

The Food Culture on Asia – A Personal View

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WE all have our favorite childhood memories. I'd venture to say that many of them are related to food. My favorite one, surprising to most people perhaps, does not involve a favorite dish, or a special candy. I must have been four at the time, and there I was, crouching in my favorite spot in the entire universe – underneath our kitchen table. From the vantage point that I had a clear view of the entire kitchen: my mom fussing over the wood-burning stove, my little brother crawling around the floor. There might have been a chicken or two pecking at the dirt outside under the hot sun but inside, I was cool, safe, and the aroma from my mom's cooking was always a good sign that all is well, dinner will be ready soon.

For a four-year old, I had a pretty good nose for food. I could tell if my mother was steaming pork sausage over rice (my favorite at the time) or duck sausage

(my other favorite). I could tell if she was making soup with chicken bones or ox tail. Like any typical Chinese kitchen, we never wasted anything when it came to food. Of all the images I have of my mother, the one of her working behind the stove was by far the most enduring and endearing one. She was a small woman, but she seemed to loom tall to a four-year old. From time to time she would brush off a bead of sweat from her brow, fend off a spark from the fire. And no matter how many pots she had simmering and boiling on the stove, she would be in perfect control of all the what, when, and where in that kitchen. Mom might never have heard of the term 'multi-task,' but could surely give a few lessons to the experts of today on that subject.

Food played a big part in my upbringing, nutritionally, emotionally, and economically – my family had, at

one time, run a tiny family restaurant. In Asia, particularly back in those days, small family restaurants made up 95 percent of all the restaurants. One can say that they were the communal kitchen for countless families in big cities and small villages everywhere. And for us, it also provided a humble living.

These days in my adopted home in North America, I wince painfully whenever I sense a food decision is coming up in a conversation. My foreboding comes from the casual frown that members of our younger generation (or even from my generation, for that matter) often display when the topic of food is discussed. Where are we going to have lunch? What are we having for dinner? In the West, so many of us are taking our food for granted. We have been spoiled by years of abundance. Our supermarket shelves are stocked with thousands of food items, the food court at the mall beckons us with mind-numbing choices, and restaurants these days are presenting their customers with menus that resemble a small phone directory. Maybe it's the ultimate irony that in a society of limitless food choices, we are choosing to abstain.

When I was growing up, food was a struggle. There were no widespread famines in rural China back in my childhood, none that I could remember, anyway. But I do remember that food was not plentiful, and that a good part of people's lives was devoted each day to secure a decent meal. My mother, for example, used to do her 'marketing' every single day. Marketing meant going to the wet market. Back then refrigerators were unheard of for the average (and not so average) households in Guangzhou. Without refrigerators, most meat and poultry had to be consumed within a short period of time after you brought it home. This was a blessing in disguise. What we missed out in convenience we gained in always having fresh ingredients for our dinners.

In the rural economy, many people sustained or at least supplemented their family diets by small-scale farming. Walk along any small village and you were bound to find small vegetable patches behind people's houses (we didn't have formal 'backyards' per se) where a few chickens and, for the luckier ones, a pig or two, would roam about. But even the most crafted backyard farmers needed firewood, spices, cooking oil, and rice. So for those and other necessities, my mother would visit the market everyday.

She was a great shopper: always had a sharp eye for finding the freshest food items and was a skilled bargainer, too. You have to be one when you are a poor widow with two boys. At times I would accompany her on her shopping trips, dragging along a heavy basket that looked bigger than me. One thing about food shopping in small Chinese markets: you don't always get what you want when you want it. Efficiency was not the trademark there. Farmers with the freshest vegetables or fishermen with their best catches might not be at the market when

you get there. So, there would be days when a trip to the market became two trips. Catch them early for the best picks, or catch them late for the best bargains. In any event, planning a dinner on a budget was a juggling act for most poor Chinese families, and a time-consuming one at that.

Necessity is the mother of all invention. Confucius might not have said it, but it sure rang true to many Chinese home cooks back in my childhood. You make the best meal with whatever you find in the market, and whatever you find in your pantry. Perhaps that explains my philosophy about recipes and cookbooks. When I asked my mother for the recipes for my favorite childhood dishes, she would laugh. "You liked this one dish better when I couldn't find white turnip in the market and substituted it with cabbage." Flexibility and an open-mind, these are the two very important ingredients for the making of a good chef. I have only repeated that twenty thousand times in my cooking programs and in every single one of my cookbooks.

So far, I have discussed the casual side of food. By casual, I mean what we sustain ourselves with everyday. But food in Chinese culture is a lot more than daily sustenance. Food does not only keep us alive; it is a cultural anchor. Name any historical or cultural event in China: our New Year, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, and I can name all the special foods that we serve for those occasions. In fact, as children, we used to identify each festival with the kind of food we will be expecting. The Mid-Autumn Festival, for example, would always mean to me paper lanterns and the taste of sweet moon cakes. Chinese New Year? That's a time for firecrackers and pan-fried white sweet lotus cakes, melon seeds and candied lotus roots...

As we make food an intricate part of our relationships with our friends and families, the same goes for our relationships with our departed loved ones

and the different deities whose blessings we pray for. As a child, I often wondered why we had to add food and rice wine in our offerings to the Kitchen God and the door sentinel. My mother used to splash the rice wine on the ground as part of the ritual. I didn't mind the wine. I had no taste for that. I was quite happy to see that she did not do the same with the steamed chicken. At least we ended up enjoying that for supper. I never did acquire much faith for all the hungry ghosts and other wandering spirits, but I was glad my mother did. Thanks to these spirits, our dinner bowls were blessed with a lot more variety of food.

Many of my TV viewers have written to me asking my opinion on what they perceived to be a relatively heavier emphasis that Asians tend to place on food, vis-à-vis their Western counterparts. My answer to them is by no means scientific. It's based solely on my decades of experience traveling to different parts of Asia, and my

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personal knowledge of the Chinese and other Asian cultures, and the role of food in them. Overall, I do agree that food does play a more important role in Asian culture. The reason, however, may surprise my viewers. I do not believe that we Asians are more obsessed with food than people from other parts of the world. Food for us is more than nutrition. It's deeply ingrained in our social and cultural experience.

In the West, when friends socialize, they often do so in a bar. In Asia, the same gathering will more likely take place in someone's home, in a restaurant, a café, or a teahouse. Wine and spirit in Asia are most often imbued with food. In saying that, I am not implying that we have fewer alcohol enthusiasts in Asia. As I mentioned earlier, my opinion is purely anecdotal and unscientific. But based on my observation, while Asians do not abstain from alcohol, we tend to consume them with our meals, or on special occasions such as a wedding banquet or other celebrations.

Which brings us back to the central role of food in our socialization. When I was a child, visits to the homes of our relatives and friends usually necessitated the bringing of a gift of food. Maybe it was only a symbolic gesture of good will, but bringing a few oranges or sweet cakes to a friend's house would get most visits off to a good start. The friend or relative would naturally serve tea and we could then share the food brought. It's all part of a socialization process that dates back thousands of years.

In a part of the world where most people do not live in the luxury comfort that is most often associated with the West, Asians find that the sharing of food is a luxury that they can afford. Hence, many of our food rituals are built around the concept of sharing. Take, for instance, the example of a Mongolian Hot Pot and its many different reincarnations all over Asia: in Japan it's Shabu Shabu, and in Southern China, the Fire Pot. No matter the name, the experience centers on a group of people sharing the eating experience together. In the West, the closest parallel that comes to mind is the Swiss fondue. The first time I was invited to a fondue party, I exclaimed, "It's hot pot with cheese!"

Another perfect example of Chinese food-sharing is the Cantonese *dim sum*. Small delectable dishes of dumplings and other tempting morsels are brought out to the dining room in carts, and diners only ask for the dishes that strike their fancy. We also call this 'yum cha,' or drinking tea, as dim sum is usually a morning tea or brunch ritual. With tea, or any other libation, sharing the dishes is the essence of enjoying dim sum. The more people one has around the table, the more dishes they can order and taste, and the more fulfilling the experience.

Families and friends usually enjoy dim sum or yum cha as an opportunity to catch up on each others' lives, to gossip, to bathe in the warm comfort of each other's company, and best of all, be surrounded by great food. It's the best way I know to spend a Sunday morning.

Sharing is also a part of our banquet tradition. Those of us who are veterans of Chinese banquets know that these events are usually held in a large hall, where all the guests are seated at big round tables. As each course is brought out from the kitchen, every guest shares the same food from a community platter. This communal style of eating originates in the home, where families would gather around and share their meals. That's why it was an adjustment for me when I first came to North America and witnessed that my Western friends were ordering for themselves only individual dishes from a restaurant menu. I am not criticizing the freedom to choose your own dish. I am merely pointing out that this difference in food custom is a symbolic example of how food is perceived in our different cultures.

And, finally, let's not neglect the true gourmands in our midst. People who truly love to eat cross every ethnic boundary. In Asia, however, the food culture seems more...how shall I put it...revered. At least it's a lot more acceptable as a hobby. In this diet-crazed era, the obsession over food in the West seems to have more to do with food avoidance. In Asia, we are still embracing the joy of exploring new and exciting dishes. Perhaps economics plays a role in this difference. As Asia is emerging as a strong global economic powerhouse, the standard of living for many of its inhabitants is rising. Given the traditional love affair that Asians have with food, is it any wonder that we go a bit overboard in indulging ourselves, now that we have the resources?

These days, the average Chinese family does not have to run down to the wet market twice a day to catch the farmer with the freshest white turnip. Our modern distribution system has made quality products more readily available on the shelves of markets everywhere. But even though we may not have to drag our big basket to the market twice a day, part of us still wants to do so. We enjoy the freedom to travel to the market; we enjoy meeting and greeting the people there. And fresh white turnips are just so much better tasting than anything inside a can. In Asia, freedom these days can mean a simple trip down to the food market.

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