



WN Project Phoenix

They do things differently in China

[Access April Update on Project Phoenix here](#)

[Access May Update special on Project Phoenix here](#)

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Ancient Chinese concepts of the nature of healthy foods, meals and diets, are very different from nutrient-based modern Western nutrition science. Chinese students wonder if they can be reconciled

Mark Wahlqvist writes:

I am much encouraged by the work of WN in the first *Updates* on *Project Phoenix* (access these above). These and their concerted thinking could help to foster the eco-nutritional movement, now much needed.

Now I can now update the *Update!* I am just back to Hangzhou near Shanghai, from Kunming in Yunnan province. Kunming is a crossroads of civilisations, homeland of minorities like the Yi whose homes I visited (1). Yunnan is a font and passage of some of Asia's greatest and most threatened river systems, and includes a geological World Heritage area, in the foothills of the Himalayas. Kunming is the terminus of the Burma railroad on which my father's oldest brother, a telecommunications technician and Japanese prisoner-of-war, died in 1943, to be buried a stone's throw from the bridge on the River Kwai. This most beautiful place and its people, where spring is regarded as eternal, is threatened by climate disruption as never before known, that will cause food and water insecurity perhaps even in my life-time.

In Hangzhou at the university where I teach, the night before I went to Kunming, I mentored a class of exceptional young people from across China including the north-west and south-west regions. These first year undergraduates in food science, not a year out of high school, pointed out that the Chinese people have a spiritual

philosophical and practical understanding of food reflected in a Ying and Yang, hot and cold construct, accounting for where they live, current climate extremes in China, seasons, life's stages, and the vagaries of health.

They said that for them, the conventional modern Western idea of food in terms of nutrients fails to serve people's broader needs, and is partly responsible for global health problems like obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that there is much ecological asynchrony for food and health in China, as for example iodine deficiency, injury and stroke. They wish to understand how Chinese people can accommodate both Yang and Ying on the one hand and the new Chinese dietary guideline pagoda (2) on the other.

I am further encouraged !

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- 2 Ge K. The transition of Chinese dietary guidelines and the food guide pagoda. *Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 2011, **20**, 3, 449-446

Mark Wahlqvist, a former President of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences, was a participant in the 2005 workshop in Giessen responsible for the Giessen Declaration. For many years he has advocated eco-nutrition.

*Wahlqvist M. They do things differently in China [Project Phoenix]
[Feedback]. World Nutrition June 2015, 6, 6, 532-533*

Geoffrey Cannon adds: On behalf of the Update team – Mark Wahlqvist raises vital points. One is about history. What is being called ‘conventional nutrition’ was originally devised as a biochemical discipline less than 200 years ago, initially in Europe, and derives from European general theories about how the world works. Until recently these concepts were either unknown or generally rejected outside the Western world except in those regions and countries colonised by the European powers.

The second point is about philosophies of life. In some parts of the world, in particular those with ancient cultures like China, ideas concerning the material and living world and thus nutrition and nourishment are completely different from what the Project is calling ‘conventional nutrition’. Further, many idea systems, and various concepts of the originally ancient discipline of dietetics, practiced and understood all over the world, accommodate only some of conventional nutrition, and often see the equation of nutrition with chemical constituents of foods as curiously limited and not much help in attaining and maintaining personal or population good health and well-being.



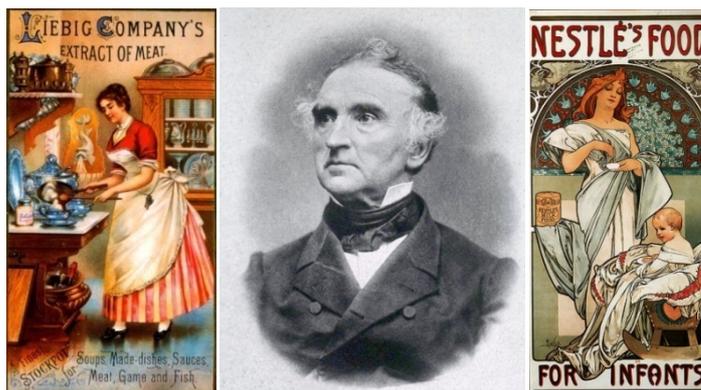
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The rise and fall of biochemical nutrition

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[Access this issue Update special on Project Phoenix here](#)



The biochemist Justus von Liebig of Giessen (centre) invented the first novel mass-manufactured ultra-processed products: meat extract (left) and – before Henri Nestlé – baby formula (right)

Claus Leitzmann writes :

It takes vast experience, immense courage and a clear vision to start the ambitious *Project Phoenix* (in *WN* in April, May and this month, accessed above) considering its far reaching implications and ambitious intention. If the project turns out to be successful, it could cloud the contributions of some Nobel Prize winners. Only those who have been in the front line assailing the prevailing nutrition science for decades can convincingly propose that conventional nutrition is burned out and that the golden era of nutrition science has ended.

WN editor Geoffrey Cannon surely has a hand in the project. Ever since I read his provocative 1987 book *The Politics of Food* and we found that we have similar opinions on the impact of sugar and processing on health, I have been impressed with his keen insight and persevering scrutiny of the conventional science of nutrition. He can illuminate the path to be taken to a fundamental change in nutrition science.

Project Phoenix as so far set out provides a compelling rationale for an independent course in nutrition education, free of any personal interests or commercial influences. The project seeks to put the nutrition situation of humankind on a new foundation and to save most of the money now spent on treatment for nutrition related diseases. As so far published it articulates brilliantly and expresses with remarkable clarity that the thrill in nutrition science can return by helping the public to avoid the fallacies of what is called modern nutrition.

Commercial interests and the confused population block independent advice on how to eat and drink for good health, for maintaining a sustainable environment and climate and for the quality of life for millions of malnourished people in economically developed countries. The same holds true for the persistent number of hungry people in economically underdeveloped countries as well as in countries undergoing rapid economic transition and life-course changes.

In the May issue of *WN* the project ingeniously compares the established mediaeval Roman Catholic Church to the obscurity of conventional nutrition science. This is simply a brilliant idea – and amusing, if it were not the bitter truth. Reductionism in conventional nutrition science has contributed to knowledge in many ways, but has not prevented chronic disease epidemics, and has caused massive confusion for experts and consumers alike with tragic health consequences. The road of reductionism has been paved with painful and mostly avoidable fiascos. It is a deceitful basis for nutrition education. The persisting ignorance of nutrition in its broader concept is a disaster.

The May contribution correctly points out the obvious paradox of ever more nutritionists and at the same time ever more nutritionally related diseases and continued hunger in the world. This dreadful situation requires and deserves urgent solutions. The only agenda of *Project Phoenix* is truth. For that reason the project is profoundly important since it can provide answers to the current nutrition problems and is no less than the start of a revolution, as was the rise of the mythical bird in antiquity and ever since.

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Leitzmann C. The rise and fall of biochemical nutrition. [Project Phoenix] [Feedback]. World Nutrition June 2015, 6, 6, 534-535

Claus Leitzmann, a former Treasurer of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences, was convenor of the 2005 workshop in Giessen responsible for the Giessen Declaration.

Geoffrey Cannon writes: Well yes, I do have a hand in Project Phoenix, but it is WN editorial teamwork, built from many people's experience, as the letters that follow this one indicate. Claus Leitzmann and I should also admit to long shared work together. Now for the pictures introducing the letter. Claus, a distinguished biochemist, has long been professor at Justus-Liebig University in Giessen, where Justus von Liebig in effect devised nutrition as a biochemical science. He invented the first mass-manufactured ultra-processed products, infant formula (before Henri Nestle) and meat extract. Having spent a week in Giessen in 2005 with Claus as host, I began to see that this is where the trouble started! Modern conventional nutrition is very recent, is a product and a driver of modern industrial society, and in some respects is very strange. At the time in common with almost everybody in the field I assumed that it was nonetheless generally a great force for good. But is it? This of course is what Project Phoenix is all about, and the more debate, the better.



WN Project Phoenix

What they didn't teach us in school

[Access April 2015 Update on Project Phoenix here](#)

[Access May 2015 Update special on Project Phoenix here](#)

[Access this issue Update special on Project Phoenix here](#)

Brooke Aksnes writes:

I support the insights in the May *Update* special on *Project Phoenix*. I do however have an alternative view on one point: nutritionists are taught a whole lot about nothing. (Access it above). This is not my experience, which has been that nutrition students are taught a whole lot about the wrong things.

As a US citizen, my university nutrition programme was accredited by the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND). It did contain some broader classes such as community nutrition and cultural aspects of food, but those were viewed as fillers for which students would receive top marks for minimal effort. Of a 120-credit programme, our six credits of medical nutrition therapy were touted as the apex. I see the value of scientific rigour, but AND is turning out nutrition professionals taught to ignore the broader social, cultural and political aspects of nutrition.

We were taught to behold modern conventional science as the 'gold standard' of everything. We were drilled over and over in class about only using evidence-based interventions in practice (and only from randomised controlled trials whenever possible). This approach has its strengths, but I realised how limiting it was when I needed to change my topic three times to find enough 'acceptable' literature to fill a thesis. Any topic outside of the strictly clinical was off-limits. It wasn't until I invested my personal time after graduation in reading about global food issues and became involved in *WN* that I began to understand the true scope of nutrition.

Clinical nutritionists have an important role. However, nutrition cannot be reduced only to caring for sick populations. In the US at least, more emphasis needs to be placed on training nutrition professionals who are fully aware of the broader role of nutrition in society, and of the economic, cultural and political forces that are at play in population nutrition. Clinical nutrition should be secondary. Curriculums need radical revision, to address the biggest issues in the world now, and to produce professionals who think outside the current officially accredited evidence-based box.

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Aksnes B. What they didn't teach us in school. [Project Phoenix]

[Feedback]. World Nutrition June 2015, 6, 6, 536

[Feedback] World Nutrition June 2015, 6, 6, 523-543



WN Project Phoenix

Data drive out care

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Here I am (second from the right) during my clinical nutrition training in an oncological hospital in my home city, Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais, Brazil. But I was not taught to value the human touch

Maria Alvim writes:

Yes, it is time to assess conventional nutrition science, as now being done in the *WN Project Phoenix* series (access it above). My comments here are on academic training, at least as I have experienced it. This is extremely fragmented. There is little dialogue between the dietary and human disciplines. There is almost antagonism between ‘clinical adepts’ and ‘social adepts’ – and dehumanised clinical work is more tangible and quantitative and more publishable in journals that help careers. It will be hard to break the *Flexner model* of health and medical schools.

I recommend the work in Brazil of *Emerson Merby* (1). He classifies health techniques into three types: hard, soft-hard, soft. Hard is like instruments used by professionals, such as stethoscopes and bio-impedance. Soft-hard is well-accepted knowledge. Soft includes receiving the patient, which is unique and targeted. In nutrition this exposes over-valuation of the hard, such as nutrients, and neglects of the soft, such as commensality. We should not think nutrients, we should think nourishment.

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Alvim M Data drive out care [Project Phoenix]

[Feedback]. World Nutrition June 2015, 6, 6, 537