

Liu Junru

CHINESE FOOD

Adventures in the World of Cooking and Eating

Translated by William W. Wang



CHINA
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Author: Liu Junru

Translator: William W. Wang

Polisher: Chen Bingmiao

Executive Editor: Zhang Hong

Art Director: Shen Zhenzhen

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Preface

When it comes to food, the Chinese have a common saying, “The masses regard food as their heaven,” which means that food is people’s primal want. It should clearly justify the importance that “eating” holds in Chinese people’s lives. Eating is not just meant to fill the stomach; having food at one’s disposal, being able to consume a good amount of food, and knowing what and how to eat are all viewed as a good “fortune.” Those who promote food culture often use the words of Chinese philosopher Confucius, “diet and love-making, all primal needs of every human being,” finding an aspiring and positive thought basis for such an epicurean lifestyle. There’s probably not another place in this world that has as great a variety of delicious



Rice fields by the Fuchun River (Photo by Miao Wang, provided by image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)



fare as China. If judging by the art and techniques of cooking, aside from France and Italy, perhaps the skills of chefs of no other country can gain recognition from the Chinese.

Extremely developed culinary techniques can make seemingly inedible ingredients, to foreign eyes, into dish after dish of delicious treats by the hands of Chinese chefs. The Chinese cookbook also contains quite an extensive list of foods, including just about anything edible with very few taboos. The Chinese, who see eating as a fortune and life as an art, not only created various kinds of regional food styles in its own vast lands, but have also spread Chinese food culture to far across the seas. Today, in this world where even the farthest corners can seem as close as one's back yard, Chinese food can be enjoyed in each and every metropolitan throughout the world.

Like many other countries with a vast territory, Chinese cuisines are differentiated largely by its northern and southern regional tastes. Although the best quality rice in China is grown in its northeastern regions, people in those regions, however, just as other northerners, prefer to eat pasta or pastry instead. In the north, classic



Vegetable sections in supermarkets that supply all kinds of fresh seasonal vegetable. (Photo by Huiming Shi , provided by Imagechina)



dishes include Beijing's lamb hotpot (fondue) and roast duck, and Shandong province's *Lu* style cuisines. In the south, the principal foods (foods that are the main source of carbohydrates and dietary fibers, e.g. bread and cereal in the west) are rice-based. A relatively greater variety of dishes are found in the south. There you can find the hot and heavily spiced *Chuan* (Sichuan) food, *Xiang* (Hunan) food, sweet and delicate *Huaiyang* food and the *Yue* (Cantonese) style which are mostly seafood and soups. Thus foreigners who have been to China are often pleasantly surprised by the great differences in taste and food types by region.

Having Chinese food not only indulges people's sense of taste, the sense of sight is also entertained. The Chinese culinary arts rely on the canon of "color (aesthetic beauty), aroma, and taste," missing any one element would not make a good dish. To make the food pleasing to the eye, usually the appropriate meat and non-meat ingredients are selected; it would include a single main ingredient and two or three secondary ingredients of different colors. Blue, green, red, yellow, white, black and brown sauce colors are to be mixed in the right combination. Through proper cooking techniques, aestheticism in food is achieved. "Aroma" is achieved by using the right spices, such as scallion, ginger, garlic, cooking wine, aniseed, cassia bark, black pepper, sesame oil, shiitake mushrooms and so on, to stimulate the appetite with the aroma from the cooked food. When preparing food, techniques such as fry, stir-fry, roast, steam, deep-fry, quick-fry, simmer and others are put to use, with the goal of preserving the natural taste and juices of the food. One can also add the right amounts of soy sauce, sugar, vinegar, spices, spicy pepper and

Scholar's Understanding of Diet before Qin Dynasty

The Pre-Qin period was a time of great turmoil and change in Chinese society, and it produced a number of great thinkers and ideas which were to have a deep and long-lasting influence. With regard to systematic reflection on drinking and eating, Mozi, Laozi and Confucius are typical in their different ways. Mozi had a very simple style of life. He advocated mutual assistance in society and active engagement in production, and thought that people should not eat unless they also toiled. He suggested that people should get only the food that their stomachs could hold and only the clothes that would cover their bodies. 'When it comes to food, there should be no more than suffices to replenish one's energy and fill the empty spaces; all that is required is to strengthen the body and satisfy the stomach.' He thought that people should live frugally and moderately and should serve society. Laozi drew attention explicitly to the importance of food and drink to self-cultivation. 'Those who would regulate the body and nourish the spirit must be sparing in their sleeping and resting and moderate in their eating and drinking.' He advocated purifying the heart and reducing one's desires, and knowing how to be content. His view of life emphasised spiritual cultivation and indifference to material things. Confucius integrated eating and drinking practices into the ritual system. His widely quoted saying 'There's no reason to reject the most carefully selected rice and the finest of chopped meat' is a call to ritual propriety not to luxury. These words had a great influence on the intellectuals of later times.





Dining environments with antique flavors and imitation imperial dishes of royal heritage closely bind culture and cuisine together. (Photo by Yu Shen, provided by Imagechina)





This is a piece of New Year's painting named *Abundance & Harvests in Successive Years*, which shows people's best wishes at the beginning of the New Year. (Collected by Shucun Wang)

other seasoning, making the dishes taste salty, sweet, sour, hot and much more. With tomatoes, turnip, cucumber and other sculptural vegetables to create elegant and intricate decorations to the plate, and the use of exquisite fine china for dining ware, Chinese cuisines really become a true art form complete with aesthetic beauty, wonderful aroma, and great taste.

Americans rely on calculating calories and cholesterol content from food to maintain good health and a shapely figure. The Japanese are into trying various health foods to preserve an everlasting youth. Different from both, the Chinese way of looking at health lies in its philosophy of "food and medicine sharing the same roots." The firm belief that food has healing powers and therapeutic effects has led to the introduction of many edible plants and herbs. And with the benefits of disease prevention and health preservation, they have become regular dishes in Chinese homes. At the same time, there is the pursuit of refinement in cooking.



The amount of food and mixing of ingredients is very essential, and it is recommended that meats and non-meats be used in combination. Whether making dishes or soups, foods with suited nutritional contents are put in combination so as to achieve the goal of balanced nutritional intake. And it is recommended to dine until the stomach is about 70% to 80% full, as this practice is passed down the generations as a secret to long life.

At the dinner table, the Chinese has their own set of manners and customs. When dining, the eater must be seated. When people of all ages and both sexes sit at the same table, the elderly must be seated with priority. One must eat food held with chopsticks; when having soup, a soup spoon must be used. There's also to be no noise when eating and so on. These etiquette have continued to this day, but the biggest change is none other than the fact that more and more Chinese have proactively given up the rule of "No talking when eating." Indeed, when dining with the Chinese, one would frequently encounter a dining environment full of chatting and noises. Many people who have their mouths full still intend to chat away. This phenomenon may be due to the reason that contemporary Chinese have come to consider dining as an important social opportunity. People need, at this time, to relax and talk about certain soothing and joyous topics to increase understanding between those sitting at the table.

In recent years, due to the accelerated development of industries and commerce, aside from traditional menu-ordered food services, Chinese fast foods have dawned onto the scene. And not only this, cuisines from every corner of the world have, one after another, made their grand appearances in all major cities in China; Italian pizza, French gourmet, Japanese sushi, American burgers, German beers, Brazilian barbeque, Indian curry, Swiss cheese and more. Anything one can think of can be found, a true all-inclusive list of dining choices. It justifies the saying "Eat in China" even more so.



The Origins of Food and Drink Culture





2,500 years ago, mountain residents in southern China invented the technique to reclaim rough mountain lands into fertile lands. They drew mountain spring water to irrigate and grew rice in terraces. The picture shows the terraces reclaimed by people of the Zhuang nationality in Guilin. (Photo by Guanghui Xie, provided by image library of Hong Kong *China Tourism*)



Tracing the Origins of Foods

There is a saying, the reason that great differences exist between eating habits of various regions of the world is the result of a multitude of factors, including limitations in ecological environment, the population volume, level of productivity and others. Most meat dishes are from areas where population density is relatively low and the soil is either not needed or unable to sustain agriculture. Reliance on meat has possibly stimulated economic activities of sharing and trade and. In comparison, a dietary habit of mainly grain, and plants' roots, stems, leaves and less meat is usually associated with an environment where supply cannot meet demand. The food supply in these places is more dependent on self-growing. However, dietary habits are not status quo, and with no classification as good or bad. But with migration of people on a global scale, dietary traditions that are once fixed to a region might be accepted and adopted by more and more people; and the original regional dietary habit evolves to contain more new elements. People could possibly see from the long-standing Chinese food culture the footprints of the common development of humankind.

China is one originating source of the world's agriculture. The Chinese have invented ways of irrigation at a very early time. Building canals and using sloped land to develop agriculture by irrigation, as well as other means of farming. As early as 5,400 BC, the Yellow River region already saw growth of foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*, also called foxtail bristlegrass, meaning the seed of broomcorn millet), and has already adopted the method of crop storage in underground caves. By 4,800 BC, areas along the Yangtze River have been planted with rice (with the distinction of sticky or non-sticky rice, the earliest "rice" pertains to the glutinous types of rice only). Since entering the agricultural age, the Chinese have formed a dietary composition with grains as the principal food and meats as supplement, and such tradition has continued to this day.



There exists an old piece of writing in China by the title of *Huangdi Neijing*. It describes the food composition of the Chinese as “The Five Grains as life support, the Five Fruits as complimentary aide, the Five Meats as added benefits, and the Five Vegetables as substantial fill.” The grains, fruits, and vegetables are all plant foods. Grain crops in ancient times were referred to as “The Five Grains” or “The Six Grains,” and usually consists of *shu* (broomcorn millet, sometimes referred to as “yellow rice,” a small glutinous yellow grain), *ji* (what we call millet today, has the title of “Head of the Five Grains,” *shu* and *ji* were the principal cereals of Northern China at the time), *mai* (including barley and wheat), *dou* (the general term for all pod-bearing crops, grows in wet lowland areas, and is the main source of protein for the Chinese), *ma* (refers to the edible type of hemp, was the principal food for farmers in ancient times), and *dao* (rice). The *shu* and *ji* are both indigenous to China, and were introduced to Europe in prehistoric times. Rice and wheat are not



Drying crops in the sun on rooftops is a more common tradition in the countryside of southern China. (Photo by Xiaoming Feng, provided by image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)



native to the north of China. It is generally thought that the origins of rice are to be found in South China, India and South East Asia. In the sites of the Chinese Neolithic Hemudu Culture (5000—3000 BC) , archaeologists have found the world's earliest evidence of rice cultivation, but in early times the growing of rice in the north of China was far from widespread, and rice counted as a precious grain. It was not until the Han Dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD), with steady improvements in irrigation and the opening up of the south, that rice gradually became a regular food everywhere, and even then for the most part white rice continued to be regarded as a comparatively expensive food. Wheat originated from Central or West Asia. Some time around the Neolithic period it was introduced to China from northwest, but cultivation started later than the growing of rice, and until the later years of the Zhou Dynasty (1046 to 256 BC) wheat was only for the aristocracy. Also, the sorghum is an indigenous Chinese crop as well, and was introduced to India and Persia (present day Iran) during the first century AD. During every Chinese New Year celebration, the Chinese use the idiom "Good Harvest of the Five Grains," which really means to bless the New Year with good harvest of all crops, so as to bring prosperity. This is enough to show that in a large country where "The masses regard food as their heaven," the production of crops has held enormous importance since olden days.

Experiences from cultivating land gave way for the Chinese to learn about many edible plants that are unknown to the West. And they have discovered that many of the human body's essential nutrients can be obtained from plants. The beans, rice, broomcorn millet, millet and other foods that the Chinese often eat are all rich in proteins, fatty acids and carbohydrates.

Foods made from grain come in many varieties and take on many forms. The northern Chinese's principal food was wheat. Therefore, most dishes on the dinner table are various types of pastry or pasta. Wheat flour is made into buns, pancakes, noodles, stuffed buns, dumplings, wonton and so on. On the other hand, in





Special racks to air-dry grain crops in the sun used in the villages of Guizhou Province. (Photo by Yinian Chen, provided by image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)

the southern part of China, the principal food is rice-based. Besides plain rice, there would be thin rice noodle, thick rice noodles, rice cakes, stuffed glutinous rice balls in soup and other types of pasta and pastry to be found everywhere. Rice spread from south to north, and with barley and wheat passing from west to east contributes significantly to the shaping of Chinese dietary habits.



Noodles after being air-dried can be stored for longer periods of time. (Photo by Michael Cherney, provided by Imagechina)

Bing, or Chinese pancakes, was one of the earliest forms of pastry. The earliest method of making *bing*, is to ground the grain to a powder, make into dough by adding water, then boil in water until cooked. In time, there has come to be steamed, baked, toasted, fried and other kinds of pancakes. *Bing* also has the most varieties among all dough-made foods. It comes in all sizes and thickness, some with stuffing. Even the stuffing comes in no less than several dozen varieties.

