

The Food and Cuisine Cultures of the Ming Dynasty

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Food culture is one of the most ingrained behaviors among the cultural and productive activities of human beings. Particularly during ancient times when transportation was cumbersome, the food culture of a given region would have to be molded by the availability of its grain cultivation and breed stock. Fernand Braudel once proposes an amazing, if not groundbreaking, hypothesis in the first volume of his *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century* trilogy: that one way or another an agricultural civilization on a given surface can feed ten to twenty as many people as its stock-rising counterpart because of the preponderance of the calories it provides. He says, “The early settlement and then the spectacular increase in population in the Far East were only possible because of the small amount of meat eaten.”¹ The accuracy of Braudel’s hypothesis aside, his emphasis on how food production is closely associated with the rise of cultures and civilizations cannot be exaggerated. If one agrees with Braudel and acknowledges that only economic, geo-historical, and social changes over very long periods are what really matter, then one would probably find the famous Chinese adage “the masses regard food as their heaven” profoundly meaningful. The saying contains multi-layered implications. First, since dining occupies such an important role in people’s daily lives, all families, including commoners on meager incomes, would strive to sate the needs of their mouths and stomachs by preparing the best food they can afford.²

¹ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century: The Structure of Everyday Life*, 1st University of California Press ed., 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 104.

² Take Robert Fortune, a Scottish botanist and traveler best known for introducing tea plants from China to India, for example. Fortune, after his 1850s’ trip to China, commented on the food of his Chinese laborers: “The food of these people is of the simplest kind — namely, rice, vegetables, and a small portion of animal food, such as fish or pork. But

Second, the issue of food supply occupies an unparalleled significance. Third, when the food supply falls short, for the general populace, it is nothing less than the collapse of Heaven, because calamities, in the forms of famine, flood, drought, poor harvest and cannibalism, would soon make their presence known. Fourth, a severe famine was usually followed by governmental actions for relief, but often of an ineffective nature; public and private charities would weigh in, but not all work successfully. Fifth, when all measures failed to sustain the famine-devastated populace, the desperate masses would likely become mobs and rebels, precipitating the collapse of the existent dynasty--analogical of the fall of Heaven.

This chain of causality shows a cohesive logic centered on the unparalleled significance of food, which sends us back to the initial statement “the masses regard food as their Heaven.” The expansive nature of Chinese food culture in the imperial socio-historical context thus raises a need to study not only the process of food consumption, but also the production, supply or lack thereof, and in the latter’s case, famine relief effort.

While a comprehensive study of Ming food institution would shed light on facets of Ming economic and material concerns, touch the boundaries of natural disaster, famine relief, communal charity, etc., this study will limit it’s arena to Ming food and cuisine cultures only.

The north China Plain has been from antiquity a land that produces wheat, sorghum, millet and foxtail millet. Crops like corn, sweet potato, and potato are

the poorest classes in China seem to understand the art of preparing their food much better than the same classes at home. With the simple substances I have named the Chinese labourer contrives to make a number of very savoury dishes, upon which he breakfasts or dines most sumptuously.” Robert Fortune, *A Residence among the Chinese: Inland, on the Coast, and at Sea. Being a Narrative of Scenes and Adventures During a Third Visit to China, from 1853 to 1856* (London: J. Murray, 1857), 42.

commonly regarded as being introduced into China after the discovery of the Americas, at a time overlapping the transition from the late Ming to early Qing, roughly the third quarter of the sixteenth century. Their influence on the subsistence of Ming people's dining tables was limited. However, with a steady growth the production they eventually became important additions to the Chinese diet in the early to middle Qing.³

Grains and other staple foods make up 70 percent or more of the calories the average Chinese person eats each day.⁴ Divided by the Yangzi River, the northerners' staple foods are wheat, and the southerners, rice. This divide also constitutes one of the most important regional differences between the North and South. Northern Chinese cuisine is that of Peking and provinces of Shandong, Hebei, Shanxi, Shan'xi and Henan.⁵ In terms of staple foods, *momo* 馍馍, the steamed bread (also known as *mantou* 馒头 or *bobo* 饽饽) occupies their daily dining table, but *bianshi* 扁食dumpling (modern name *jiaozi* 饺子, known to the Manchus as *zhubobo* 煮饽饽) are an inseparable part of the Spring Festival holiday. The process of making *bianshi*, similar to that of making *jiaozi* today, has been vividly described in a lyric of Yuan Drama:

White wrapper and soft stomach, the touch of them pleases your hands. At first the wrappers are empty, and then you add in some onions and meats. In boiled water, they swim like mandarin ducks, pair by pair. Their reunion is ephemeral though, for the boiling only takes a while. Oh! you *bianshi*! When uncooked I tweak you, and when done I chew you, the delicious flavor of you only known to my stomach.⁶

³ Frederick W. Mote, *Imperial China, 900-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 750.

⁴ Jacqueline Newman, *Food Culture in China*, Food Culture around the World, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004), 90.

⁵ Frederick J. Simoons, *Food in China: A Cultural and Historical Inquiry* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1991), 45.

⁶ Xianglin Li, "Yuanqu Dangzhong Shuo Bianshi 元曲当中说"扁食"," *Sichuan pengren gaodeng zhanke xuexiao xuebao* 四川烹饪高等专科学校学报 4 (2002).



Figure 1: *Bianshi*

Bianshi is a must-have at the tables of Shandong households during New Year's Eve. Even a family of stringent situation would manage to borrow money to buy white flour and meat, and ensure the symbolic *bianshi* show up at its dinner table; for, the absence of which bespeaks not only the utter failure of the family's finance, but also the householder's negligence to the welfare of the folks living under the same roof. If he were remiss in this responsibility, maids, servants and young housewives would have complained and grumbled for the rest of the year until they are fed *bianshi* on the next New Year's Eve.

Perching on the northeast corner of the China domain, Beijing had become the Ming capital after the third Ming Emperor, Yongle, seized the throne by warring against his nephew, Emperor Jianwen. Even before the founding of the Ming, Beijing's geographic position with respect to trade routes had brought to it a rich assemblage of food plants, spices and flavorings. The pastoral peoples it faced in the north, particularly the Mongols, who were to become China's rulers in the 14th century, made substantial contribution to its culinary culture. Following the Yuan conquest, the swarming in of middle-Asia collaborators whose population penetrated throughout

northern China had left some heavy Islamic marks on regional cuisines. In addition, if Macro Polo's travelogue account is to be believed, among the "Khan-balik" (Beijing) inhabitants there was a sizable population of "Christians, Saracens, and Cathayans, about 5000 astrologers and soothsayers."⁷ The conglomeration of varieties of foreign and domestic cultures would inevitably bestow the metropolis a vibrant and comprehensive cuisine legacy.

A multitude of late Ming literati, perplexed by the collapse of hierarchical and moral orders, and vexed by the blurred boundaries of class and gender, vented their dissatisfactions on the writings of "morality books, family instructions, conduct books and vernacular fictions."⁸ Paradoxically, albeit the outcries were made by the moral figureheads of the scholar-gentry, it was also the same class that shepherded the Ming society into a carnival of materialism. As a result, we frequently see authors who meant to "admonish and awe the world" were also the ones who most cherished the pen of "portrayal of things".

The writing style of *Jin Ping Mei*, to which Naifei Ding rightly denotes as a "narrative economy of excess and luxurious consumption....a mania for objects insofar as they always and already are the signs of what makes them objects"⁹, is near material-fetishism. So too, has the late Ming novel *Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan*¹⁰ been zealously engaged in depiction of details, sometimes in a degree seemingly impedimental to the fluidity of the narrative; the difference between the two works though, is that while *Jin Ping Mei* lavishes its ink on "luxurious consumption," *Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan* takes more

⁷ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1958), 158.

⁸ Wu, "From History to Allegory: Surviving Famine in the *Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan*," 91.

⁹ Naifei Ding, *Obscene Things: Sexual Politics in Jin Ping Mei* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 188-89.

¹⁰ Xizhou, Sheng. *Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan*. Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1993.

interest in the lives of the well-to-do peasantry or urban commoners.

In *Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan*, when the male protagonist Di Xichen's concubine Jijie is pregnant, the morning sickness drives her to crave for a long list of curious foods most people have never heard of:

Honey crucian carp of Sichuan, tadpole soup of Fujian, whole scorpion of Pingyin, *qi* snake of Huguang, bamboo raccoon of Huoshan, balloonfish of Suzhou, yellow mouse of Datong, goose of Gushi, chicken of Laiyang, crab of Tianjin, duck egg of Gaoyou, elephant truck of Yunnan, lion leg of Jiaozhi, phoenix meat of Baoji, psychedelic fish of Dengzhou....(79.611)

The enumeration of food specialties is not the only occurrence in the novel. Due to the geographic proximity, many of the food specialties available in Beijing were also securable by Shandongnese. In the ephemeral reunion of Xichen and his old lover Sun Lanji, she prepares for him quite a feast, the food list of which comparable to the abovementioned.

Sun Lanji brings out duck egg of Gaoyou, ham of Jinhua, pickled fish of Huguang, mussel of Ningbo, crab of Tianjin, dragon louse of Fujian, drunk shrimp of Hangzhou, *suosuo* grape of Shanxi, sweetmeat and sweetball of Qingzhou, bamboo terrapin of Tianmushan, dried shrimps of Dengzhou, crisp flower of Datong, salty devilwood of Hangzhou, horse betelnut of Yunnan, amber candy of Beijing; she also arranges a fine collecting box with fifteen separate cells. Then she put on her table four dishes of dry fruits: one lichee, one dried chestnut, one fried ginkgo, and one sheep tail bamboo shoot walnut; and again there are four small dishes: a vinegar-soaked ginger shoot, a ten-spiced lobster sauce, a piece of lettuce, and a toon sprout. Knowing that Xichen does not drink heavily, she opened a semi-finished wine syrup, hoping the early arrival of Xichen and the late returning of her husband Qin Jingyu might create a chance of reunion (50.386).

Most of the listed local products in the above two occasions remain signature

foods in their respective regions nowadays. That a slightly well-off Beijing family is able to cater to those strange cravings of a pregnant concubine might be inconceivable to a modern reader, but taking into consideration the permeating epicurean culture of the late Ming Beijing, it is in fact not that unthinkable.

As mentioned, the geographic and political significance of Beijing had rendered it a conflux of food cultures from different regions. Present-day Beijing cuisine owes most of its debts to culinary imports from Shandong and that of its most recent conquerors, the Manchus. Back in the Ming, it was more of a mix of northern ethnic Chinese, Mongolian, and Islamic food styles as well as the gamut of Chinese fare from different regions. To trace the origin of Beijing epicurianism, two critical periods, the Chenhua and Hongzhi reigns, must be addressed.

The Founding Emperor Hongwu was a man of austerity and frugality. To prevent his descendants from indulging in gastronomy, he strove to set up an exemplary dining pattern. He demanded the palace foods be prepared in Regular Supply (*changgong*, 常供), a family-styled cuisine, and to show that he had not forgotten his grass-root origins, he made tofu a requirement for his breakfast and dinner menus. Empress Ma frequently presented herself in the palace kitchen to supervise the cooking.¹¹

For Hongwu, dining was more than an occasion to display one's virtue of frugality. Much like clothing, it constituted yet another important institution in which distinctions on social hierarchies must be addressed. He had a set of regulations on dining protocols devised, with the special emphasis on the classifications of dining vessels and the correlative usages of them. Rank entitlement was a primary consideration

¹¹ Baoliang Chen, *Piaoyao De Chuantong: Mingdai Chengshi Shenghuo Changjuan* 飘摇的传统: 明代城市生活长卷 (Changsha: Hunan chubanshe, 1996), 60.

when deciding the eligibility to access a certain vessel. For example, dukes, marquises, and officials of the first and second ranks were entitled to use golden wine bottles and wine cups, the rest utensils in silver. Officials ranking from the third to the fifth were allowed wine bottles in silver and cups in gold; rank sixth to rank ninth, both bottles and cups in silver and for the rest utensils in porcelain or lacquer; commoners were only allowed to use wine bottles in tin and cups in silver.¹²

Those regulations were reinforced over time through the forms of imperial edicts, circular orders, rescript or laws. The 35th year of Hongwu saw the promulgation of a law banning the usage of golden wine vessels by officials and civilians; and in the 16th year of Zhengde, a memorial petitioning to outlaw the usage of silver vessels by artisans and merchants was granted by the throne.¹³ Loaded with trivial details, those laws and regulations were hard to follow from the beginning, and still harder when economic progress nearly upturned the “simple and plain” early Ming social structure. However, to treat these legal proscriptions as having saliently dissolved in the midst of a highly fluid, boundary-crossing society would be to err towards over-simplification. Hierarchical social protocols are devised to rivet individuals to their inherent social positions, and when enforced upon people in forms of laws and rescript, the momentum they have gained would persist long after those laws and rescript are disregarded, ignored, or even abolished.

The Chenghua reign saw the social trend of pursuing material comforts everywhere on the rise, in which the imperial palace had played as a leading role. For example, although tofu remained a must-have dish on the court menu, its courtly version

¹² Dongyan Li, "Fangwu Qiyong Dengdi房屋器用等第," Guoxue Daohang 国学导航, <http://www.guoxue123.com/shibu/0401/01dmhd/0072.htm>.

¹³ Ibid.

was made not from bean curd from yellow beans, but rather from the brains of nearly a thousand birds, which was dressed to resemble the poor dish. The Hongzhi 弘治 reign was characterized by a relaxed political atmosphere. Born and raised up in adversity, Emperor Hongzhi had grown up to be a tolerant, forgiving, self-disciplined prince. He was identified as the only monogamous emperor in the entire Chinese imperial history.¹⁴ Quick in mind, diligent in attending court audience, devoted to Confucian teachings and adamant to principles, he was a one-of-the-kind model sovereign who won unanimous praise from the bureaucracy and people. He lived pristinely, but not only did he refrain from imposing the same standard on his courtiers, he actually was quite entertained by the idea that they should enjoy a leisurely life of wines and banquets after having withdrawn to their private lives. In view of the fact that official parties were usually held at night, and his ministers may have been drunk on their ways home, he ordered all the avenue-abutted shops and inns in Beijing and Nanjing have their lanterns lit during evenings to illuminate the streets. From the Hongzhi reign and onwards, the writings of the Ming scholar-officials were flooded with records of parties, menus and cuisines. Epicureanism had become such a popular topic that one's knowledge of cuisine was reckoned as a sign of erudition and nobility. Zhang Juzheng, the prime minister of the youngster Wanli, complained that he had "nowhere to settle chopsticks" when over 100 dishes were laid in front of him in a regular family dinner. Late Ming literati Zhang Dai styled himself *qingchan* 清饑, or "high-hearted glutton," as he truly was an elite glutton of signature regional foods. In his *Reminiscences in Dreams of Tao An* 陶庵夢憶, he noted down a list of foods that he had savored, the comprehensiveness of which exceeded

¹⁴ Mote, *Imperial China, 900-1800*, 634.

that of the lists of Jijie and Sun Lanji in combined, and the origins of which covered almost each and every province.¹⁵

In essence, with regards to food, one of the four “primary material concerns”, the Ming regime had shown an obsession with forming its people into neatly layered hierarchies. To achieve that end, sets of inclement sumptuary laws were mobilized to give out detailed regulations on the people’s dining behaviors, i.e., who is to use what utensil made of what material under what occasion; but one is reminded that the Ming regulations on the entitlement to access different dining vessels in the world of food were not ultimately about regulating the food material culture, but meant to give out clear demarcations in social boundaries.

Beijing’s vibrant and comprehensive cuisine legacy mentioned must be viewed the Ming capital’s historio-geographic nature, one that had been traditionally very receptive to the cultures of its adjacent pastoral peoples, evidence of which one can find in Macro Polo’s travelogue account. Given the numerous accounts by late Ming gentry-scholars on cuisines and banquets, it is safe for one to draw conclusions that despite the dynasty’s early-year attempts to restrict people’s access to better food, the innate desires to pursuit that material comfort had never been truly abated; and that bred in the loosened political atmosphere of the Chenhua and Hongzhi reigns, epicurianism was on the rise. By the time of late Ming, economic development had outpaced the ossified legal codes, and epicureanism finally swamped modes of frugality.

¹⁵ Chen, *Piaoyao De Chuantong: Mingdai Chengshi Shenghuo Changjuan* 飘摇的传统: 明代城市生活长卷, 69-71.