

In China, health and illness both come by mouth

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Editor's note: In the eighth installment of their continuing series, Alice Wang and Ed Rowland, now joined by longtime colleague and advisor Alf Luo, will examine the central cultural role of the mouth and how that continues to impact COVID-19 consumer healthcare purchasing patterns in sometimes surprising ways.

Part one is available [here](#). Part two is available [here](#). Part three is available [here](#). Part four is available [here](#). Part five is available [here](#). Part six is available [here](#). Part seven is available [here](#).

Chinese history and culture have long viewed eating as central to life and wellbeing, a bread (or rice) first philosophy. Health comes in by mouth, but so does illness.

Taoist beliefs, core to Chinese philosophy, set this out in the 4th century book, *Tao Te Ching*, and are integral to daily life and how the world works. That is what makes COVID-19 so deeply disturbing to the Chinese. The virus apparently entered through the food system in a Wuhan wholesale seafood market. The recent flareup in Beijing apparently came through food again, this time in salmon. Mandarin Chinese counts people by using the word mouth. The cultural connections of COVID-19, food and the mouth are not lost on the average Chinese citizen.

It's also a central part of how the average Chinese consumer seeks prevention and protection –through the mouth. Enter the consumer healthcare promise to treat and/or prevent COVID.

Some of it is in very unexpected ways. Witness the following recent promotion results:



Alice Wang

TMall Global June 18 Promotion Results	
Item	Increase
Vitamin C	80%
Beauty Supplements (Collagen etc.)	Almost 200%
VMS	Almost 200%
Functional Foods (e.g. gummies)	250%
Probiotics	Almost 200%

Another nutrient/supplement gaining traction, accompanied by some consumer confusion, is collagen. Known as an important protein supporting skin tissue and connective tissue, collagen has skin and nail health benefits. Food supplement collagen, which differs from topical formats, is most efficiently absorbed from whey protein. This format also jumped in sales. Vitamin C has ascended the top of the healthy food pyramid. Even though the effect has not been scientifically proven to enhance immunity and fight against the coronavirus by March 2020, it was a best seller among all dietary supplements on China's largest e-commerce platform, TMall. Vitamin C soon sold out at traditional retail stores and has become a luxury gift, equal to facial masks.

Even more esoteric is gaining interest with a growing number of the new uprising middle class with a rapacious appetite for Swiftlet or Collocalia Nest Extract. Yes, bird nest extract. The extract contains proteins, amino acids and minerals. The unproven benefits include anti-aging, maintaining beauty, and even immunity enhancement improving lung and kidney function. . Some brands are even making claims purportedly supported by sponsored medical studies. Meanwhile, many poor birds are losing their homes as a result.

China's restaurants were on COVID-19 shut down from January through to early April. While takeaway and limited distanced seating helped, the reopening in April saw an explosion of reopened restaurants. Only the recent COVID flareup in Beijing has slowed this down but only in that city. The post-quarantine release has spawned some extreme gorging and, not surprisingly, a refocus on weight and health. Post-pandemic weight management supplement sales, especially L-carnitine, have surged. Whether it be longer term chronic disease avoidance, obesity concerns or younger consumer wanting to slim down, the reopening feast has been accompanied by strong gains in weight management supplements.



Ed Rowland



Alf Luo

The story will continue but right now, TMall has a new limited-time L-carnitine coffee offer. Order now, before it's sold out.

Alf Luo has 20+ years in Chinese e-commerce strategy and marketing and most recently in charge of Alibaba Health Content Marketing. An award-winning marketer he has authored China's authoritative Nutritional Supplement report and headed two "TP" providers building e-platforms. He is a pioneer in the Chinese e-commerce healthcare industry.

Alice Wang is a consumer healthcare professional with deep knowledge of the Chinese e-commerce, the world's largest internet market. Her team provides clients up-to-the-minute information on the Chinese e-commerce market, and customized service to the world's largest market.

Ed Rowland is the principal of Rowland Global LLC (www.rowland-global.com) and believes in the promise of global business and supports companies in their strategy, tactics and execution of international growth initiatives.