

Changing
Chinese
Foodways
in Asia

EDITED BY

David Y. H. Wu

Tan Chee-beng

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The Chinese University Press

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ISBN 962-201-914-5

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

SHA TIN, N.T., HONG KONG

Fax: +852 2603 6692

+852 2603 7355

E-mail: cup@cuhk.edu.hk

Web-site: www.chineseupress.com

Printed in Hong Kong

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Foreword

During the Chinese New Year of 1996, I went with some friends to a resort area for a vacation. The first evening we went together to a restaurant with a sign which reads “*Guangshi Fandian*” (廣式飯店) (literally Cantonese style restaurant). To our surprise, when the dishes were brought to our table, they included Peking roast duck, “*Gongbao jiding*” (宮保雞丁) or fried chicken with hot pepper, and “*zaoliu yupian*” (糟溜魚片) or sweet and sour fish slices. Where was the Cantonese food? Can you imagine a Cantonese restaurant serving fish not whole but in slices? When we asked the lady manager about this strange phenomenon, to her credit, she explained gracefully that “*guangshi*” (廣式) did not mean Cantonese style, but rather “*guangfan*” (廣泛) or extensive coverage!

It is exactly the same now in Taiwan, that most restaurants serve all kinds of cuisines from different provinces of China, even though their shop-signs indicate a specific Chinese cuisine. This is the general trend of Chinese cuisine in Taiwan, a phenomenon of mingling, mutual borrowing, or shall we say the homogenization of different regional styles of food into one unifying cuisine. But if we consider the picture from a different angle, we may say that in present day Taiwan, particularly in the urban areas, there are three major regional cuisines which constitute the most popular styles of Chinese cuisine. The popularity of these three cuisines, however, expresses the symbolic meaning of ethnic identity according to Taiwan's current

political situation rather than according to the tastes of the food itself. This again is another interesting trend relating to Chinese foodways in Taiwan.

Beyond the local ethnic or political sphere, if we turn to generation differences among the population, we find that young people in Taiwan do not pay too much attention to traditional Chinese food at all. Reflecting a general trend in the modern world, they prefer to have Western fast food, such as hamburger or pizza. As a board member of the Foundation for Chinese Dietary Culture, I reluctantly go to McDonald's and Pizza Hut several times a month with my two granddaughters. I explain to my friend that this is my way of doing anthropological field work on the phenomenon of globalization of food habits!

I would like to bring up here the issues of globalization of food systems and discuss its implications for the future of Chinese food and cuisine.

In the past fifty years, since before the Second World War, anthropological studies of food have made considerable contributions to our understanding of human culinary habits, food production and consumption, food preference and nutrition, dietary change, and the psycho-cultural dynamics of symbolism related to food. One important characteristic of anthropological approaches to food and diet is closely associated with the discipline's central concept of culture. With this concept, the unit of anthropological observation of foodways is invariably a single culture or a single cultural community. Even though there are cross-cultural comparisons of food classification, as well as food choices and health promotion, social status, or religious meanings, the study of a food system, like the study of a cultural system, has been culture-bound. Nutritional anthropology, for instance, a rather new sub-field of anthropology that emerged in the 1970s, combines the methodologies of human ecology, biology, and sociocultural studies to interpret food systems and human evolution, and focuses its data collection and analysis on particular local cultures. Not until the 1980s, when anthropologists began to pay more attention to national and international

issues of culture, did the global issue of cultural commodification, that is, the significance of the global phenomena of food as symbols of ethnicity, gender, nationality, and modernity come to be addressed.

Highlighting the contrast of research approaches between the traditional anthropological study of food and contemporary issues of food may help us to formulate a new way relating Chinese food and dietary culture to the new awareness of globalism, consumerism, and McDonaldization. We have mentioned nutritional anthropology. While in the past we have looked at a community to record its food resources, subsistence economy, household dietary patterns, cultural classifications of animal and plant species, and kinship as well as other social organizations relevant to the sharing of food, now we have to gather data on the globalization of food supply, multinational corporations and trade, and cultural hegemony in the promotion and sale of processed food. To understand types of food consumption or food preferences, we cannot confine our analysis only to food habits, cultural taste, religious symbols and rituals of a particular society. This is because nonindustrialized societies are disappearing and dietary change is subject to factors far beyond local cultural values: the impact of political and economic policies, the dynamics of international trade and power relations between nations, and the impact of multi-national strategies in the construction of a modern, cosmopolitan taste of prestige. Major works in this regard are almost always centred on the domination of Western industrial countries on less developed areas, or Japan's dominance in Asia. Familiar examples are McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants, and the Japanese introduction of packaged food through new supermarket chains in Asia. Chinese influence in the global situation is seldom researched, although media reports in Asia are full of recent stories. It is time to consider the significance of the Chinese food system in the modern world. Based on four aspects of current global existence, I wish to present familiar examples of Chinese food culture and speculate on their future implications around the world.

The Impact of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Methods of Health Promotion on the Culture of Health and Fitness in the Twenty-first Century

Food and medicine have long been integral parts of the Chinese food system. Millions of Chinese identify their food items, develop cooking methods, and create local high cuisines with a particular concern for health promotion and longevity. In my essay “In Search of Equilibrium and Harmony,”¹ for instance, I pointed out that Chinese food and cuisine reflects a fundamental philosophy, a canon of social order of human existence, of keeping harmony with the universe. There are practical, ecological, and moral implications in the contemporary world. Empirical examples of modern day application of these concepts include hot and cold classifications as well as daily cooking and drinking of medicinal soups among Hong Kong’s people. It will be interesting today to document how soups for health or vitality have become popular outside Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast China, not to mention packaged herbal soup bases sold in the supermarkets in Southeast Asia and North America.

Further research is needed on how Chinese concepts and practices of food and medicine have been adopted by people outside China, or adapted conceptually in the global chain of food supply and consumption. Researchers should pay close attention to the globalization of fashionable conceptions of the body — such as obesity — and its effect on dietary preferences and diet control, especially among the young and educated. Of interest to people around the world, not just anthropologists or health researchers, would be methods of incorporating Chinese concepts of food and health in the global development of the social construction of the body and diet, as well as a global food industry of health and fitness.

Refined Chinese Cuisine and Chinese Fast Food

Fast-food restaurants provide convenient, reliable, and consistent ways of eating in the daily lives of urban dwellers. Seen as a Western,

especially American, form of cultural imperialism, fast food in just a decade or two has transformed Chinese high cuisines into Chinese fast-food, both in terms of the standardization of dishes and the manner of eating and serving outside of the home. While Chinese cuisine in the homeland has undergone a process of simplification, standardization, homogenization, and incorporation of non-Chinese food items and cuisines, the non-Chinese world also increasingly accepts reinvented, and repackaged Chinese dishes in public eating places. The further development of fast-food and ready-to-cook meals in the future may intrigue both consumers and food business people in the twenty-first century. Whether or not Chinese refined high cuisine can survive the McDonaldization test of omnipresent fast-food culture will be of concern to gourmets and scholars of food and cuisine.

Chinese Cuisines and Local Traditions: Localization and Globalization of Major Chinese Cuisines

Should refined Chinese cuisines survive the impact of the fast-food phenomenon, will we see a continued homogenization of Chinese cuisine, as exemplified by dishes served in restaurants outside China (i.e., Peking, Sichuan, and Cantonese cuisines served in Chinese restaurants in the United States)? China is a vast country and the varieties of regional cuisine continue to compete for supremacy in the national cuisine area of China. The dynamics of mutual influence, borrowing, and re-creation are worthy of future attention. Will there be more blending of cuisines? And, how will trends in China affect the interaction of the world's major cuisines? These questions all involve possible patterns of change that may shape the eating habits of future generations of gourmets.

The Chinese Diaspora and the Spread of Chinese Food Culture Overseas

The global diffusion of Chinese food culture has occurred during the

past two hundred years, under the impact of Western capitalism and colonialism. When hundreds of thousands of Chinese left Southeast China, mainly the two provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, and arrived in Southeast Asia, Oceania, and North and South America, they brought with them not only Chinese ways of cooking but also new food ingredients. For example, we have learned that Chinese introduced a special kind of taro to New Guinea, where taro has become the most important ceremonial food. In the South Pacific, early Chinese migrants introduced many fruits and vegetables that were not indigenous to the islands. New waves of Chinese immigration to foreign countries in the second half of the twentieth century have sparked the introduction of new food ingredients for Chinese cuisine around the world. In recent decades, Chinese restaurants have sprung up in countries that did not have substantial Chinese populations in the past. Professor James Watson's early research on the spread of Cantonese restaurants in England and other European countries is a good example of this point.

Fujian or Minnan cuisine is popular and well-known in Southeast Asia. When I was doing fieldwork in the 1960s in the southern part of the Malay Peninsula, I enjoyed local meals which reminded me of the cuisine of my childhood in Quanzhou in Southern Fujian. In Australia and North America, however, Cantonese cuisine, especially the country-style cooking of the Si-yi counties, dominated the Chinese restaurant scene until the 1970s, when non-Cantonese cuisines became popular in restaurants opened by new immigrants from Taiwan and mainland China. It is sociologically useful to study the identities of different waves of Chinese immigrants overseas, to see whether these correspond to the emergence of certain types of regional Chinese cuisine. It is important to recognize the influence of international politics and cultural discourse on Chinese food and cuisine in order to understand changing Chinese food cultures in various parts of the world. We need to know more about the global phenomenon of Chinese diasporas, and the changing patterns of cuisine and the fate of particular dishes in Chinese restaurants and in the homes of the Chinese overseas.

Finally, there are important questions of theoretical significance in anthropology. We note, on the one hand, the influence of host cuisines on the culinary and dietary habits of immigrant population. At the same time, we witness the influence — often but not always subtle and gradual — of Chinese food practices and food choices upon the eating habits and food concepts of the hosts. We are not always sure of the extent to which we are perceiving rather simple cases of acculturation and borrowing, or whether we are dealing instead with more complicated cases of cultural construction. I have noticed that there are papers in this volume which deal with what is referred to as the phenomenon of the “creolization” of Chinese food in Southeast Asia. We may wish to consider what the term “creolization” means, and whether it can be applied across space and time. Regardless of whether we find before us here a process of creolization, of cultural invention, of globalization, of all three or of something altogether different, these are all important cultural issues that we must explore, by way of serious research and perhaps by means of concrete discussion in future conferences.

In my remarks here, I have not sought to advance any new research material, but rather to touch upon what I regard as some of the major problems we students of food and food habits must engage ourselves in studying, if we are to understand where Asian food habits have come from, as well as where they are going. The problems of feeding an ever-growing world population are matched by our continuing uncertainties about ongoing trends in the ways in which the world eats — how much, of what sort, and what concepts guide such behaviour. By addressing such questions, we may be able to make a genuine contribution to global understanding.

Yih-yuan Li

Note

1. See Yih-yuan Li, “In Search of Equilibrium and Harmony: On the Basic Value Orientation of Traditional Chinese Peasants,” in *Home Bound: Studying in East Asian Society*, edited by Chie Nakane and Chien Chiao, pp. 127–47. Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1992.



Acknowledgements

This volume grows out of the International Conference on Changing Diet and Foodways in Chinese Culture which was jointly organized by the Department of Anthropology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, and The Fairbank Centre of East Asian Research, Harvard University. The conference was held on 12–14 June 1996 at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Not all papers are included in this volume. The papers presented by the Harvard team on children's food has been published separately, see Jun Jing, ed., *Feeding China's Little Emperors: Food, Children and Social Change*, Stanford University Press, 2000. We are grateful to these two universities and to New Asia College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong for financial support, thus making the present volume possible.

The editors would like to thank Prof. James L. Watson who led the Harvard team and gave insightful comments at the conference. We thank all paper contributors and participants at the conference for sharing their views with one another. Professor Yih-yuan Li, member of the Academia Sinica and president of the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, delivered a keynote speech at the meeting, and which becomes the Foreword of this book. Prof. Sidney Mintz, the William L. Straus, Jr. Professor at Johns Hopkins, presented his concluding comments at the conference, and then wrote them up for this volume. He also copy-edited the final manuscript, and for that we are most grateful. Last but not least, we thank Miss Tong Ho Yan and Miss Yan Ka Wai for clerical assistance, and Miss Guan Swee-Hiang for proof-reading.

D. Y. H. W.
T. C. B.



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Introduction

David Y. H. Wu and Tan Chee-beng

The term “foodway” is a new word, not yet listed in condensed English dictionaries. Anthropologists, however, have used the term in recent decades to loosely refer to a way of life that involves food, food habits, and food consumption. The study of foodways lately has become popular among anthropologists. Several recent anthropological works show how the discipline studies the human consumption of food in a way that is different from that of nutritionists, agriculturalists, or economists.

Mary Douglas, for instance, is known for unveiling the symbolic meanings of human behaviour, and her article “Deciphering a Meal” (1971) is a good example of the structural school of anthropological research on food. Douglas’s work follows the master structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who explores the issue of human unconscious structure by studying myths, as shown in his works *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964/1970), *From Honey to Ashes* (1966/1973), and *The Origin of Table Manners* (1968/1978). Jack Goody’s book *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1986) best illustrates a social anthropological approach to the study of social hierarchy, and the differentiation of tastes in human civilizations. Sidney Mintz in his work *Sweetness and Power* (1985) combines macro-historical method and cultural analysis to tell the story of the global evolution in sugar consumption. Arjun Appadurai’s (1988) work opens a new horizon for understanding the emergence of a “national cuisine” by tracing the social history of cookbooks in contemporary India. More recently, James L. Watson

(1997) and a group of Asian anthropologists have focused their fieldworks on McDonald's food chain in major cities in East Asia, and they have delineated the social and political meanings of ethnic, cultural, and national identities in the globalization of the fast-food industry. All in all, we are told by anthropologists that food carries special meanings, and there are diverse and interesting ways to decipher its cultural meanings.

The present volume is another demonstration of this new anthropological attempt to understand the meanings of changing foodways. But as far as we know, this is the first attempt to focus on Chinese food in East and Southeast Asia. Two previous works by anthropologists on Chinese food, diet, and its consumption have earned scholarly attention. The book edited some twenty years ago by K. C. Chang on *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (1977) was a very significant first attempt to review the history of Chinese food, cuisine, and social life revolving around food. A second book, Eugene Anderson's *The Food of China* (1988) combines both a history of Chinese food production and ethnographic materials on the foodways in Hong Kong. Since the publication of these two major works on China, there has been no book dealing with Chinese food and cuisine in contemporary Asia, and the present volume fills in the vacuum in both a temporal and geographical sense. In the wider context of East and Southeast Asia, the study of Chinese food and transformation in different settings inform us about the impacts of internal, regional, and global forces on the foodways of the Chinese people, and on the peoples in contact with them. This is evident from the following summary of different chapters in this book.

Part 1 begins with an introduction to the dietary culture of Guangdong in South China, in the regions of Chaoshan Plain (i.e., Chaozhou and Shantou areas) and in the Pearl River Delta. The chapters by Chen Yunpiao and Su Jianling provide us with an insight into the foodways of these important regions, telling us of the rich varieties of foodstuffs used in daily life and in religious rites, and which reflect both historical continuity and regional ecological adaptation and innovation.