

CHINESE
CULTURE

FOODS

LIU JUNRU



China Intercontinental Press



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Preface

There is a widespread saying about food and drink in China – “food is the first necessity of the people”. This shows the important place that “eating” has in the lives of Chinese people. Eating is not just for the elimination of hunger. The ability to enjoy food is thought of as a kind of “good fortune” by Chinese people. Advocates of China’s “eating culture” often cite the ancient Chinese thinker Confucius, who said “food and sex are the basic human desires”. These words are thought to provide a firm ideological basis for the importance of enjoying food and enjoying life. Although the instinct to eat food is the most basic of human urges, the importance of enjoying life



On October 18th, 2013, many Chinese dishes were evaluated during the Foods and Drinks Exposition, at the Nanjing Gourmet Festival.

(and therefore food) moderately, keeping one's life in harmony and not going to any extremes is at the core of Confucian thinking. At the same time, the Taoist philosophy of pursuing the unity of nature and man also deeply influences the daily lives of ordinary Chinese people. Confucius said "If we don't know life, how can we know death?" This clearly shows that Chinese people have a pragmatic attitude towards philosophical issues such as life and death, one that is different from the more speculative approach taken by many people in the West. This means that a Chinese person's understanding of the world is manifested in specific practical ways, of which eating is perhaps the most important.

Chinese people pay attention to what they eat. Chinese cooks have the culinary skills to turn many raw ingredients that seem inedible to foreigners into delicious delicacies. Chinese cooks are also adept at combining the tastes of different ingredients to produce delicious meals. They add various seasonings to their recipes and let all the tastes of the various ingredients they use blend together and augment each other. This culinary approach reflects Chinese philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of "blending to reach a balance".

To create their delicious recipes, Chinese cooks rely on their intuition, which is informed by their training, locality and cultural heritage. This is the essence of China's culinary art (and its most elusive and difficult to describe aspect). It is also the reason why Chinese foods are so wonderful.

As is the case in many countries that have vast territories, there is a great difference between the food and drink that is consumed in the north and south of China. Though the best rice in China is produced in the northeast, residents in the north still favor wheaten food. The classic dishes of the north are Beijing's instant-boiled mutton and roast duck and Shandong dishes. In the south, the staple food is rice. People in this area of the country enjoy a relatively diverse range of foods, including both spicy Sichuan and Hunan dishes, sweet and fresh Huaiyang dishes and Guangdong dishes that mainly consist of seafood and soup. As a result of this variety, foreigners who come to China marvel at the numerous types of Chinese local foods and at the variety of tastes on offer.

Though the dishes from China's various regions have different tastes, all cooks pursue the goal of "good colors, smells and tastes". The Chinese don't just pay attention to the way food tastes, they also pay attention to the way food looks. This emphasis on both the flavor and presentation of food is an important part of the Chinese take on eating. Therefore, eating Chinese dishes not only satiates one's hunger but also provides pleasure to the eye and the taste buds. To make their dishes look



On the evening of November 12, 2013, the “Chinese Food Festival” began at the UN headquarters. This event was sponsored by the China Cuisine Association. At the event, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon talked about China’s eating culture and said “Food is the first necessity of the people” and “Have a good appetite” in Chinese.

colorful and tasty, Chinese cooks choose good meat and vegetables and normally make sure that their main and secondary ingredients have two or three different colors. Chinese cooks like to mix blue, green, red, yellow, white, black and brown ingredients to make their recipes look appetizing. To further stimulate a diner’s appetite, Chinese cooks add appropriate flavorings to their recipes such as onions, ginger, garlic, wine, anise seeds, cinnamon, pepper, sesame oil and mushrooms. These create delicious smells when they are cooking. Chinese cooks use a variety of cooking techniques. These include frying in shallow oil, stir-frying, braising, steaming, frying, quick-frying and stewing. Careful attention is paid to preserving foods’ original tastes, and, when appropriate, various seasonings are added to make dishes taste salty, sweet, sour and spicy. When it comes to presenting food, some cooks prepare beautiful “dish flowers” made of tomatoes, radishes and cucumbers. These are then used to garnish food, which is placed on exquisite porcelain tableware. This makes eating in China a really wonderful experience that indulges all the senses.

In America people maintain their physical health and a trim figure by calculating the calorie

content of their food and by ensuring that they do not eat excess quantities of harmful substances such as saturated fats. Japanese people are passionate about eating health foods in order to stay young. In contrast, the Chinese believe that “medicine and food have the same origin” and use this principle as a way of keeping healthy. Because the Chinese firmly believe that foods can help cure illnesses and speed recuperation, many edible plants that are thought to have medicinal properties are included in the dishes that people eat every day. At the same time, Chinese cuisine emphasizes the importance of eating only the finest quality rice and of only consuming finely minced meat. A lot of attention is paid to the quantity of food in each dish and to balancing the amount of meat and vegetables they contain. This is done to ensure that food contains the right levels of nutrients to maintain health, fitness and wellbeing. One secret of longevity, which has been passed from one generation of Chinese people to the next, is to stop eating when one is 70 to 80 percent full.

Food in China is linked to many of the country’s festivals and celebrations. These festivals feature many eating customs through which people offer prayers for safety and good luck. In particular, during the Spring Festival (the most important traditional festival in China) there is a



A Chinese cook preparing Dragon Whiskers Noodles. This display took place on October 17th, 2013, at the opening ceremony of the China Gourmet Week in Paris, France.

reunion dinner on Lunar New Year's Eve. People are also invited to dine with each other throughout the first lunar month. Fresh fish is eaten at these meals. This symbolizes "annual surplus". Dumplings are also eaten during this festival. These auspicious items of food symbolize the good wishes people have for their family members and friends. Many other Chinese rites and rituals are also linked to food and drink. For example, candies are eaten at weddings and longevity noodles are eaten on birthdays.

Chinese people are most particular about table manners and have a strict set of rules for how to behave. For example, people must be seated while eating. When people of different ages are at the same table, the oldest person should take a seat first. While eating one must normally use chopsticks, but while drinking soup one must use a spoon. During a meal nobody should talk loudly. Today, some of these traditional manners are being lost; in particular more and more people are abandoning the ancient rule that "no one should talk while eating". Indeed, when Chinese people eat together, the eating environment can often get very noisy. In addition, many people now talk to each other when their mouths are full. These changes have occurred mainly because dinner is seen by modern Chinese people as an important opportunity for socializing, relaxation and pleasant conversation.

The importance of Chinese eating culture is shown by how it shapes the way people speak – for example, the Chinese equivalent of getting a slap in the face is "eating a slap in the face", the Chinese equivalent of being left out in the cold is "eating close door soup", the Chinese equivalent of suffering a loss is "eating losses", the Chinese equivalent of being very popular is "eating delicacies" and the Chinese phrase "packing excessive food" describes a severe situation. When people meet and greet each other, Westerners say "Good morning" but Chinese people say "Have you eaten dinner?". For the Chinese "eating" is everywhere and it has a profound influence on their ideology and culture.

Chinese people set great store by their enjoyment of good food. It can be said that they pursue their own "art of eating". The enjoyment of food also reflects the way in which the Chinese approach life. For example, the leisurely enjoyment of a pot of light-scented tea and a cup of turbid wine reflects the Chinese philosophical approach that values the aesthetic pursuit of balance, inclusiveness, thoughtfulness and the unity of man and nature. China's food and eating culture has had a massive influence on the world that extends far beyond food itself. Its key contributions



On May 16, 2010, some participants in the 35th Miss Bikini International World Final learned to cook Chinese dishes in Beijing to experience China's eating culture.

are the Four Great Inventions: soybeans, tea, chopsticks and its cuisine. By cultivating soybeans, the Chinese people developed an important source of vegetable protein for the world. Chinese tea provides a refreshing, thirst-quenching, convenient and cheap drink for everyone to enjoy. Chinese chopsticks and porcelain tableware have been popular in many countries for more than 1,000 years. Arguably there is no other country that has developed as many delicacies and culinary skills as China.

At present, Chinese dishes are available almost everywhere in the world. Many foreigners not only like eating Chinese dishes, but they also enjoy studying Chinese cuisine. Learning to cook Chinese dishes has also become a popular pastime in many countries. All foreigners who travel to China for business or pleasure enjoy discovering the variety of Chinese cuisine and eating authentic Chinese delicacies. At the same time, as China has opened up to the outside world, the food and drink of various other countries has become available, especially in China's big cities. These new imports include foods such as Italian pizzas, French dishes, Japanese dishes, American hamburgers, German beer, Brazilian roast meat, Indian curry and Swiss cheese.



The Origins of Food

The different eating habits of people around the world are explained by many factors including geography, ecology, population sizes and farm productivity levels. China's long history of farming has allowed the Chinese to discover and cultivate many edible plants not known to many Westerners. From the pre-Qin period, Chinese people mainly ate cereals, and ate more grain than meat (in comparison to Westerners who ate more meat). Modern Chinese people therefore have grains as their staple foods. Fish, meat, eggs, milk and vegetables are non-staples. Many nutritionists consider this type of diet to be conducive to nutrition and health. It is also thought to be a less environmentally destructive diet than one based on meat.

Traditional Foods

As explained above, there are many factors that explain the diversity of eating habits around the world. For example, people whose diets are predominantly meat-based are normally found in regions where the population density is relatively low, farmland is not needed or land cannot be farmed. In contrast, people whose diets are low in meat and high in cereals and other plants normally live in places that have high population densities, limited arable land and a limited supply of meat. Of course, thanks to the movement of people, food and information around the world, eating traditions that used to be limited to one area have spread and the way in which people eat has evolved.

Throughout its long history, China has been a key driving force in the development of food and agriculture around the globe. China invented farming methods such as water diversion, canal construction and the use of irrigation to farm mountain slopes. Around 5,400 BC, millet was planted in the Yellow River basin, and loess caves were used to store grain; around 4,800 BC, rice was planted in the Yangtze River basin. The Chinese people then adopted a diet in which grain was the staple food, with meat acting as a supplement. This has been the main structure of the Chinese diet ever since.

The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic is an ancient Chinese work that describes the diet of the ancient Chinese as follows: “The five cereals are staple foods, the five fruits are auxiliary foods, the five meats are beneficial, and the five vegetables should be taken in abundance.” In antiquity, grain



Farmers in Anren County, Hunan Province tilling land at the annual tilling commencement ceremony. This is done to thank the Yan Emperor (Holy Farmer) for “tasting all herbs and teaching farmers to cultivate the five cereals” and to pray for favorable weather and bumper grain harvests in the year ahead. This ceremony has a history dating back thousands of years.

crops were called the “five cereals” or the “six cereals”. They included glutinous millet, broomcorn millet, wheat, beans, fiber crops and rice. Glutinous millet is also called yellow rice and it has tiny, yellow glutinous grains. Broomcorn millet (equivalent to modern millet) is known as “the head of the five cereals.” Both glutinous millet and broomcorn millet originated in China and spread to Europe in the prehistoric period. In ancient times, they were the main grain crops in the north of China. Beans were the main source of edible protein enjoyed by the ancient Chinese people. Wheat and rice did not originate in China. It is generally thought that rice originated in India and Southeast Asia. However, the earliest cultivated rice in the world was discovered in China. It was farmed by the Hemudu culture of the early neolithic period (c. 5,000-3,000 BC). Wheat originated in Central Asia and West Asia, and spread to China from the northwest during the neolithic period. Another important crop, sorghum, originated in China, and spread to India and Persia (today’s Iran) in the 1st century AD.

During every Spring Festival, Chinese people use the idiom “bumper grain harvest” to wish