

Chinese Geography through Chinese Cuisine

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China has the world's largest population, now over 1.3 billion, but its land area (much of it high mountains or desert) is about the same as that of the United States, which has less than one-fourth as many people. So Chinese farmers have learned to use every inch of their fertile land intensively. Pressure on the land has required extremely efficient farming and resulted in a vast mosaic of food cultures, intimately related to local climate (even micro-climate) and water-soil resources. Some products may be found in all of China's agricultural regions, but most places are known for, and take pride in, a local cuisine.

For food is never just "what the land can produce," so local preferences—taste and culinary history—play important roles in people's choices. To take an important example, why did chile (*capsicum*) peppers, which could be grown everywhere in China, only become an important source of flavor and nutrition in central and western regions (such as Hunan and Sichuan), rather than along the coast, where they first arrived from the Americas? Why are some Chinese cuisines more strongly flavored and others lighter? We can use this variation in food to help our students see China not as an "it," a singular and homogeneous trans-Pacific *Other*, but (more accurately) as a complex geographical and human "them," diverse and plural in every way. This essay discusses how the regional cuisines of China reflect topography, climate, and people's ability to extract both calories and taste from the land and water.

Until the twentieth century, there was no such thing as "Chinese food," at least not in China. Rather, each part of China had its own unique ingredients and preparations, so Chinese people associated particular tastes and smells

with particular places. Some techniques, like steaming or stir-frying in oil, and some ingredients, like cabbage, ginger, soy sauce, and green onions, were used everywhere, but most specific preparations remained closely associated with local cuisines. China's climates range from Siberia to the tropics, and you would never expect such diverse ecologies to produce the same kinds of food. What we call "Chinese food" outside of China usually means an over-sweetened variant of Cantonese (Guangzhou) cuisine—the home region of most Chinese immigrants—one tailored to the tastes of foreigners and using ingredients very different from those used in China. To make a familiar comparison, imagine what anyone in Europe would think of a restaurant that sold "European food." Would that be Greek or Portuguese or Bavarian or Swedish? Only outside of Europe could such a restaurant make any sense or survive. Europeans share baked bread, onions, stewing, roasting, and other ingredients and techniques, but what tremendous variation lies beneath the connections! So, too, with China.

One of the great pleasures of traveling in China (as in Europe) lies in tasting

the dishes that local people are proud of and consider their very own. In every part of China, you will find the balance of flavors, the overall taste of the local cuisine, to be unique and different, suited to the products of local soil and water. Even the same ingredient can differ widely across the Chinese landscape. For example, in olden times, traveling merchants from Shanxi province, in the north, would carry their personal jugs of Shanxi vinegar with them wherever they went rather than tolerate the inferior sourness of vinegars elsewhere.

Nowadays, of course, many young people in China prefer the allure of homogenized fast food, Pizza Hut or McDonalds, rather than the antiquated tastes of their parents and grandparents. Even the well-known Chinese avoidance of dairy products (which began because there's so little land available for grazing) is being challenged, for cream sauces, cheese, and yogurt have now become common. But despite the gradual homogenization of "Chinese food" and the advent of the Big Mac, local and regional cuisines still retain their uniqueness. We can teach Chinese geography as we take apart the idea of "Chinese food." The most obvious geographical divisions—north-south, east-west—also distinguish important culinary differences.

China's great rivers all flow down from the eastern Tibetan massif to the Pacific: the Huanghe (Yellow River) in the north, the Changjiang (Yangzi River) in the center, and the West and Pearl River system in the south. The entire culture area thus

Some 50,000 Muslim Hui people live in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. The Muslim Quarter is crowded with merchants and its numerous restaurants offer local specialties such as skewered lamb. (Tedd Levy, 2008)



rises heading west and (as elsewhere in the northern hemisphere) gets hotter and wetter heading south. Most fundamentally, the north is temperate and sometimes arid, appropriate for dry-field grains, the south humid and well watered, perfect for wet-field (paddy) rice. Since for Chinese people, food (*fan*) means “cooked grain,” the difference is crucial—northerners eat porridge, noodles, or steamed bread as their “main food” (*zhushi*), while southerners eat rice. The east can utilize the resource of the sea and the lowlands, the west the products of mountains and river valleys, and their local flavors reflect these topographical variations.

North. Northern China, centered on the great triangular plain with Beijing at its apex, is a region of wheat, corn, sorghum, and millet, without the monsoon rains that nourish the south. Often called “coarse” or “vulgar” by southerners, dishes from the north tend to be strongly flavored, with onions or garlic in charge. Influences from the pastoral

peoples to the north have also affected this region, so lamb and beef often join the more “Chinese” pork, chicken, and duck on northern tables. The Manchus, the core of the last imperial dynasty to rule China (the Qing, 1636-1912), brought their northeastern food ways and those of their Mongol allies to their political center at Beijing. The capital’s cuisine, therefore, includes many forest and grassland ingredients, like wild mushrooms and horsemeat, as well as elaborate dishes from the former imperial kitchens, such as the famous oven-baked Peking/Beijing duck. Oven baking remained a rare cooking technique in China, largely because it required so much fuel compared to steaming, boiling, or stir-frying, but the imperial household could afford it.

Because the northern climate is cold and harsh, people from this region must preserve food for the long winters. Turnips and cabbages are produced in vast quantity throughout the north, and urban families buy hundreds of pounds

at harvest time to store in the cold or to pickle with salt, vinegar, and chilies (similar to Korean *kimchi*). Since their importation from the New World in the sixteenth century, white potatoes also provide wintertime calories for northern Chinese. Like New England and other temperate zones, north and northwest China are justifiably proud of their fruits. Melons, apples, crabapples, pears, and peaches grow in profusion, as do nuts and more exotic sweets such as the sour (and medicinally powerful) jujube or wolfberry (*gouji*), so northern meals will often end with a simple plate of fruit rather than any prepared dessert. Northwest China, astride China’s major trade routes to Central Asia, has long been home to a large population of Muslims, whose religious dietary restrictions prevent them from eating pork. They therefore dominate the herding, butchering, and preparation of lamb, mutton, and beef.

East. Eastern Chinese food comes from the “land of rice and fish,” one

of China's richest agricultural regions, centered on the lower reaches of the Yangzi river. There the predictable monsoon rains and hot climate create ideal conditions for growing rice and for cultivating a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. Since the growing season is long, many eastern farmers can raise two crops of rice per year, ensuring an adequate supply of grain for the dense population. In this center of urbanization and commercial agriculture, most of the transportation is done by water, the network of rivers and canals connecting every village and town to larger marketing centers, so even bulk grains can be moved by boat to supply large cities. It was here that Marco Polo saw the vast metropolis of Hangzhou, with over a million people in the thirteenth century, and described its enormous food markets to an unbelieving European audience.

Eastern cooking is bland and more lightly spiced than that of the north, with just a hint of onion or ginger. Freshwater fish and shellfish constitute a crucial source of protein, whether farmed or caught in the waterways, whether eaten fresh or preserved (often dried). Along the coast, of course, marine products (fish, shellfish, seaweed) provide protein, calories, and delicious possibilities. Though the basic ingredients for cooking are similar throughout the region, different cities in eastern China have unique culinary reputations. The city of Wuxi (pronounced *woo-see*), for example, is famous for its inhabitants' tendency to add sugar to *anything*. In Wuxi, sweetness can overwhelm all other flavors, so folks from elsewhere indulge in good-natured teasing about Wuxi's sweet tooth. This presumably began because Wuxi produces sugar; however, so do other parts of China that do not sweeten their food so copiously. Culinary history is filled with such mysteries!

The great metropolitan port city of Shanghai, on a Yangzi tributary near the sea, has been in constant interaction with Europe and America for almost two centuries, so its cuisine has received many

Selected websites for Chinese geography and cuisine

Columbia University, Center for East Asia

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/menu_pages/blue/geo_china_a.htm

Extensive variety of resources, including the student activity: "Ordering a Chinese Meal," designed to introduce students to Chinese cuisine. Also, "Food and Geography," a student reading that discusses relationship between food and geography.

Food in History: Regional Chinese Cuisine Project

www.globaled.org/chinaproject/lesson1.htm

By Monika Weidner, Poly Prep High School

This project includes a student assignment, a reading, and a bibliography.

Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives

www.asiasociety.org/style-living/food-recipes/food/meats/food-chinese-culture

Useful background reading from the Asia Society website: askasia.org

outside influences. There, for example, Chinese cooks routinely use cheese, an exotic ingredient rarely found in China before the late twentieth century.

West. Western China, the upper Yangzi region including the provinces of Sichuan (Szechwan) and Hunan, is justifiably famous for powerful tastes, dominated by fresh ginger, garlic, green onions, brown peppercorn (*fagara*), and chilies (*lajiao*). These provinces share a hot, humid climate and long growing season, with the Tibetan highlands to the west providing abundant water in the spring snowmelt, so the rice paddies yield two crops per year. Western chefs combine this agricultural richness with the heat of chilies and the mouth-numbing smoky flavor of brown peppercorn to create dishes that can overwhelm a newcomer but can also amaze with their subtlety and variety. When chilies arrived in Hunan and Sichuan, they fell on fertile ground—people there already loved the spiciness of their brown peppercorn, so the New World *capsicum* peppers fit the local cuisine.

South. Southern Chinese cuisine is usually represented by the venerable, multifaceted cooking of Guangzhou, in China's southernmost province, a low-lying region of heat, humidity, and dense

human settlement. Given its ports and population, this region has long been the source of "Chinese" food outside of China, for its people have migrated overseas in great numbers and established communities from Hawai'i to Puerto Rico, from Vietnam to London.

Since southern farmers can produce year-round, freshness lies at the core of southern Chinese culinary technique, and light cooking of the freshest ingredients produces a broad range of flavors, textures, and colors. Only small amounts of oil are used in Cantonese stir-frying, but extremely high heat is applied to cook the food very rapidly. This technique produces what the Cantonese call *wok hay* (in Mandarin, *guoqi*), the "breath of the pot," a short-lived heightening of flavors regarded as a high expression of a cook's skill.

The rich soils and frost-free, sub-tropical climate of lowland southern China enable amazingly diverse agriculture. A common joke says that a Cantonese will eat anything with four legs except a table, anything which swims except a submarine, and anything which flies except an airplane. A tourist who goes to any of the markets of the region will discover a huge array of animals, fresh and dried insects, anything imaginable that lives in fresh or

salt water, and an astonishing variety of plants, all destined for the dining table. In the words of one chauvinistic cook, “Only the food of Canton has no limitations, no restrictions. It is a cookery open to experimentation and creativeness.”

Frontiers. China’s frontier regions, originally inhabited by culturally non-Chinese peoples, all have their own unique cuisines as well. Koreans, Manchus, Mongols, Turkic-speaking Muslims, Tibetans, Thais, and many other peoples maintain their food ways, based in the ecologies surrounding the Chinese culture area—high mountains cut by deep valleys, vast grasslands, and deserts. Their cookery has both interacted with China’s and stayed separate, producing fascinating combinations. In the past 20 years, for example, men of Uyghur ethnicity from Xinjiang, China’s northwestern-most province, have opened kebab stands in every major Chinese city. Their fragrant grilled lamb

skewers and pilaf (called *polo* in Uyghur), with spices more Turkish than Chinese, have become favorite snack foods not only for nostalgic Middle Eastern and Central Asian tourists but also for local Chinese.

What can we conclude from this brief survey of Chinese cuisine? Climate and topography profoundly affect what people eat, and China, larger than Europe with even greater geographical diversity, contains numerous culinary zones. The north-south gradient—including significant differences in temperature and rainfall—determines even the most basic foodstuffs, from the coarse dry-field grains of the north to the three annual rice crops of the far south. The east-west gradient, in contrast, influences the *taste* of food to a great extent, from the bland or sweet dishes of the lower Yangzi to the fiery Sichuanese cuisine.

From broad plains to narrow mountain valleys, from three-month growing

seasons to year-round agriculture, from fishing villages to enormous cosmopolitan cities, China’s geographical variety is reflected in its foods. Teaching China’s cuisines helps us to teach geography by illustrating vividly how much diversity lurks within the category “Chinese food,” and thus within China’s physical landscape and human population. The exercise can humanize the Chinese by destroying the stereotype of a homogeneous horde. The Internet can provide dramatic photographic evidence of China’s geographical range, and learning about food—in which everyone is interested—can take our students inside those images to a fundamental human activity. 📷

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