

Traditional Chinese Foods

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ABSTRACT: Food plays a crucial part in understanding other cultures. The Chinese culture has a rich history tracing back thousands of years. Chinese people have a variety of cuisine due to their rich tropical weather and the geographic features that support agriculture. Just as the China's traditional medicine is the most popular and well- researched traditional medicine, traditional Chinese food is without doubt one of the most exciting and diverse cuisines in the world. Chinese restaurants and their chefs continue to create magnificent dishes that are tasted around the world. Before you fulfill your dream of visiting China, nothing stops you from familiarizing yourself with their foods and learn to prepare them from home. This paper is a primer on tasty Chinese foods to eat for all seasons.

KEYWORD: food, culture, food philosophy, Chinese staple foods, Chinese Chinese foods, occasions.

INTRODUCTION

We need to obtain nutrients from foods in order to survive and be healthy. The requirements of energy and nutrients are different due to differences in race, age, sex, and physical activity. Food also plays various roles in our daily life, beliefs, and socioeconomics. People living in different places take nutrients from different kinds of food. Different foods convey different meanings among the eaters and indicate the closeness of their relationships [1].

The People's Republic of China is the world's third biggest country by territory, and it has the largest population. Chinese culture is thousands of years old. China has diverse and sumptuous foods due to their large population. Chinese civilization has been at the forefront of its time, revolutionizing different areas such as ceramics, architecture, music, literature, martial arts, visual arts, philosophy, and religion. The Chinese are among the few handfuls of nations that preserve their indigenous culture and tradition as displayed in their way of life. Their favorite dishes include spring rolls, tofu, dumplings, noodles, sweet, and sour chicken.

China has a vast territory and abundant resources. Each region has different climate, natural products, folk customs, and favorite dishes. It is well known that there are "eight major cuisines" in China: Jiangsu and Zhejiang cuisines are like the beautiful and elegant ladies of Jiangnan; Shandong and Anhui cuisines are like

the simple and unsophisticated stout men of northern China; Guangdong and Fujian cuisines are like a refined and elegant prince; Sichuan and Hunan cuisines are like a talented celebrity, rich in content.

Chinese people change their menus as they transition from one season to another. Chinese are among the peoples of the world who have been mainly preoccupied with food and eating. When the rest of the world uses forks and knives, the Chinese are still using chopsticks. One of the best benefits of visiting China is being able to partake of the traditional Chinese food.

FOOD PHILOSOPHY

Chinese philosophy has a great impact on Chinese foods. Traditional Chinese philosophical thinking has infiltrated every aspect of Chinese food culture. Traditional Chinese food is considered holistic and is used to harmonize the body, mind, and spirit. Someone has well said, “Fashion is in Europe, living is in America, but eating is in China.” This saying is a testament to the popularity of Chinese food around the world. The Chinese believe these foods will increase blood circulation and help get rid of the coldness and dampness. These foods reduce the hotness and dryness.

Chinese culture believes there is a positive energy and a negative energy in the universe. This theory is called balancing “Yin and yang.” “Yin” represents negative energy and “yang” represents positive energy. Yin and Yang represent two complementary aspects of every phenomenon. When applying this philosophy into Chinese Food, Yin and Yang represent two aspects of human body, while five elements mean the food can be divided into five categories: hot, warm, neutral, cool and cold. The five elements of Yin and Yang are illustrated in Figure 1 [2]. Foods belonging to the yin (also known as “cold” food) are bitter melon, winter melon, Chinese green, mustard green, water crest, Napa cabbage, bean sprout, soybean, mung bean, tulip, water chestnut, cilantro, oranges, watermelon, bananas, coconut, cucumber, beer, pop, ice cream, ice chips, grass jelly, clams, and oysters. Foods that belong to the yang (also known as “hot” food) are chili pepper, garlic, onion, curry, cabbage, eggplant, toro, pineapple, mango, cherry, peanuts, beef, turkey, shrimp, crab, French fries, fried chicken, and pizza. Eating hot and warm food can promote the Yang in human body, while eating cool and cold food can promote Yin in human body. Both food groups need to be equally balanced to create a harmonious and healthy state, otherwise, conflict and disease will result [3]. This philosophical thinking suggests that people’s diet should be adapted to the natural environment.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE INGREDIENTS

Chinese daily meals often consist of four food groups: grains, vegetables, fruit, and meat. Most dishes are a combination of recurring base ingredients that form the foundation for many dishes. Common traditional Chinese Ingredients include the following [4,5]:

1. *Rice* is a staple in Chinese cuisine. It is a predominant ingredient throughout Chinese cooking. Both long and short-grain varieties are eaten as sides and in dishes like fried rice. Rice and noodles are a very important part in the Chinese diet.
2. *Noodles* are a mainstay in Chinese cooking, besides rice. They are one of the oldest traditional Chinese staples. They come in different sizes and shapes in China. They can be cooked in the soup or stir-fried, which is known as “chow mien.” Noodles are usually served for breakfast, lunch, or late snacks.
3. *Rice vinegar* is mild, delicate sweetness that softens the edges on other flavors—from ginger to sesame to bright fiery chilies.
4. *Zhenjiang vinegar* is also known as Chinese black vinegar, Zhenjiang or Chinkiang vinegar is made by adding acetic acid and bacteria to rice or a grain like sorghum or wheat.

5. *Sesame oil* is made from roasted sesame seeds. It loses its aromatic pungency when heated, so it's most at home in chilled dishes and dipping sauce.
6. *Cooking wine* may be Shaoxing wine, or rice wine, made from fermented glutinous rice and can be used for both drinking and cooking.
7. *Black bean sauce* takes those flavors a step further into a potent, addictive cooking sauce made with dried chilies, cooking wine, soy sauce, brown sugar, and cornstarch.
8. *Hoisin sauce* is a dark, thick sauce that contains fermented soybean paste. Some Chinese sauces and vinegars are displayed in Figure 2 [6].
9. *Oyster sauce* is a thick, glossy sauce made with oyster extract that adds a sweet note of brine to steamed and stir-fried vegetables.
10. *Soy sauce* is derived from a blend of cooked soybeans and roasted wheat grain
11. *Five-spice powder* is an invaluable spice blend throughout Chinese cooking that hits on the full range of flavors: sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and umami.
12. *Sichuan peppercorn* is not really pepper at all, but the berry of the Asian prickly ash tree that, when dried, looks like a peppercorn.
13. *Scallions* are the most famous onions in native China. People also call them green onions outside China.
14. *Garlic Scapes* are flower buds or garlic hearts. Only the buds and stems are edible from these garlic scapes.
15. *Ginger roots* are popular and mostly used in the steamed fish cuisine. Ginger brings out the subtle taste of seafood dishes.
16. *Coriander* is used to decorate or garnish dishes like steamed fish dries or soup.
17. *Herbal tea* is a beverage made from the leaves of tea plants and boiled water. Chinese tea is consumed any time of the day. Figure 3 depicts a traditional Chinese tea house in Chengdu [7]. Chengdu is known for its flavored rabbit heads.

Traditional Chinese meals are made with these ingredients. The holy trinity of Chinese ingredients, namely scallions, ginger, and onion, increase the subtle taste note of many famous Chinese dishes.

DIFFERENT CHINESE DISHES

Traditional food habits of the people of China vary from region to region within China. Each region of China has its own essential dishes and culinary styles and also a way of cooking. For example, Sichuan cuisine is spicy, Shangdong cuisine is generally salty and crispy, while Cantonese cuisine is sweet. These dishes are enjoyed and eaten across the nation and have now been shared and experienced around the world. Due to the variety of dishes, it is daunting for one to choose the most popular Chinese dish. However, it is recommended that you try the following tasty traditional foods when visiting China [7-14].

1. *Fried rice* is a very simple but it is one of the most popular Chinese cuisine within China and beyond. It is a dish of boiled rice that is usually mixed with scallions, minced meat, and scrambled eggs. It is a wholesome meal for dinner. Fried rice in different region has different flavors. Although the main ingredients remain the same, different regions of China produce different versions of fried rice. For example, chicken fried rice is cooked in a wok or frying pan along with egg, vegetables, and chicken. Lotus leaf rice is a classic Chinese dish consisting of sticky rice wrapped and steamed in lotus leaves. Rice porridge is a nourishing, easy-to-digest meal. Eating steamed rice powder and pork is an important

annual custom at the beginning of summer. Egg fried rice is a colorful, tasty, and easy-to-make dish. It is shown in Figure 4 [8].

2. *Peking/Beijing Duck* is a dish that is synonymous with the city of Beijing (the capital of China) with a global reputation. It is a huge hit with foreigners and locals alike. Every restaurant has their own little variations to this classic dish. You will experience enjoying the duck being prepared and served in front of your eyes.
3. *Hotpot* is known to be fairly spicy with a soup that goes along. It is also known as a steamboat. The traditional food was brought down from noble banquets and has now become a common dish to tie together any family and communal meal. It is a stew of meat and vegetables cooked in a simmering pot of soup stock. Although hotpot is a perfect winter warmer, the dish is popular throughout the entire year. Variation in hotpot generally lies in the sauces and the meats. Lamb hotpot is the most common. It originated in the Yuan Dynasty, according to legend. Chengdu is the city you should visit to experience the delicious Chinese hotpot. Chinese hot pot is a warm comfort meal, usually dinner, best eaten with a group for people such as family, relatives, or friends; hence it is a social food.
4. *Dumplings* usually consist of different kinds of meat such as pork, beef, chicken, shrimp or even fish, and chopped vegetables wrapped into a piece of dough. They can be baked, boiled, fried, simmered or steamed. Dumpling provides a dish for everybody. They can be eaten for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. One can dip them in Soy Sauce or Vinegar with Garlic to enhance the flavor. Dumplings were invented by a famous doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, Zhang Zhongjing, more than 1,800 years ago. There are many variations of dumplings depending on the region. Dumplings are shown in Figure 5 [7].
5. *Kung Pao Chicken* is basically diced chicken cooked with peanuts, cucumbers, peppers, and other ingredients. This red cuisine is moderately spicy with tender meat and delicious flavor. It is red but not spicy, while the meat is tender, smooth, and crisp. It is commonly seen in the US TV series and has spread around the world as typical Chinese food. Kung pao chicken is a famous Chinese dish that is very popular with foreigners. It is a dish that features in Shandong, Sichuan, and Guizhou cuisine.
6. *Spring rolls* are popular all over China. They are fried pancakes with different fillings in China. They are the perfect side dish. The name is intrinsically linked to the Chinese New Year. It used to be consumed as a seasonal snack at spring festivals. The filling can be either sweet or savory depending on your preference. For a sweet filling, sweetened bean paste is a good choice. The spring rolls filled with cabbage, vegetable, or other meat fillings have become a crispy and tasty addition to any main event.
7. *Mapo Tofu* is actually sautéed tofu in hot and spicy sauce. Its main ingredients are tofu, minced beef (or pork), chilies, and Sichuan pepper. The tofu itself is set in hot and spicy sauce before being simmered with bean paste, beef, and hot roasted chili oil. People cherish tofu very much and called it “Mapo Tofu.” The flavors are aromatic and you are filled with warmth with every bite you take. If you cherish spicy food and you prefer a vegetarian diet, then the Mapo Tofu is one of the best Chinese food dishes you should consider. Figure 6 shows Mapo Tofu [9].
8. *Chow Mein* is essentially a dish of fried noodles served with chop suey. “Chow” means fried, while “mein” means noodles. This implies that Chow Mein is commonly served with stir-fried noodles. With stir-fried noodles, and your choice of sauteed tofu, vegetables, or meat, Chow mein has become an easy and reliable meal to be savored and enjoyed. This traditional Chinese food has the perfect balance of sweet and salty. There are endless variations of this meal and that gives you plenty of choices. It has become one of the most popular dishes in China and is served at Chinese restaurants all around the world. A typical chow Mein is shown in Figure 7 [13].

9. *Sweet and sour pork* is a staple dish that is constructed around its main ingredient, deep-fried pork stir-fried in a sweet and sour sauce, typically made of sugar, ketchup, white vinegar, and soy sauce. The dish has a unique taste. This signature meal is enjoyed in Western China and in Chinese restaurants around the world, serving as one of the most popular dishes in China.
10. *Rice noodle*: Different kinds of meat can be added to rice noodles. There are rice noodle restaurants everywhere in Guilin, and in many places around the world. The most popular are sliced beef and large beef brisket. Chopsticks are used to pick up the noodles, which are then stirred in the soup a few times.
11. *Fried eggs with tomatoes* are essentially a dish made with tomatoes and eggs. It is sweet and sour. The ingredients are easy and it is very easy to cook. It is a favorite of Chinese students studying abroad.
12. *Sausage* is made from pork which is chopped into small pieces, seasoned with salt, sugar, wine, soy sauce, Sichuan pepper, and other ingredients. All kinds of sausages are made in China. They can be divided into two categories: Sichuan-style sausage and Cantonese-style sausage. The main difference is that Cantonese sausage is sweet while Sichuan sausage is spicy. They are both popular at Chinese New Year.
13. *Egg drop soup* is one of the staple soups in Chinese cuisine. It is often made by dropping whisked eggs in hot broth, which should form the delicate, flower-like clusters. The soup can be dressed up by numerous ingredients such as the chicken broth which make it an extremely versatile dish. Traditionally, the dish is served as an appetizer. The soup is shown in Figure 8 [10].
14. *Red bean soup* is a classic Chinese soup that is commonly consumed as a dessert, made from red azuki beans, lotus seeds, and tangerine or orange peel. It can be served hot in winter or cool during summer.
15. *Chinese hamburger* is the Chinese answer to a western hamburger. Chinese-style hamburger is known as rou jia mo, a Chinese translation for bread with braised meat. It is equally a comfort food primarily prepared in the streets.

APPLICATIONS

Chinese food applies to different occasions. The Chinese banquet dinner usually occurs on special occasions like holidays, weddings, graduations, birthdays, or having a special visitor in town. For example, during birthday celebrations, noodles are served to symbolize long life. The longer the noodle, the longer the life will be for the birthday person. Other applications of traditional Chinese foods include the following:

➤ *New Year Food*: The largest national festival is the Chinese New Year

Celebration. New Year is celebrated in February and lasts for 15 days. Many Chinese families will celebrate with fireworks and gather for a New Year's Eve meal, staying up to bring in the new year. Fish is a traditional Chinese New Year dish. The celebrations allow Chinese people to say goodbye to the old year and welcome the new year. Every food represents something, and symbolism is associated with every traditional dish eaten for the Lunar Year. In China, every year is represented by one of 12 animals. 2023 is the Chinese Year of the Rabbit. October 1 is the National Day, which is also an occasion for celebration [13].

➤ *Wedding Food*: The wedding day is regarded as the beginning of a marriage. One should celebrate the special day with the people nearest and dearest to you. Planning a Chinese wedding celebration is a great way to incorporate your culture into your special day. Including traditional Chinese wedding food is an easy way to honor parents and older relatives who may prefer Chinese cuisine to Western food. The wedding banquet was a traditional means of demonstrating the prosperity and generosity of the couple's family. Several foods of different names, colors, and flavors are served to symbolize wishes for happiness, longevity, or fertility. Typically, Chinese wedding banquets include eight or nine dishes,

which is a way invoking good luck and longevity for the newlyweds. It is customary for the brides to change her dress several time during the wedding celebration. For example, she may wear a western style wedding gown for the ceremony and change to a traditional dress for the reception and banquet [12].

- *Chinese Medicine as Food:* Food in China is not consumed just to satisfy hunger, but for health promotion, treating diseases and, most importantly, building relationships among people and enhancing family values. Chinese people believe that except providing nutrition to the body, food can also cure disease. Some traditional foods are related to China's traditional medicine, which is perhaps the most popular and well- researched traditional medicine. Food plays an crucial role in ensuring your body can adjust to seasonal changes. All foods have their own energy and characteristics that help balance our bodies and support health at all times [15,16].
- *American-Chinese Food:* A Chinese meal mainly consists of two parts: staple food (usually made of rice, noodles or steamed buns) and meat dishes. This is different from Western meals, which take meat or animal protein as main dish). The Chinese food that is available in Chinese restaurant in US is not really traditional Chinese food. It is heavily Americanized. American-style egg rolls are thick, bloated, deep-fried rolls of dough filled with meat and vegetables. Chinese people generally do not eat much beef. American-style lo mein noodles are thick wheat flour noodles that are stir-fried with vegetables or meat. The Westernized versions of Mapo Tofu dish is usually much less spicy than their traditional counterpart. Chinese American-style wonton soup usually consists of a thick noodle wrapped around a clump of pork in a broth. Chinese people are generally not as concerned about nutrition as Western culture. They are more concerned with the food's taste, flavor, color, and aroma. Ethnic Chinese cooking does not involve much deep fried cooking. The reason most of the Chinese restaurants in America have deep-fried dishes is to promote business and to please western tastes. Thus, there are some American-Chinese foods that you will not find in China and so may be regarded as not being traditional Chinese food. For example, fortune cookies have Japanese roots but they were popularized by American-Chinese restaurateurs. Figure 9 shows some fortune cookies [17].

CHALLENGES

Although people in the west absolutely love Chinese food dishes as the best go-to option in many situations, Chinese traditional foods are facing challenges from the influence of Western food industries such as MacDonald's and Burger King. Immigration and commerce from the outside have played an immense role in shaping the food culture. There is a lot of influence from southeast Asia and from the West. The symbol for some of the Chinese dishes are so complex that it cannot be typed on a computer or shared with others who are not Chinese.

A major problem with visiting China is a generally poor grasp on English. In spite of this, the service is exceptionally impressive as Chinese will do absolutely everything possible to make your experience there the best possible.

CONCLUSION

China is the nation with the largest population as well as one of the most impressive cuisines in the entire world. Chinese food culture and food philosophy have a long history. It is the product of centuries of refinement and experimenting with varies methods of cooking and ingredients. The culture has a deep-rooted affection for food and how to prepare it. Chinese chefs have incredible variety of tools, recipes, and procedures on their kitchen.

Chinese cuisine is popular and unique worldwide because they are prepared with a unique combination of different ingredients that make them tasty. The worldwide acceptance makes it easy for you satisfy your cravings for traditional Chinese food dishes at any part of the world. Perhaps, the best part of Chinese cuisine

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is that they have a range of options for both vegetarians and non-vegetarians. More information about traditional Chinese food can be found in the books in [18-28].

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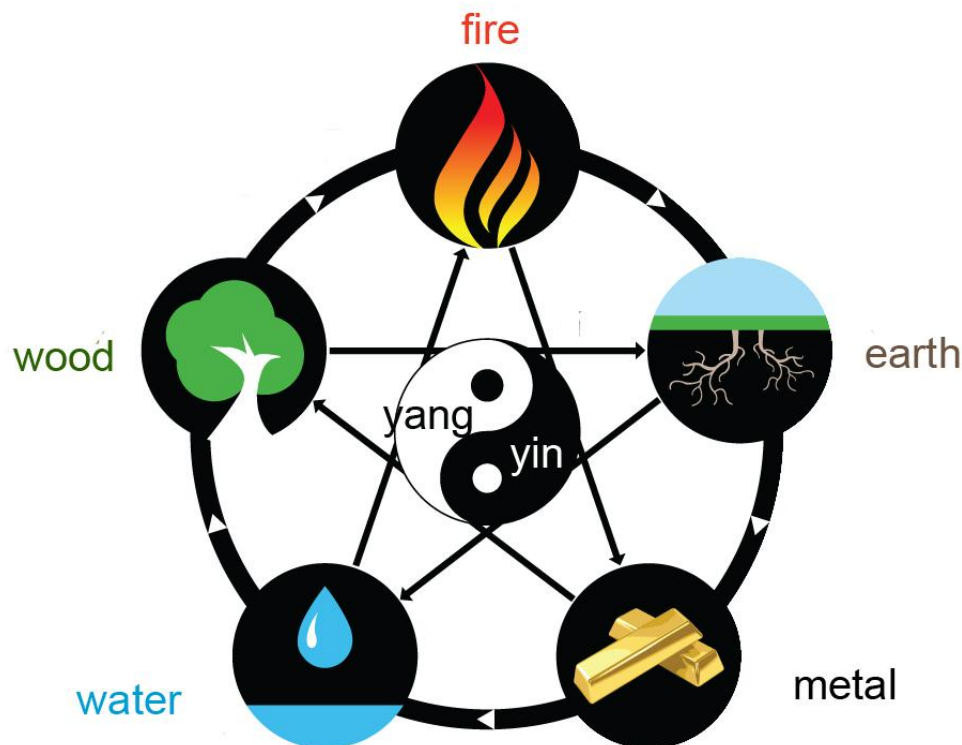


Figure 1. The five elements of Yin and Yang [2].



Figure 2. Some Chinese sauces and vinegars [6].



Figure 3. A traditional Chinese tea house in Chengdu [7].



Figure 4. Egg fried rice [9].



Figure 5. Dumplings [7].



Figure 6. Mapo Tofu [9].



Figure 7. A typical chow Mein [13].



Figure 8. The egg drop soup [10].



Figure 9. Some fortune cookies [18].