The Chinese believe that herbs have their own unique flavours and natural properties that have affinities to certain organs in the body. When consumed, their energies in *yin* or *yang* are directed to these organs.

According to the ancient Chinese, food and herbs are the same. Many of us use herbs in our cooking and yet are ignorant of their medicinal values. Take for example, ginger. This common and widely used herb has numerous medicinal properties. The Chinese believe that herbs help nurture health.

In bio-chemistry lessons, we learn that all matter is made of chemical constituents. To the chemist, food or herbs have certain active ingredients in them. These active ingredients are the chemical agents that give them the potency as drugs or medicine. So, most people commonly ask what is it in a herb that makes it work.

There is an obsession in today’s hectic lifestyle to find and consume the active ingredients for quick results. Many of us take certain types of food because they contain this or that vitamin or mineral. Some people think that the active ingredient, vitamin, mineral or caloric content in a food or herb is all there is to it. Indeed, we agree to this scientific aspect of such analysis, but we have also learnt that this is only one aspect of the reality, and that by knowing this, we are still far from knowing the whole truth.

Food and herbs have life and energy within them. When these vibrate in resonance with our human energy, they energise and heal us. This is one aspect of thinking that science has ignored or missed out. Food, the herb, or our very own human body is not just a pile of dead chemicals. The chemical constituents seen by chemists are the tangible expression of the biological energies within matter. Cutting-edge physics has now come to sing the same song as the ancient sages, saying that energy determines matter and not the other way round!

Some 5,000 years ago, ancient Chinese said that food and herbs have their own unique, natural properties. They have tastes such as sweet, sour, pungent, salty and bitter. They have cool, cold, warm, hot or neutral nature. Besides that, food and herbs have their affinities to certain organs in the body. When consumed, their energies are directed to these organs.

Zhang Zhonging, the physician of the 2nd-3rd century wrote: “Flavours of foodstuff may exert active effect on health recovery or exert negative effect on health. Proper application of them will be beneficial; improper application, harmful.”

Another outstanding Chinese physician, Sun Si-Mao said: “Food can expel pathogenic factors from the human
The Chinese have identified a number of herbs that can supplement and tone up qi, blood, yin and yang. Herbs can be classified into three grades:

- **Superior grade**
  These herbs nourish life and spirit. They are non-toxic and can be used on a long-term basis to maintain health.

- **Medium grade**
  These herbs nourish form or the body. They are generally non-toxic or a little toxic, and are used to treat chronic and light diseases.

- **Low grade**
  These herbs are toxic and are used to expel diseases in acute and more serious diseases.

To the Chinese, taking herbs as food is either to treat diseases or to build up health and prevent diseases.

Here are some commonly used herbs that are good for health.

**Ginseng**
*Panax Ginseng, Ren Shen*

*Nature:* Sweet and mildly bitter, slightly warm
*Meridian:* Heart, lung and spleen

It replenishes and supplements the original qi, and supplements the lung yin.

Ginseng is considered the herb of eternal life and the elixir of life among the Chinese. The fundamental value of this herb lies in its extraordinary ability to promote and correct the body’s chemical imbalance. Various scientific studies have shown that ginseng acts on the pituitary glands and stimulates the adrenal glands, thus increasing the body’s resistance to the ill-effects of stress. Ginseng also stimulates the hypothalamus in the brain to secrete substances that stimulate cell growth and healing in the sex organs.

The value of ginseng is determined by the origin, age and how the herb is processed. For example, white ginseng refers to the root of the plants that are less than six years old. It is considered second quality. The roots are first bleached with sulphur gas and then sun-dried. Red ginseng refers to the root of older plants, generally six years or older.

Over-dosage of this herb can lead to headaches, insomnia, palpitation and a rise in blood pressure. A traditional antidote is mug bean soup.

**Chinese Caterpillar Fungus**
*Cordyceps sinensis, Dong Chong Cao*

*Nature:* Sweet, warm
*Meridian:* Lung and kidney

It invigorates the kidneys and lungs, and is known to relieve dyspnea, eliminate phlegm and stop bleeding. Those with shortness of breath and coughs with blood-tinged sputa will find this herb useful. It is a tonic for the aged and those who are weak due to long-term illness.

Be careful of fake cordyceps in the market. The plants *stachys gaobombcis* and *stachys sieboldii* produce tubers that look like worms. Another imitation is a processed product made from moulded maize, wheat powder and plaster. This imitation is yellowish in colour and has a smooth surface.

**Chinese Angelica**
*Angelica sinesis, Tang Kuei*

*Nature:* Sweet and acrid, warm
*Meridian:* Liver, heart and spleen

*Tang kuei* is considered the queen of woman’s herbs. It is deemed one of the most balanced yin tonic. It has the ability to strengthen and invigorate the entire female reproductive system and is used in every type of menstrual disorder. Despite being a ‘female herb’, it also effects the male reproductive system by increasing male fertility.

This herb nourishes the blood and regulates menstruation. It activates blood circulation and disperses cold. *Tang kuei* also moistens the large intestine and promotes bowel movement.
Dr. Chris K. H. Teo, (Ph. D.) was formerly a Professor of Botany at Universiti Sains Malaysia. He retired from this position after teaching and doing research at that University for 26 years. He has written numerous research papers and more than a dozen books. He was a Fellow of the Matsumae International Foundation, Fellow of the Alexander von Humbolt Foundation, and was also a consultant to UNDP-OPS-Bhutan Government.