

Will the “real” China study please stand up?



I have a vegetarian relative who comes to town from time to time to visit. It’s always a hassle negotiating a restaurant because he insists on vegan, and I prefer a place offering at least fish.

Recently we settled on Greek and met at a nice restaurant in Midtown. I ordered the whole fish and a big Greek salad with fresh olive oil. He scanned the menu skeptically, uttered a sigh, and issued precise instructions to the waiter:



Conflicting studies debate the influence of the Western diet on our health.

“Bring me a large salad—skip the feta cheese, NO dressing, just fresh lemon, and I’ll have a side of garbanzos, no oil please, and some sautéed spinach, but make it steamed instead, and a plate of rice, also without oil or butter.”

I glanced over at him and hoped the conversation would begin with the weather, politics, recently seen movies, family gossip—ANYTHING but diet, which I knew to be his favorite subject.

A retired dentist, talented gardener and vegetarian chef, he's a diet devotee. Although I'm a professional nutritionist, my relative always seems to want to pick a food fight with me.

"How can you ignore the evidence?" he salvoed. "Haven't you read *The China Study* by Professor Campbell? He's a top nutrition scientist, and his research clearly shows that meat and fat are causing the epidemic of degenerative diseases that we see in the West."

What he's referring to is a popular book by Colin Campbell, a Ph.D. researcher, Professor Emeritus of Nutritional Biochemistry at Cornell University and champion of vegetarian diets.

Actually, *The China Study* is not a "study" at all but an exhaustive compilation of patterns of diet and disease made over the course of decades in China and Taiwan. It has been lauded as the "Grand Prix of epidemiology" by *The New York Times*.

What it suggests—admittedly quite persuasively—is that there has been a dramatic uptick in degenerative diseases in China and that the increase is highly correlated with adoption of a Western diet. Cancer, heart disease and diabetes rates are convincingly shown to soar with escalating dairy and meat intake. Charts, tables and graphs abound.

The China Study is revered as the Rosetta Stone of the vegan creed, oft-cited as *prima facie* evidence for the superiority of a meat- and dairy-free diet.

But what if there were a new "China Study" that contradicted Colin Campbell's previous conclusions?

Well, as of this month, there is. It appears in the October edition of the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* entitled, "Meat intake and cause-specific mortality: a pooled analysis of Asian prospective cohort studies."

The article concludes: There is NO association between meat intake and risk of death due to any cause in all the Asian countries studied (including, of course, China).

The researchers acknowledge the undeniable fact that deaths due to degenerative diseases are skyrocketing in newly prosperous Asian countries.

Many have gone from predominantly rural societies to urbanized industrial powerhouses in the span of a few decades. With this have come the new specters of obesity, sedentary lifestyle, stress and environmental pollution. Yes, there appears to be a correlation between the animal food that Asians are increasingly able to afford and higher disease rates, but does it reflect causation?

When confronted with that question, not only could the researchers not find evidence of higher risk of death with total meat intake, they found the reverse! There was a lower risk of death for Asians who consumed more red meat, poultry and fish/seafood; specifically, men who ate more red meat had less heart disease, and women had less risk of cancer!

The authors admit that studies such as this are hard to do and that more access to meat might simply be a marker of better overall health status or affluence, confounding the results. They also note that what might apply to Asians—who still consume far less meat than North Americans—might not be applicable in the West.

And finally, while vindicating meats overall, this study does not address the question of safety of processed meats, whose harmful effects do show up in some diet studies.

What does this mean for the rest of us? Does this give us license to eat red meat three times a day? Should we all hop on the Paleo bandwagon? Well, not so fast, hunter-gatherer wannabes! It merely means we can shed the guilt about not being vegan and go “Gangnam Style” like the average Asian, with reasonable portions of lean meat, fish or poultry three or four times a week.

There was an awkward silence as I paused for a moment and looked at my relative: “Soooo . . . ” I ventured tentatively, “It’s pretty weird not having the Yankees in the play-offs this year, dontcha think?”