EDUCATION ABOUT ASIA

Discover a World of Information on Asia!

VOLUME 16, NUMBER 3 WINTER 2011

EAA Table of Contents

Using Food to Teach about Chinese Culture

By Kandice Hauf

In my undergraduate teaching of Chinese and East Asian history to business majors, I find that food is a very useful idiom for learning about traditional and modern Chinese culture. Since everyone eats, it makes a foreign culture more approachable. Attitudes toward food help students understand change and continuity in China's long history and provide insights into social and political values in various historical periods. In this article, I share some of my experiences, approaches, and materials to assist others in incorporating food in their college, high school, and middle school courses on China or world history.

Here, as in my courses, I proceed chronologically and by topic. I occasionally teach "Food in Chinese Culture," but most of my courses are surveys of Chinese history or comparisons of East Asian cultures. Depending on the content and timeframe of a course, I would incorporate some of the assignments presented here. Especially fruitful areas that explore the connection between food and culture in Chinese history include geography; philosophy and religion; exploration of Chinatown; evidence from films, food, and globalization; and learning from students and alumni.

Early China and the Geographical Setting

Approaching the study of ancient China by asking what people ate and thought about food can take some of the mystery out of the distant past. Students grasp north-south geographical differences by learning that as early as the Neolithic period, the first major northern crop was millet, and then wheat was introduced from western Asia, while the south was warm and wet enough for rice cultivation. Though Chinese civilization began in north China, by the eleventh century, the majority of the population had shifted to the rice-cultivating south. In every course, students develop geographical literacy through adding items to blank outline maps and taking map tests. Though we always look at historical maps, I find it more practical to have students learn contemporary political geography. Through time, most ordinary Chinese were affected by the relentless annual cycle of planting and cultivating. Festivals and lifecycle rituals (birth, marriage, and death) provided an opportunity to rest and join with family and friends, and to eat special foods and

drink. From the time of Confucius (551–479 BCE), society was divided into four ranks—the elite (warrior elite and later scholar-officials), farmers, artisans, and merchants. The position of farmers after the small leadership class highlights the importance of agriculture and food production. The major origin myths of the Chinese are mythical larger-than-life humans who discover elements of Chinese culture, such as the founding of agriculture by Shennong, the divine farmer.

The beautiful bronze vessels of the Shang (1600–1050 BCE) and Zhou dynasties (1050–256 BCE) introduce students to Chinese art, technology, and religion—in particular as ritual vessels in which food and drink were offered to ancestors and gods. Students learn about the cultural and political actions and meanings of food and drink while learning about elite religion and the veneration of ancestors and gods. In reading about sacrifices and offering food, students understand the importance of the family and of time as continuous, not sharply demarcated among past-present-future; they come to understand that time links ancestors and future progeny with living family members. We view bronze vessels in books and often at a local art museum; we read articles and translations to find references to the use of food in Chinese religious thought and practice through the ages.

Philosophers on Food

Students of Chinese culture need a basic understanding of the major ways of thinking of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. I have found it best to instruct students in the basic teachings of these three spiritual traditions and then have them analyze the passages they find (or are provided) to develop their own understanding of how these early, pivotal thinkers thought about food. Here I will mainly present Confucius on food, as he and the development of his teachings by later followers into Confucianism were an important aspect of Chinese culture into the twentieth century and are staging a bit of a comeback today.

Confucius taught about humaneness, filial piety, and the need to return to a peaceful, hierarchical state and society that he believed existed at the beginning of the Zhou dynasty. I ask students to write an analysis of Confucius and his thinking about food based on statements in the *Analects*. *Analects*, Book 10, chapter 8 is a meaty passage to analyze:

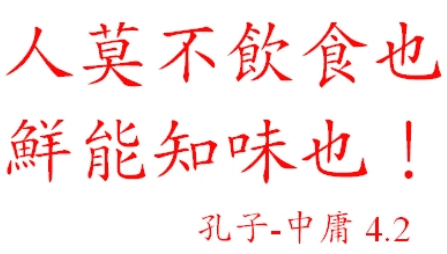


Figure 1. Everyone eats and drinks; yet only few appreciate the taste of food. *Doctrine of the Mean, 4.2, a Confucian book*.

> *He did not eat his fill of polished rice, nor did he eat his fill of finely minced meat. He did not eat rice that had gone sour or fish and meat that had spoiled. He did not eat food that had gone off color or food*

> *that had a bad smell. He did not eat food that was not properly prepared nor did he eat except at the proper times. He did not eat food that had not been properly cut up, nor did he eat unless the proper sauce was available. Even when there was plenty of meat, he avoided eating more meat than rice. Only in the case of wine did he not set himself a rigid limit. He simply never drank to the point of becoming confused.*[1]

We see from this passage that Confucius ate and drank with moderation and care. He teaches that a varied diet of well-prepared vegetables, meat, and rice accompanied by wine are preferred and worth working for by moral means, but should be enjoyed in moderation and eschewed if they cannot be acquired morally. There is a sense of food safety with Confucius not eating sacrificial meat older than three days (10/9). When his steward declines a payment of grain, Confucius suggests charity: "Can you not find a use for it in helping the people in your neighborhood?" (6/5).

Confucianism is not an ascetic tradition in which purification and fasting are taken to extremes, but ritual and sacrifice are important practices (e.g., Book 10: chapters 7, 9, and 11). During sacrifice, the living are feeding and communicating with those in the supernatural realm, and after the spirits have had time to eat and drink, humans do not waste the food, but divide it up and consume it. The suggested physical arrangements of sacrifices and types of food and drink served in ancestral sacrifice can be seen in the ritual text compiled by the famous neo-Confucian synthesizer Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Since Zhu Xi's interpretations of Confucianism were considered orthodox from the thirteenth into the twentieth centuries, and were the basis for the civil service examination—the major route to elite status—his work carried weight into the twentieth century. Tea and wine are usual offerings on the altars, and Zhu Xi advises that foods in season be offered for festivals:

> *The festivals are those locally observed, such as Clear and Bright, cold food, double five, Middle Origin, and double nine. The foods offered are the local specialties enjoyed at those festivals, like rice dumplings. They are presented on a large plate accompanied by vegetables and fruit, with the same sort of ceremony as at New Year, the solstice, and new moons.* [2]

Daoism is the other major indigenous Chinese philosophy. In the *Laozi* we find the famous advice about governing the state as if frying a small fish (chapter 60). That is, the ruler, like the chef, should take a *wuwei* (no invasive action) approach that does not make the state (fish) fall apart from over-handling. The *Zhuangzi* contains passages about drinking dew and abstaining from eating grains—teachings picked up by believers in a Daoist religion (third century on) as part of the disciplines of diet, exercise, and meditation aimed at attaining longevity. As in Confucianism,

Daoists teach moderation but mock rituals using food and drink.

Yin-yang cosmology is an ancient and contemporary interpretation of phenomena as interplay between polarities (yin=cold, yielding, female; yang=hot, forceful, male). Though often associated with Daoist teachings, the use of yin-yang transcended any one way of thinking to become a general Chinese cultural resource. Yin-yang is applied to cold and hot aspects of food, food as medicine, the importance of nutrition, and balance and harmony of flavors.

By the Tang dynasty (618–907), we can talk about the three ways of thinking in Chinese culture. Buddhism was introduced from India in the first century and gradually became accepted and sinified. Buddhism also has dietary teachings, including moderation, fasting, vegetarianism, and monastic rules against strong flavors such as garlic.

Chinatown as a Site to Learn about Food

Students build on their knowledge by carrying out assignments in Asian groceries, restaurants, and/or Chinatown. In Chinatown students can observe, eat, and experience living Chinese culture. Some students are surprised at how "foreign" Chinatown seems. Students prepare by reading Internet sites on the history of Chinatown and regional Chinese cuisines and apply their knowledge of Chinese culture to interpret what they observe. A food scavenger hunt is part of this field research and might include a Chinese pharmacy, a shrine, fresh and live food, cooked food in a window display, moon cakes or other festival food, ritual items, evidence of yin-yang, and marketing (e.g., teas with weight reduction claims). Students prepare a portfolio of their experiences in their chosen format, which is usually a write-up with photos or sketches, but has included videos, posters, and a *zine* (a noncommercial, often online publication). Twice students prepared and delivered a teaching unit to elementary school students, and once prepared a display on campus for Asian history month.

Figure 2. Chinatown, Boston.
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinatown,_Boston

Part of this portfolio assignment is a food review and report of a conversation, preferably with a Chinese or Chinese-American whom they can ask about where their family came from in China, what regional Chinese cuisines they enjoy, and how food differs in the US and China. We read cookbooks to learn what dishes might go together in a family-style meal. I emphasize sharing after a student reported, "I ate a whole steamed fish!" Chinese ways of thinking about what makes a proper meal still include the combination of *fan* and *cai*, that is, rice or

starch and a vegetable or meat dish.[3] Students decide what to eat, from a full meal to bubble tea—a cold beverage made with tea, milk, and sweet tapioca black balls. The food review and report of a conversation can be written by a group of up to four students and also included in their individual portfolios. I devote a class period to oral reports of students' Chinatown field research so we can discuss and analyze their findings while enjoying Chinese snacks.

Through their interviews with chefs and restaurant owners, students have learned that global tourism affects the food industry. The growing economic power of China means more Chinese tourists in Western countries and more Westerners spending time in China and becoming more adventuresome in their eating. This is affecting the type of Chinese food served in some Western restaurants.

Former students report that knowing some Chinese etiquette and how to order a combination of tastes and textures has served them well at job interviews and on business trips to Asia. In our interconnected world, more graduates will likely work with Chinese and will need to be aware of the importance of food, including banquets, in social relationships. Banquets are about celebration and extravagance rather than sustenance. They are important for developing *guanxi* (connections), which greases the wheels, sometimes leading to bureaucratic corruption. In a newly wealthy China, as in the diaspora, endangered items such as shark fins and seahorses are in demand as food and medicine. Exposure to the environmental impact of food choices encourages students to interrogate their own decisions and to debate the ethics of cultural foods.

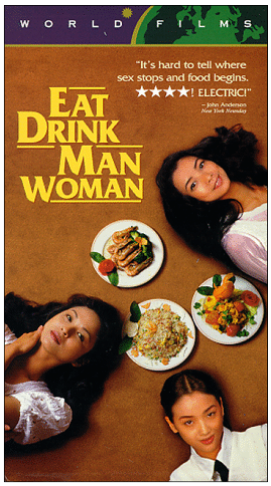
Portrayal of Food and Culture in Chinese Films

Documentaries, feature films, YouTube videos, and their own videos help students contemplate the role of food in culture. One film I use to orient students to twentieth-century China is *To Live*.[4] I usually assign this as homework that students view in the library, on Netflix, or in an on-campus global film series. After watching the story of one family that loses its wealth through gambling in the 1940s then survives the civil war battles between Communists and Nationalists, the Great Leap Forward, and finally the Cultural Revolution, students are asked to articulate and evaluate the impact of People's Republic of China (PRC) political campaigns on food and family life to 1976.

The film begins in a teahouse in the 1940s where students witness social class stratification as an elite clientele eats snacks and drinks tea and alcohol while gambling and enjoying a shadow puppet performance. The male protagonist is carried home on the back of a female bearer. The growing family eats plain but abundant food in a communal dining room during the Great Leap Forward period (we aren't shown the subsequent famine) and celebrates their daughter's Red Guard wedding with simple snacks under the watchful eyes of Mao Zedong. *Jiaozi* (pork dumplings) are eaten to celebrate the New Year and offered at the son's grave; a disgraced doctor chokes on buns while the daughter dies in childbirth; and at the

end, we see grandparents and grandson sitting down to a simple lunch. The son and daughter are dead, but the family survives and expresses their bonds around the dinner table.

Another beautiful film with delicious images of food is *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*.[5] Depending on the course, I might show clips in class or have students watch the film as homework to discuss in class with other historical readings for context. Students might write a film review or use the film as one of several sources in an essay on change and continuity in twentieth-century China. The film is set in 1990s Taiwan. It introduces students to the post-civil war period and the development of democratic Taiwan as a variant Chinese culture. When the Nationalists fled to Taiwan in 1949, they brought cuisine from every region in China to add to the cuisine of the island. The main character is a widowed chef who attempts to hold his family of three young women together and expresses his love for them through cooking elaborate gourmet Sunday dinners. The fresh food and different cooking techniques demonstrate the diversity and aesthetics of Chinese cuisine. The film provides an opening for students to contemplate food and family relationships in a Chinese democracy in contrast with the PRC. The three daughters and the father are all searching for love and individual happiness. The oldest daughter is a teacher and Christian, the second a rising business executive, and the youngest a pregnant fast food worker who has a hurry-up wedding.



Food and Globalization

The images of the fast food restaurant in this film lead into considering food and globalization. I have used the James Watson edited volume on McDonald's as an entry into the spread and meaning of Western fast food in East Asia. In my East Asian Cultures class, I add the chapters on Japan and Korea, and in China classes, I use the chapters on Taipei, Hong Kong, and Beijing. Students become aware of the many variations of Chinese/Asian culture and practice asking questions of their evidence and supporting their interpretations with specifics: urban-rural, time, region, class status, etc. The readings are about both East Asians experiencing Western culture and a multi-national Western corporation adapting to East Asia.

Since McDonald's is often the choice of youngsters, it also demonstrates the rising economic status of families and the power of pampered, often urban children in one-child China families who make consumer choices. (Family size is influenced by the PRC family-planning policy that began in 1979.) Filial piety still exists, but young people have more of a voice in the family than in the past. In order to place the studies of McDonald's in different cities in regional and historical perspective, I ask students to prepare group presentations that include history, geography, and

local cuisine in addition to the McDonald's material. Students are encouraged to consider the possible adverse health effects of fast food. In addition to helping students think about change and continuity in different regional cultures, this assignment reinforces their knowledge of the physical and political geography of China. Since most of my students are interested in business, they enjoy learning about localization of a brand and the necessity of being aware of local culture and adapting to the wishes and needs of local consumers.

For example, both in Taipei and Hong Kong, young people have turned McDonald's into after-school social and homework clubs from three to six p.m. The managers have adapted to this and even put a positive spin on it, saying that students present a wholesome image for the business. Students include maps, pictures, recipes for traditional cuisine, YouTube ads for McDonald's in China, and clips from feature films in their presentations. The Beijing group might illustrate imperial cuisine using a clip of eunuchs serving an elaborate meal to the last emperor, Puyi.[6] This provides an opportunity to review the organization of imperial China and the end of the Qing dynasty in 1912.

Learning from a Multicultural Student Body

My college has a high percentage of international and heritage students whose experiences I include in our course content. Using techniques of oral history, students interview their Chinese elders about their own food memories, how they learned to cook, their recipes, etc. I pair students without Chinese elders with those who do have them, so they can interview together, and I also arrange for students to interview Chinese-Americans at a senior center. I have invited family members into the class to share their histories and give us cooking demonstrations. I might be the scholar, but I do not live the culture I teach, so it is important to have a variety of voices in the classroom.

Another oral history project involves alumni living and working in China (all male to date). This is done easily using email and Skype. In addition to questions about their life and work, interviewees are asked to keep a food diary with prices when possible. Some students decide to keep a food diary too, and some have become more mindful in their eating. Since most alumni work in Beijing, Shanghai, or Hong Kong, it is no surprise that the cuisine is international. If the alum is married to a Chinese, more of the eating takes place at home and is more Chinese. It is common for breakfast to be coffee and toast or a baked good, for a coffee and snack to be purchased at Starbucks during the day, and for beer or wine to be consumed in the evening. One aspect of these interviews that has worked well with academic readings is alumni reports of hosting and being a guest at banquets.

In these interviews with alumni, students become aware of cultural continuity in that food is still essential glue in family, social, and business situations. However, they also realize that globalization and government reform have allowed for significant change in food choices, including Western fast food and gourmet foods

when compared with the limited range of food in the Maoist era, as seen in the film *To Live*. Other continuities discussed in this article include continued widespread agreement among Chinese on fan (rice, starch) and cai (vegetable/meat dishes) as the components of a Chinese meal, the relationship of food and health, and the importance of moderation in eating. Just as students viewed excess in banquets and food served to emperors, they note that newly wealthy Chinese do not always practice moderation. To conclude, I have found that food is a useful idiom for teaching about continuity and change in Chinese cultural values in various historical periods, and I trust that others will find some of my approaches and assignments appropriate for their college, high school, and middle school students.

Notes

1. D.C. Lau, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (Penguin Books, 1979). See also Book 7:7, 9, 13, 14, 16, 19, 27; Book 9:16.
2. Patricia Buckley Ebrey, Jordan Paper and Lawrence G. Thompson, eds., *The Chinese Way in Religion* (Florence, KY: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 38.
3. K. C. Chang, "Food in Chinese Culture," *Lifestyle: Food and Recipes* (Asia Society), accessed July 6, 2011, http://asiasociety.org/style-living/food-recipes/food/meats/food-chinese-culture.
4. *To Live* directed by Zhang Yimou (MGM World Studios, 2007), DVD in Mandarin with English subtitles.
5. *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, directed by Ang Lee (MGM World Studios, 2002), DVD in Mandarin with English subtitles.
6. *The Last Emperor*, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci (Columbia Pictures, 1987; Criterion Collection, 2008), DVD.

Further Sources

Anderson, E.N. *The Food of China*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
Chang, K.C., ed. *Food in Chinese Culture, Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.
Ha, Jin. "After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town." *The Bridegroom*. New York: Vintage International, 2000, 184–225.
Jing, Jun, ed. *Feeding China's Little Emperors: Food, Children and Social Change*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
Watson, James L. *Golden Arches East, McDonald's in East Asia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Kandice Hauf is a historian of China who specializes in the cultural history of the Ming dynasty. She has published several articles and book chapters, and her current project is a comparative study of discipleship in Confucianism, Christianity, and Buddhism. She teaches at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts.