

FOOD IN CHINESE CULTURE

ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY K. C. CHANG



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CHINESE DYNASTIES

Hsia	21st–18th century B.C.
Shang	18th–12th century B.C.
Chou	12th century B.C.–221 B.C.
Ch'in	221–207 B.C.
Han	206 B.C.–A.D. 220
Three Kingdoms	220–265
Chin	265–420
Six Dynasties	420–589
Sui	581–618
T'ang	618–907
Five Dynasties	907–960
Sung	960–1279
Yüan	1271–1368
Ming	1368–1644
Ch'ing	1644–1911

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INTRODUCTION

K. C. CHANG



To say that the consumption of food is a vital part of the chemical process of life is to state the obvious, but sometimes we fail to realize that food is more than just vital. The only other activity that we engage in that is of comparable importance to our lives and to the life of our species is sex. As Kao Tzu, a Warring States-period philosopher and keen observer of human nature, said, “Appetite for food and sex is nature” (trans. Lau 1970, p. 161). But these two activities are quite different. We are, I believe, much closer to our animal base in our sexual endeavors than we are in our eating habits. Too, the range of variations is infinitely wider in food than in sex. In fact, the importance of food in understanding human culture lies precisely in its infinite variability—variability that is not essential for species survival. For survival needs, all men everywhere could eat the same food, to be measured only in calories, fats, carbohydrates, proteins, and vitamins (Pike 1970, pp. 7–12). But no, people of different backgrounds eat very differently. The basic stuffs from which food is prepared; the ways in which it is preserved, cut up, cooked (if at all); the amount and variety at each meal; the tastes that are liked and disliked; the customs of serving food; the utensils; the beliefs about the food’s properties—these all vary. The number of such “food variables” is great.

An anthropological approach to the study of food would be to isolate and identify the food variables, arrange these variables systemically, and explain why some of these variables go together or do not go together.

For convenience, we may use *culture* as a divider in relating food variables hierarchically. I am using the word *culture* here in a classificatory sense implying the pattern or style of behavior of a group of people who share it. Food habits may be used as an important, or even determining, criterion in this connection. People who have the same culture share the same food habits, that is, they share the same assemblage of food variables. Peoples of different cultures share different assemblages of food variables. We might say that different cultures have different food choices. (The word *choices* is used here not necessarily in an active sense, granting the possibility that some choices could be imposed rather than selected.) Why these choices? What determines them? These are among the first questions in any study of food habits.

Within the same culture, the food habits are not at all necessarily homogeneous. In fact, as a rule they are not. Within the same general food style, there are different manifestations of food variables of a smaller range, for different social situations. People of different social classes or occupations eat differently. People on festive occasions, in mourning, or on a daily routine eat again differently. Different religious sects have different eating codes. Men and women, in various stages of their lives, eat differently. Different

individuals have different tastes. Some of these differences are ones of preference, but others may be downright prescribed. Identifying these differences, explaining them, and relating them to other facets of social life are again among the tasks of a serious scholar of food.

Finally, systemically articulated food variables can be laid out in a time perspective, as in historical periods of varying lengths. We see how food habits change and seek to explore the reasons and consequences.

These observations provide some simple and practical clues for the beginning of a theoretical and methodological framework for the study of food as a cultural, rather than chemical, process. Strange as it may seem, considering the obvious importance of food in the life of every human being, every culture, every society, such a framework is not available in anthropological literature. Such a framework would comprise theoretically defensible borders of the field, commonly recognized, but not often resolved, problems, and accepted procedures for tackling issues within them. The studies of kinship, government, economy, and religion have such frameworks. The studies of food and a few other categories of daily life, such as clothing, do not have them. I believe the study of food has defensible borders, is centrally involved with problems of vital interest, and can be tackled by means of logical and generally practical procedures. To transform such beliefs into practice, and to explore the profitability of various approaches, we need a test case. What could be a better case than the Chinese?

Chinese food certainly has variety, and it also has a long documented history, probably longer than any other food tradition of comparable variety. Such, at least, are the assumptions that underlay my thoughts of using Chinese food as a test case in the development of "food-in-culture" studies.

My academic, aside from my gastronomic, interest in Chinese food came originally from a study of Shang and Chou bronzes. The use of the ritual vessels was related to the preparation and serving of food and drink, but without an understanding of the essential food variables I found it hard to understand the bronze vessels in their original context. My pertinent research (Chang 1973) convinced me that at least one of the best ways of getting to a culture's heart would be through its stomach. In the fall of 1972, two of my colleagues at Yale, professors Emily M. Ahern and Alison Richard, joined me in offering a graduate seminar on the anthropology of food and eating. Among my findings was that a rigorous methodology for the study of food and eating must still be developed. In late spring of 1973, I invited the collaborators of this volume to join with me in taking a first look at the facts and the significance of food making and food use throughout Chinese history. This would be a relatively detailed study of the food variables within a single culture, and our conclusions and observations

could contribute to an understanding of the change and interrelationship of food variables and the rest of culture over a time span of several thousand years. Our efforts should, of course, be of interest to scholars of China, but they should also serve to demonstrate some fruitful approaches to the study of food in general.

I said a “first look” above, but that is not strictly correct. Shinoda Osamu has almost singlehandedly carved out the field of Chinese food studies through a series of learned articles, culminating in the collection of “Food Canons” (Shinoda and Tanaka 1970) and the monograph on the history of food in China (Shinoda 1974). But his emphasis and ours are quite different. Shinoda’s studies are focused on descriptive history, ours on analysis and interpretation. The latter two are not possible without the former, but because of his works we have been spared the necessary task of compiling a lot of facts as a first step. Therefore, one may say that this volume has gone a step further.

It may be an indication of something profound and significant—though I don’t know what—that my invitation was accepted by every one of my colleagues on my first approach. My request was a simple one: present the essential facts for your period, and discuss them with regard to topics that loom large in your data or in your mind. In methodology, the authors used no single preconceived framework, and their chapters demonstrate what seem to them to be the most fruitful approaches for their respective data. In terms of patterns of continuity and change of the food variables within the tradition of the Chinese culture, each author is responsible for his period, and the overall effect is plain as their chapters are read in the proper sequence. Since our efforts are exploratory, both in methodology and in regard to the history of Chinese food, there will not be a concluding chapter.

This book serves three purposes. It is a “case study,” in which scholars of food-in-culture can see the ways in which ten of their colleagues have analyzed and interpreted their data. It is a descriptive history of food habits in China, where one should find facts both trivial (when *tou fu* began, when the Chinese first used chopsticks, and the like) and profound (the adoption of American food plants—sweet potato and maize, in particular—which had a large effect upon Chinese population). Finally, the book makes a significant contribution to Chinese cultural history, in which food and food habits played multifarious roles. Since this is a relatively new field, the multiple authorship better ensures exploratory breadth and creativity, but it makes it harder for the reader to detect common patterns and to draw generalizations.

My own generalizations pertain above all to the question, What charac-

terizes Chinese food? This question could, of course, be answered at several levels. A patron at a restaurant in any Chinese city could point to a list of specific dishes on the menu. A cookbook catering to the needs of contemporary families lists all the essential ingredients, utensils, and recipes. A student of modern Chinese culture makes learned generalizations about the common denominators and regional varieties. All of these characterizations are evidently correct, but they serve very different purposes. The data and studies in this book provide the basis for a characterization of a food style over a period of thousands of years, during which time some variables persisted, some died out, some were modified, and some new ones came to be added. Accordingly, I see the following common themes that run through the whole body of our data.

1. The food style of a culture is certainly first of all determined by the natural resources that are available for its use. Palaeolithic hunters the world over relied heavily on animal flesh, which was cooked by a very small number of techniques, among them broiling, drying, pickling, and stone-boiling. The range of variations was probably limited, both for foodstuffs and for cooking methods, during substantial parts of the earliest segments of hominid prehistory. But from an early time, gathering—of fruits, nuts, berries, grubs, seeds, and other edible materials provided by nature—had assumed an important role in supplying human diet. These provisions varied from area to area depending on the natural distribution patterns of the pertinent plants and animals. Therefore, Early Man's diet—especially toward the Upper Palaeolithic period when a more diversified use of the many local food resources became prevailing—was already a link in the food chains of *local* ecosystems. When cultivated plants and domesticated animals began to provide the bulk of the foodstuff among many peoples, the local pattern of food habits became increasingly pronounced because the first plants and the first animals that were placed under domestic use could only be those that were naturally grown in or readily adaptable to specific regions.

It is thus not surprising that Chinese food is above all characterized by an assemblage of plants and animals that grew prosperously in the Chinese land for a long time. A detailed list would be out of place here, and quantitative data are not available. The following enumeration is highly impressionistic:

Starch Staples: millet, rice, *kao-liang*, wheat, maize, buckwheat, yam, sweet potato.

Legumes: soybean, broad bean, peanut, mung bean.

Vegetables: malva, amaranth, Chinese cabbage, mustard green, turnip, radish, mushroom.

Fruits: peach, apricot, plum, apple, jujube date, pear, crab apple, mountain haw, longan, litchi, orange.

Meats: pork, dog, beef, mutton, venison, chicken, duck, goose, pheasant, many fishes.

Spices: red pepper, ginger, garlic, spring onion, cinnamon.

Chinese cooking is, in this sense, the manipulation of these foodstuffs as basic ingredients. Since ingredients are not the same everywhere, Chinese food begins to assume a local character simply by virtue of the ingredients it uses. Obviously ingredients are not sufficient for characterization, but they are a good beginning. Compare, for example, the above list with one in which dairy products occupy a prominent place, and one immediately comes upon a significant contrast between the two food traditions.

One important point about the distinctive assemblage of ingredients is its change through history. Concerning food, the Chinese are not nationalistic to the point of resisting imports. In fact, foreign foodstuffs have been readily adopted since the dawn of history. Wheat and sheep and goat were possibly introduced from western Asia in prehistoric times, many fruits and vegetables came in from central Asia during the Han and the T'ang periods, and peanuts and sweet potatoes from coastal traders during the Ming period. These all became integral ingredients of Chinese food. At the same time, despite the continuous introduction of dairy products and processes throughout the early historical periods, and despite the adoption of some dairy delicacies by the upper strata of society during the T'ang period, milk and dairy products, to this date, have not taken a prominent place in Chinese cuisine. This selectivity can be accounted for only in terms of the indigenous cultural base which absorbs or rejects foreign imports according to their structural or stylistic compatability. It also relates to the internal divisions of the Chinese food traditions, to be commented on later.

2. In the Chinese culture, the whole process of preparing food from raw ingredients to morsels ready for the mouth involves a complex of inter-related variables that is highly distinctive when compared with other food traditions of major magnitude. At the base of this complex is the division between *fan*, grains and other starch foods, and *ts'ai*, vegetable and meat dishes. To prepare a balanced meal, it must have an appropriate amount of both *fan* and *ts'ai*, and ingredients are readied along both tracks. Grains are cooked whole or as flour, making up the *fan* half of the meal in various forms: *fan* (in the narrow sense, "cooked rice"), steamed wheat-, millet-, or corn-flour bread, *ping* ("pancakes"), and noodles. Vegetables and meats are cut up and mixed in various ways into individual dishes to constitute the *ts'ai* half. Even in meals in which the staple starch portion and the meat-and-vegetable portion are apparently joined together, such as in

chiao-tzu ("Chinese ravioli" or "dumplings"), *pao-tzu* ("steamed bun with fillings"), *hun-t'un* ("wonton"), and *hsien-ping* ("pan-fried bun with fillings"), they are in fact put together but not mixed up, and each still retains its due proportion and own distinction (*p'i* ["skin"] = fan; *hsien* ["filling"] = ts'ai).

For the preparation of ts'ai, the use of multiple ingredients and the mixing of flavors are the rules, which above all means that ingredients are usually cut up and not done whole, and that they are variously combined into individual dishes of vastly differing flavors. Pork, for example, may be diced, sliced, shredded, or ground, and when combined with other meats and with various vegetable ingredients and spices produces dishes of utterly divergent shapes, flavors, colors, tastes, and aromas.

The parallelism of fan and ts'ai and the above-described principles of ts'ai preparation account for a number of other features of the Chinese food culture, especially in the area of utensils. To begin with, there are fan utensils and ts'ai utensils, both for cooking and for serving. In the modern kitchen, *fan kuo* ("rice cooker") and *ts'ai kuo* ("wok") are very different and as a rule not interchangeable utensils. The same contrast is seen in Shang bronze vessels between *kui* ("rice servers") and *tou* ("meat platters"). To prepare the kind of ts'ai that we have characterized, the chopping knife or cleaver and the chopping anvil are standard equipment in every Chinese kitchen, ancient and modern. To sweep the cooked grains into the mouth, and to serve the cut-up morsels of the meat-and-vegetable dishes, chopsticks have proved more serviceable than hands or other instruments (such as spoons and forks, the former being used in China alongside the chopsticks).

This complex of interrelated features of Chinese food may be described, for the purpose of shorthand reference, as the Chinese *fan-ts'ai* principle. Send a Chinese cook into an American kitchen, given Chinese or American ingredients, and he or she will (a) prepare an adequate amount of fan, (b) cut up the ingredients and mix them up in various combinations, and (c) cook the ingredients into several dishes and, perhaps, a soup. Given the right ingredients, the "Chineseness" of the meal would increase, but even with entirely native American ingredients and cooked in American utensils, it is still a Chinese meal.

3. The above example shows that the Chinese way of eating is characterized by a notable flexibility and adaptability. Since a ts'ai dish is made of a mixture of ingredients, its distinctive appearance, taste, and flavor do not depend on the exact number of ingredients, nor, in most cases, on any single item. The same is true for a meal, made up of a combination of dishes. In times of affluence, a few more expensive items may be added, but if the

times are hard they may be omitted without doing irreparable damage. If the season is not quite right, substitutes may be used. With the basic principles, a Chinese cook can prepare “Chinese” dishes for the poor as well as the rich, in times of scarcity as well as abundance, and even in a foreign country without many familiar ingredients. The Chinese way of cooking must have helped the Chinese people through some hard times throughout their history. And, of course, one may also say that the Chinese cook the way they do because of their need and desire for adaptability.

This adaptability is shown in at least two other features. The first is the amazing knowledge the Chinese have acquired about their wild plant resources. Thousands of plants are listed in the encyclopedic *Pen ts'ao kang mu* (S. C. Li 1930 ed.), and the notations about each plant include a statement concerning its edibility. The Chinese peasants apparently know every edible plant in their environment, and plants there are many. Most do not ordinarily belong on the dinner table, but they may be easily adapted for consumption in time of famine (*chiu huang*). Here again is this flexibility: A smaller number of familiar foodstuffs are used ordinarily, but, if needed, a greater variety of wild plants would be made use of. The knowledge of these “famine plants” was carefully handed down as a living culture—apparently this knowledge was not placed in dead storage too long or too often.

Another feature of Chinese food habits that contributed to their notable adaptability is the large number and great variety of preserved foods. Data are lacking for quantified comparison, but one has the distinct impression that the Chinese preserve their food in many more ways and in greater quantities than most other peoples. Food is preserved by smoking, salting, sugaring, steeping, pickling, drying, soaking in many kinds of soy sauces, and so forth, and the whole range of foodstuffs is involved—grains, meat, fruit, eggs, vegetables, and everything else. Again, with preserved food, the Chinese people were ever ready in the event of hardship or scarcity.

4. The Chinese way of eating is further characterized by the ideas and beliefs about food, which actively affect the ways and manners in which food is prepared and taken. The overriding idea about food in China—in all likelihood an idea with solid, but as yet unrevealed, scientific backing—is that the kind and the amount of food one takes is intimately relevant to one's health. Food not only affects health as a matter of general principle, the selection of the right food at any particular time must also be dependant upon one's health condition at that time. Food, therefore, is also medicine.

The regulation of diet as a disease preventive or cure is certainly as Western as it is Chinese. Common Western examples are the diet for arthritics and