones are indicated for internal vacuity, for reconnecting injuries from cuts, and for supplementing bone. They can be processed into a liquor. The marrow is sweet and warm in flavor and is indicated for men and women's damage in the center, interrupted [flow in the] vessels, tension and pain in the sinews, and counterflow cough. Take it mixed in liquor. The kidney is neutral and indicated for supplementing kidney qi. The meat is bitter and warm in flavor, non-toxic, and supplements the center, strengthens the five *zang* organs, and boosts qi and energy. The raw meat governs wind strike and deviated mouth. Slice it very finely and spread it on the deviated place."

The text concludes by again quoting the Yellow Emperor with some stern warnings:

"Do not eat fish with white eyes. Eating fish with horns will cause the outbreak of heart fright and harm the person. Eating fish that lack intestines or a gallbladder causes impotence in the husband and infertility in the wife for three years. Fish with black spots on the body must not be eaten. Minced fish from fish with red eyes causes accumulations...."

## Conclusion

Perhaps even more clearly than in the more clinically oriented volumes of the *Essential Prescriptions*, what is most striking to me about the information in this volume on "treating with food" is the emphasis on balance and avoiding harm in Sun Simiao's approach to medicine as the art of restoring or improving health. More than anything, knowing that and how everything in the external environment affects the human body is essential if we are to avoid harm. As Sun himself warns in the very beginning of the *Essential Prescriptions*, "To add to what is already full or to decrease what is already deficient, to make what is already flowing freely penetrate even further or to congest what is already blocked, to cool what is already cold or to warm what is already hot, this is only doubling the disorder. Where there was still hope for the patient's life, I now see their death." And if we can avoid harm, there is no need for toxic drugs or harsh interventions because disease will never break out in the first place.

\* For a wider survey of Sun Simiao's thought, see my "Nurturing Life in Classical Chinese Medicine: Sun Simiao on Healing without Drugs, Transforming Bodies and Cultivating Life" *Journal of Chinese Medicine* *Journal of Chinese Medicine* No. 93, June 2010.

## Acknowledgements

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## About the author

Ever since the research for her PhD dissertation on medieval Chinese gynecology, Dr. Sabine Wilms has been studying and teaching, reading and writing about classical Chinese medical literature. She is a popular international lecturer, professor at the School of Classical Chinese Medicine, National College of Natural Medicine in Portland, Oregon, and an independent writer and researcher. She has dedicated her life to transmitting the wisdom from the Chinese medical classics to practitioners of Chinese medicine in the modern world. For her translations of Sun Simiao's writings on gynecology and pediatrics, watch out for a forthcoming publication by Happy Goat Productions. Also note that Sabine has an active Facebook page called 'Sun Simiao, God of Medicinals and Master of Nurturing Life'.