Chinese food culture: Influences from within and without

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Written by Ken Hom.

In *Food in Chinese Culture* (Yale, 1978), Michael Freeman writes that any cuisine worthy of the name comes not from a single tradition, instead it "amalgamates, selects, and organizes the best of several traditions." While sampling foods in restaurants and homes throughout China, I have been impressed by how many commonalities there are between "Chinese" foods and the cuisines of other parts of the world. On the one hand, there are foods, dishes, and recipes that I believed were imported into China long ago but which are, in fact, of Chinese origin, such as rice. On the other hand, there are "traditional" Chinese dishes that, it turns out, were adopted into the canon from foreign sources. Tomatoes, for example, are to be found everywhere in China, indeed I saw them in all regions I visited. My assumption was that they have always been a part of Chinese cuisine; yet tomatoes are a recent introduction (by Chinese standards), arriving from the Americas barely one hundred years ago. The same is true of such standards as corn (maize), squash and chili peppers, all of which entered China comparatively recently.

Farther back in time, during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), Near Eastern foods such as spinach, lettuce, almonds, sugar beets, and figs were adopted. However, the balance sheet of these borrowings is more than matched by China's contributions to others' cuisines. Food across Asia, for example, bears a strong Chinese influence, including the cuisines of Japan, Korea, and Viet Nam, Malaysia and Thailand.

All of this is to be expected. Chinese traders and emigres arrived with their customary foods and cooking techniques. Those who later returned to China brought with them new foods and recipes; foreign traders entering China did the same. Thus, over the centuries there has been a weaving back and forth, sometimes very slowly, sometimes quite rapidly, of the fabric of Chinese cuisine. The theme is clearly Chinese, the essentials having already been established by the end of the Song Dynasty (1279 A.D.), but there are always variations on the theme. Indeed, much of the history of China and its neighbours is reflected in the migrations of people within and without the country, and in the amalgamations that make up their various cuisines.

China is bounded on all sides by barriers of ocean, desert, and mountains. Where natural barriers were inadequate, the "Great Wall," extending over 3000 miles from the Bohai Sea to the Gobi Desert, was erected and effectively blocked invasions and alien influences. And thus China was, by official decree, sealed off from the outside world from the "barbarians" and "foreign devils" whom, it was presumed had anything to offer the Imperial civilization. Or so it might seem.

In actuality, China has been open (if usually on her own terms) to the outside world for two thousand years. Her culture–and parts of her cuisine–have been influenced by "foreigners" since the beginning of recorded history. Nor has this been a one-way street. Like some distant, mysterious, pulsating star, China through the centuries has sent out her own influences–not only to Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, the Philippines, but, comparatively recently, to the West as well.

For, through the centuries, the oceans were as much gateway as barrier; the deserts and mountains were threaded with caravan trails, especially the appropriately-dubbed Silk Route; and even the Great Wall had openings through which commerce flowed. For example, during the Tang Dynasty, (618-907), traders from many areas and nations–Japan, Korea, Arabia, India, and Persia–thronged the ports of China, delivering their goods and trading for the many rich products of Asia.

Later, between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, the merchant and naval fleets of China far exceeded in number and commercial importance those of any other Asian or European fleets. By the thirteenth century, Chinese merchants had established regular commercial links with India, their vessels being the largest on the seas even though the trade involved a long and hazardous voyage. Until the nineteenth century, Chinese junks were the backbone of Asian sea-borne commerce: only the advent of steam and Western imperialism forced the decline of Chinese merchant shipping. Today, however, once again, China ranks among the top ten fleets of the world in tonnage.

For millennia, heavy commercial, religious, and, unfortunately, military traffic has passed to and from China. Even before China's first consolidation under centralized rule in the third century, A.D., the Han Dynasty had opened the fabled Silk Route. Running from Lanzhou (Gansu Province) to Yumen (near the western terminus of the Great Wall) and then across desert plateaus and mountains to Samarkand, this route and some parallel and subsidiary pathways provided China's main contact with Central Asia and beyond until the thirteenth century. Even traffic with India flowed along the Silk Route, by way of Afghanistan.

The original function of the route was military: to guard China's expanding western border and to maintain contact with potential allies against mountain nomads of the northwestern frontier. But then Buddhism and, rather quickly, commerce began to flow along the protected route. It was thus that Chinese silks and other products eventually reached Roman cities and other remote places as far away as Siberia. Until the nineteenth century, most of China's commercial contact with other societies was by way of this great route.

As for the north, even the Great Wall could not seal off China completely. Commercial traffic to and from Korea and Manchuria was allowed to pass through it. The nomad tribes the Wall was designed to keep out traded their only real commodity, horses, for Chinese products at the markets set up on the "wrong" side of the Wall. Military forces penetrated the Wall as well. In 1271, for example, the Mongols under Kublai Khan swept into China and established a dynasty that lasted until 1368. This was a unique interlude, for Mongol chauvinism did not allow assimilation into Chinese culture. They retained instead most of their own customs, including their culinary practices. When the Chinese successfully rebelled against Mongol rule, the Mongols retired to their central Asian steppes, leaving behind not much more than the culinary imprint of their passion for yogurt, game, goat, mutton, and the mare's milk derivative, koumiss. In fact, while it is probably true that the Mongols did not by themselves introduce mare's milk, butterfat (from mare's or cow's milk), and mutton to China, scholars generally define these three foods as differentiating the Mongol from the Chinese cuisine. From Beijing to Kunming, I experienced this non-Chinese influence in many places. In Kunming, for example, restaurants serving mutton and goat cheese — pan-fried in a wok — reminded me of how it could have been served in the time of Kublai Khan.

China, always open to outside influences, has, in turn, influenced those cultures from whom she borrowed, and the impact of Chinese culture on the cuisines of her neighbors is clear and substantial. This was largely the result of "overseas Chinese," those entrepreneurs whose reputations as shrewd and efficient businessmen were already well established hundreds of years ago.

Although Japan, Korea, and Thailand have unique systems and ideas about food, the Chinese influence in undeniable. Possibly the most important gift of the Chinese traveler was rice. The basic food of the East, perhaps its most valuable and useful plant, rice was first cultivated in China some 3000 years before it spread elsewhere. It was from Chinese technique and fare that the Koreans learned to apply such spices as garlic and chili pepper to strong meat dishes, usually pork and beef. In Northern China, I saw many food stalls in markets offering distinctively Korean style foods — serving their unique pickled vegetables heavily flavored with garlic and chili peppers. It is believed that the cultivation of soybeans, a staple food in most of Asia, began in China. Chinese influences also deeply affected the development of Philippine cuisine. It has been said that Chinese cuisine left an indelible mark on Philippine cooking and that Chinese gastronomy was the midwife of Philippine haute cuisine. In fact, no family meal of importance is ever complete without dishes of Chinese heritage.

Likewise, in terms of cooking and eating implements, both spoons and chopsticks, universal in Asia, are of Chinese origin. Similarly, the wok, that marvelously adaptable cooking implement found in many Asian kitchens, is of Chinese origin. Even in India, the great authority Madhur Jaffrey has written, "the ancient Chinese may have come here [Kerala, India] for black pepper but, in fair exchange, they left behind their woks, cleavers, plates, pickling jars and design for roofs and river-craft." In many ways, then, the influence of the great "Middle Kingdom" radiated out into the world.

One point always to remember: the Chinese are neither nationalistic nor xenophobic when it comes to food or techniques. While the basic Chinese diet grew out of those animal and vegetable foods that are indigenous and plentiful in China itself, over the course of millennia to the present day the scholar Andersen has written: "foreign foods, spices, herbs, techniques, and culinary concepts have been used to expand and enhance that diet."

During the Han Dynasty (205 B.C. to 220 A.D), Chinese cooks adopted foreign methods and reworked native wheat flours to make the first noodles and wheaten cakes: "It was the ingenuity of the Han Chinese in experimenting with the most common eating materials, coupled with a willingness to learn from other cultures, that eventually led to the opening of an entirely new chapter in Chinese culinary history." (Ying-shih Yu)

The Tang Dynasty (618-907) –the Golden Age of China– was one in which a taste for the exotic could be indulged. Thus, "the golden peaches of Samarkand" and many other foods entered China — grapes, spinach, lettuce, figs, kohlrabi, sugar beets, leeks, and shallots. There are references to pine nuts, almonds, and pistachios as well, and it is no accident that the first known cookbook and the first nutrition textbook appeared then. And, although it was known long before the Tang, it was during that dynasty that tea attained the popularity it has never lost. The growing influence of Buddhism and its emphasis on vegetarianism led to innovative uses of wheat products; in the form of dumplings and fried dough strips, of which I still saw everywhere in China — from street food stalls to restaurants to homes. The Tang period was less an age of innovation than one of consolidation and integration of new foods into the culinary tradition, but by the close of the Dynasty, Chinese cuisine was prepared to take its definitive shape.

It was during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) that "Chinese cuisine" crystallized into its distinctive, enduring form. Over those three hundred years, China — her cooks, food writers, nutritionists, elite consumers, merchants, and food vendors — brought together the ingredients necessary for the creation of any cuisine. That is, they deliberately created a style of cooking and eating, applying a well-defined set of attitudes about food and its place in society to an abundant and varied supply of ingredients, relying on venerable techniques but always remaining open to new foods and methods. This is when the Seven Necessities were set forth: firewood; rice; oil; salt; soybean sauce; vinegar; and tea. After this extraordinary effort, China, by the end of the Song Dynasty, had established a cuisine of great sophistication, with high standards which were nevertheless permissive, allowing for maintenance of tradition and for experimentation and innovation, only demanding that new dishes are appealing to eye and to the palate. And even after this "foundation" period, new foods and techniques were pervasive, for how can people's tastes be legislated?

While the Mongol influence was felt during this time, the next significant stage of integration of "foreign" foods came during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), when the earliest influences from the West came from Southern Europe. New World food, especially peanuts, sweet potatoes, and corn (maize), were introduced as the Portuguese and the Spanish explorers made their way to India, China, and the Philippines in the early sixteenth century. Chinese traders probably carried in Mexican sweet potatoes purchased from the Spaniards in Manila; the peanut is first mentioned in Chinese sources in 1538; corn (maize) is noted in 1555. The white potato arrived in the eighteenth century, possibly in the baggage of French missionaries. While peanuts and corn (maize) very quickly became staples in the diet of Chinese living in the coastal areas, potatoes and sweet potatoes had a hesitant start. Used first only as "famine foods," only later did they become acceptable and sustaining secondary foods. By the end of the Ming period, even the Yao people, who live in the remote mountain fastness of southern China, were relying heavily on potatoes and sweet potatoes.

China's population, stable at about one hundred fifty million for centuries, almost quadrupled in the period from about 1700 to 1850. Corn (maize), peanuts, sweet potatoes, and Irish potatoes were by then basic crops, providing the necessary calories and other food elements to impel and sustain an astonishing population increase. These "new" foods were consumed almost entirely by the poorer classes, that is, the great majority of people, and we can speculate that the amalgamation of Western foods was instrumental in this increase in population. Indeed, until recently, there has been in China the greatest disparity between the diet of the rich and the poor than in any other country in the world. The masses experienced a sustaining but limited diet; the elite, great in numbers but a small minority of the population, enjoyed gourmet fare comprising an astonishing variety of foods, and it was this class that maintained what we define as Chinese cuisine. That cuisine was based on a vast array of native animal and vegetable ingredients.

By the first century B.C. — two thousand years ago! — Chinese agriculture and animal husbandry were already the most efficient in the world, and already more productive than medieval European farms were to be more than a millennium later. Agricultural manuals from the period list the "Nine Staples" in addition to the "Seven Necessities" that were the basis of the Chinese diet: wheat, barley, millet, glutinous millet, spiked millet, soybeans, rice, hemp, and small beans. Hemp provided seeds for food and oil. Millet was the preferred grain for both eating and brewing, only gradually giving way in the popular taste to wheat and rice. What, and, more recently, sorghum and corn (maize) were northern grains, with rice predominant in the south and central parts of China, and this regional variation exists today.

These staples provided the Chinese people with their essential calories, carbohydrates, and protein. By themselves they would have constituted a sustained but rather insipid diet. However, even two thousand years ago, the Chinese refused to submit passively to nature when something could be altered: "Human resolution can overcome Heaven's destiny," as the ancient saying goes. To these staples they added mustard greens, leeks, scallions (spring onions), watercress, and other light and tasty vegetables and sauces. Other standard items were lychees, cinnamon, bamboo shoots, magnolia buds, true oranges, grapes, chestnuts, sugarcane, honey, fagara (Sichuan pepper), and a variety of flowers and buds.

By the end of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.), pickled and salted foods were commonplace, the art of fermenting soybeans had been perfected, and wheaten noodles had been introduced. Domesticated and game animal and fish were also available and in demand, at least in the diet of the upper classes: horses, sheep, deer, ducks, geese, carp, and other fish and game. These joined the company of the venerable chicken and pig. Domesticated dogs, as both food and pets, long precede all other animals. The wok was in universal use: stir-frying and its accompanying food preparation techniques (slicing and cutting, evenly and thinly) was a standard cooking method.

The evolution of the cuisine within China has grown more gentle and gradual. The "definitive shaping of the food system," as one scholar puts it, was accomplished almost one thousand years ago: "The elite and the middle-class developed the greatest cuisine the world has ever known; even the poor benefited from it."

It is this cuisine, this taste of China, with its home-grown as well as its exotic influences, that I experienced in my visits to my ancestral homeland.

Ken Hom OBE is an American-born Chinese chef, author and television-show presenter for the BBC. In 2009 he was appointed honorary Officer of the Order of the British Empire for "services to culinary arts". Image Credit: CC by Alpha/Flickr.

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A concise but comprehensive posts on the fascinating history of Chinese cuisine. There is no doubt that Chinese food is popular the world over, and this post would make an interesting reading for those who are fans of Chinese food.

It is interesting to note that pickled and salted foods ,as well as stir frying, date back to almost 2000 years ago. These very same kinds of food people still order and take out in Chinese restaurants even to this very day.

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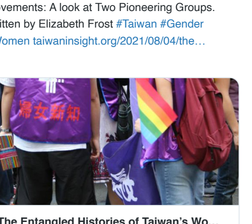

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