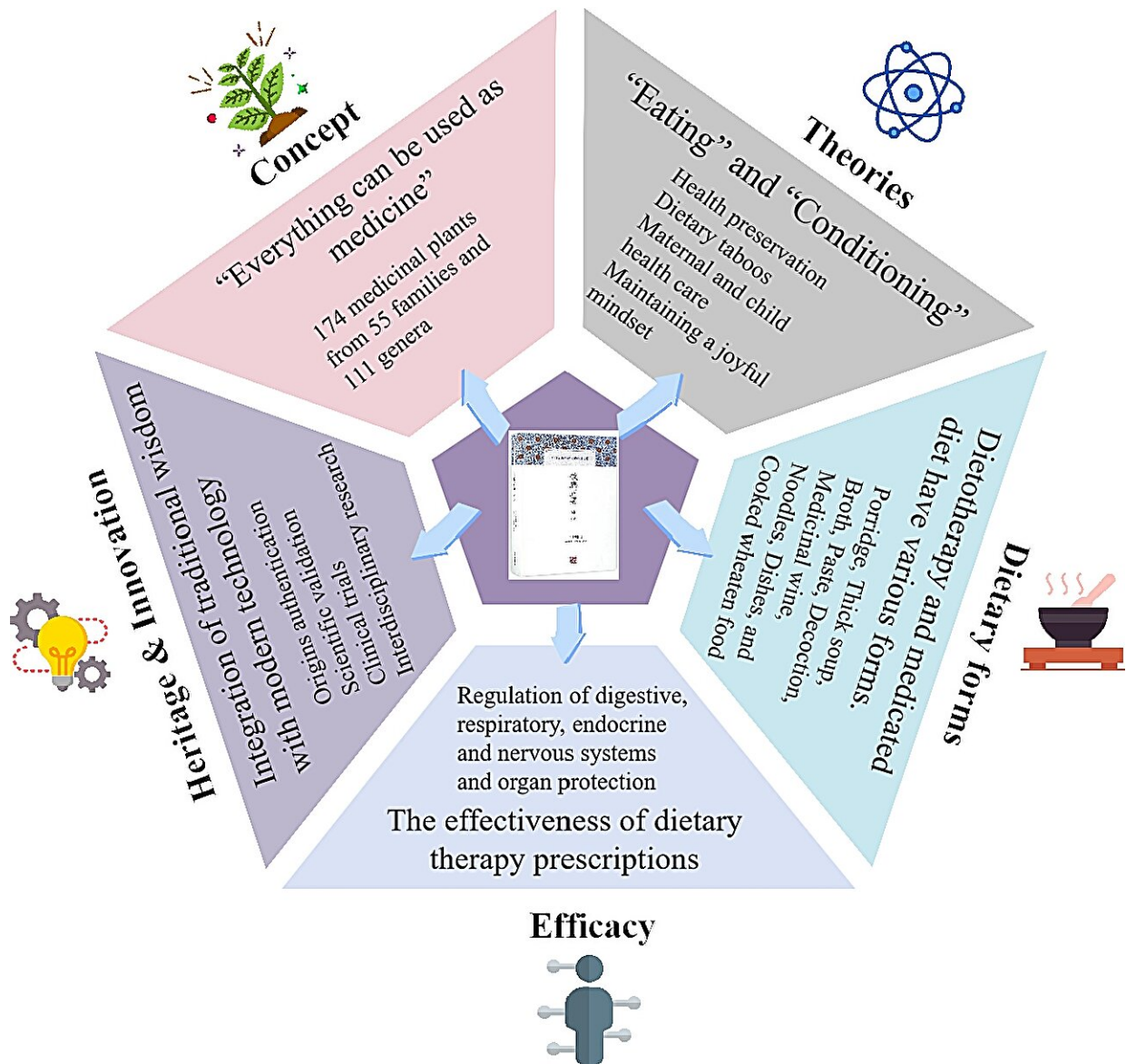


# Utilizing food as medicine: A modern exploration of an old practice

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The five key elements that bring Yinshan Zhengyao together to explore the

effects food can have on all facets of life. Credit: Chun-Hong Zhang and Min-Hui Li, Baotou Medical College

While this concept may have been the norm hundreds of years ago, many present-day societies are overfed and undernourished, leading to floods of health issues in many populations. Getting back to the basics might be a large part of the solution

We've all heard "you are what you eat," but mostly we hear it used to describe the unfortunate [health](#) effects one might have after a prolonged unhealthy diet. However, it can go the other way around.

Using the text of Yinshan Zhengyao, researchers are bringing an old established concept of using food to treat ailments under the light of a modern context, with the added benefits of the current knowledge of genetics and metabolism to help propel the teachings of Yinshan Zhengyao into the public eye once again.

Researchers published their results in [Food and Medicine Homology](#).

"Yinshan Zhengyao is the world's first authoritative nutritional treatise, compiled by Hu Sihui, a dietitian of the Yuan dynasty. This work embodies the traditional Chinese medicinal concept of 'homology of food and medicine,' rich in the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation," said, Min-Hui Li, researcher and author of the study.

Yinshan Zhengyao comprises 174 [medicinal plants](#) across 55 unique plant families and 111 genera. These plants are indispensable to the culture of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Another highly important piece of this traditional Chinese text is the power of the mind and mood over the human body. Cheerfulness and tranquility are aspects

that are emphasized in Yinshan Zhengyao, as the mind-body connection can be as important as the fuel taken in by an individual.

"In Yinshan Zhengyao, dietary therapies are particularly interesting for their effects on regulating digestion, respiration, endocrine, and nervous system functions, as well as protecting and regulating various organs," said Li.

The foundation of this text is to provide treatment (and prevention) of [chronic diseases](#) through the use of plants, but also by instilling the importance of quality food in society. By viewing food as medicine, greater emphasis and care are put into the preparation and consumption of food by "putting the food to work" not only as a source of energy but as a source of longevity.

In TCM, diseases come from imbalances in the body. For example, kidneys are seen as organs that work closely with the reproductive system and the regulation of fluid metabolism.

Modern discoveries show that kidneys, in addition to being an important part of the urinary system, are also related to maintaining fluid balance and endocrine function. Treating one part of the body can have a cascade of effects that one might not have imagined would be related, such as lumbar pain or limb weakness as a result of renal (kidney) issues.

With the Yinshan Zhengyao text hailing back to the early 14th century, modern medicines and therapies can be used in conjunction with the plant and diet information available from this early work on diet, health and nutrition. Professor Min-Hui Li and his team propose the integration of modern information to explore and analyze health care's use of medicine and parallel food sources.

By studying modern applications of health and medicine, like the [human](#)

[genome](#), metabolism and regulatory networks and relationships, researchers aim to continue helping the forward movement of enhancing human health along with bringing the idea of food as medicine into a larger, more modern lens.

**More information:** Hui Niu et al, Yinshan Zhengyao: exploring the power of food and inheriting healthy thoughts, *Food & Medicine Homology* (2024). [DOI: 10.26599/FMH.2024.9420006](https://doi.org/10.26599/FMH.2024.9420006)

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