


### 3 THE QUEST FOR PERFECT BALANCE

#### *Taste and Gastronomy in Imperial China*

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'Have you eaten?' This most common of daily greetings attests to the central position occupied in Chinese lives, now as in the past, by food and the whole range of activities surrounding it. These activities included the acquisition, preparation, presentation and consumption of food, often accompanied by intense discussion of every detail along the way. Indeed, few would argue with the proposition that Chinese culture ranks among the most keenly food-oriented in the world. This focus has sometimes been attributed to the prevalence in China until quite recently of terrible famine. Yet most observers now agree that generally Chinese people in the premodern period were fed reasonably well, perhaps even better than some of their counterparts elsewhere. The favourable impression made by the ordinary Chinese diet on foreign visitors, recorded centuries apart by such observers as the thirteenth-century Venetian merchant Marco Polo, and the nineteenth-century British plant-hunter Robert Fortune, lends support to this view. Thus hunger is not, or not the only, explanation for the strength of Chinese food culture.

The canonical classical texts that guided rulers since antiquity made popular welfare, which included ensuring that people had enough to eat, the principal goal of good government. Failure to attend to such fundamentals could provoke unrest, which in theory indicated an impending loss of the mandate of heaven and in practice often threatened a looming loss of power. At the same time, an interest in food that surpassed mere concern for sustenance was an integral feature of even ordinary people's lives, as we can tell from early folk-songs wistfully contrasting daily fare with festival foods. For persons of refinement, an interest in and knowledge about food was from antiquity one of the essential attributes of the cultivated life, binding together gustatory and aesthetic taste. Thus, beyond food's immediate practical purposes, in different ways it has always played a significant part in Chinese political, social and cultural life.

Food also played a vital and varied role in the symbolic realm. Early texts governing the ritual behaviour around which Chinese society was organized paid enormous attention to the selection and preparation of



Previous page: Along with painting and poetry, an interest in and knowledge about gastronomy was one of the essential attributes of the cultivated life. Dinners and banquets were a routine part of social life, while every scenic outing, drinking party and poetry-society meeting tended to culminate in an elaborate repast served in beautiful surroundings. This painting is attributed to the 12th-century emperor Huizong of the Song dynasty.

Above: The figures from about AD 907–1125 are in a tomb at Xuanhua, Zhangjiakou, Hebei province. They were probably attendants intended to accompany the person buried in the tomb into the after-life, where the needs of the departed for nourishment were just as great as those of the living. Tomb decoration and burial objects of this kind often provide vital information about the practices of everyday life.

food, and to table manners, as well as to the appropriate alimentary offerings to be made to the ancestors, whose need for nourishment in the after-life was as great as that of the living. Those who adhered to the rituals counted as civilized, while those who did not ranked among the uncivilized or barbarian.

Further, early ritual texts associated cooking with civilization and established a cooking vessel, the *ding* or three-legged cauldron, as a symbol of the state. Thus civilized people were seen as 'cooked' while the uncivilized were defined as 'raw', characterizations that at the same time distinguished crucially between those who ate grains and refined their food by cooking it with fire, and those who neither ate grains nor used fire to cook their meat. This distinction between culture and nature, so clearly linking food practices to issues of identity, constituted a cultural version of 'you are what you eat' that retained its force at least into the late imperial period, when the degree of civilization of minority peoples within the empire still tended to be measured largely in terms of what they ate.

The early Chinese sense of cultural superiority rested on, among other justifications, the relative sophistication of its system of government in comparison with that of the neighbouring peoples. By association, cooking itself served as a useful metaphor for government – useful not only because it referred to an everyday activity and hence



The set of nesting wine or food cups with their own container, inscribed with characters indicating their intended usage, capacity or ownership, were buried so that their wealthy owners would find sustenance in the afterlife. Archaeologists found the remains of food – fish and pheasant bones and wheat – when they excavated this 2000-year-old tomb in 1972.

Early ritual texts associated cooking with civilization and established a cooking vessel, the three-legged *ding*, as the symbol of the state. Moreover, cooking often served as a metaphor for government, so that culinary talents, broadly conceived, were regarded as an apt qualification for ministerial office. This vessel dates from the 3rd or 4th century BC.



was readily comprehensible, but also because it seemed peculiarly apt. Thus in the fourth century BC the early Daoist text *Dao De Jing*, attributed to Laozi, claimed that 'Governing the country is in principle like cooking a small fish', meaning that great care and attention were in both cases essential. Indeed, culinary skills were thought to constitute a fine qualification for ministerial appointment. Perhaps the earliest of those who thus gained office was Yi Yin, who in the second millennium BC became prime minister of King Tang of the Shang dynasty. According to legend, Yi Yin was a foundling whose foster parents taught him to cook. His culinary skills brought him to the king's attention, and in his first audience he transformed the greatest philosophical issues of governance into a menu of foods to be coveted. Among other things, Yi Yin likened the whole world to a kitchen in which one prepares food, and proper government to good cooking. Just as in cooking it was necessary to understand flavours to blend them successfully; so in governing it was necessary to grasp people's sufferings and aspirations in order to satisfy their needs.

Yi Yin also laid out what became a classically influential culinary theory. He classified animal foods, for example, as falling into one of three categories: fishy, rank or 'muttony', depending on whether the creature involved had lived in water or had been carnivorous or herbivorous. All needed transformation by cooking in order to become pleasant to eat. Having once identified the correct category, the cook could select the most appropriate cooking methods for dispelling odour and producing delicious dishes, adding seasoning to achieve a balanced taste that was 'not excessively sweet or sour, lightly flavoured but not tasteless, tasting of fat but not greasy in the mouth', and so on. Many of Yi Yin's categories remain current today.

In general terms, the main characteristics of Chinese food culture were as follows. First, Chinese cuisine had at least the potential to be extremely varied. In the case of ordinary people this was mainly due to the fact that in a cuisine that rested on the infinite permutations of ingredients and seasonings, a huge variety of combinations was possible, although of course in practice poverty often sharply restricted choices. Moreover, for the most part potential ingredients were not limited by religious taboos, although one cannot discount the influence of Buddhist-inspired vegetarianism. For the elite, the range of combinations was even greater than those available to ordinary people because of the much broader pool of potential resources. And as Chinese-controlled territory expanded over the centuries, more and different foods became available, although access at first remained quite local. Besides, by no later than the Song dynasty (960–1279), increased agricultural output



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This terracotta sculpture of a cook or fishmonger dates from the Han dynasty (3rd century BC to 3rd century AD). Aquatic fare formed part of the Chinese diet from earliest times, as we know from murals depicting early kitchens and from descriptions of feasts that refer among other dishes to finely minced fresh carp, lake perch and turtle stew. Incantations addressed to the departed included fried fish among the foods offered as bribes to lure back the lost soul.



Burial objects in Han tombs often included small-scale replicas of stoves such as this one. These stoves could be stoked through the hole at the front; the hollow interior served as a fuel-burning chamber and was well insulated. The cooking pots would sit on the openings on the top.

combined with greater commercialization, expanding inter-regional trade and increasingly effective ways of preventing spoilage to make an enormous difference. Along with urban growth, these factors both made it possible to move beyond shaping one's diet to accommodate only immediately accessible ingredients and created the conditions for the development of a market in luxury foods.

In addition, China's age-old connections to other parts of the world, particularly in Central and Southeast Asia, led to a steady influx of imported foodstuffs, which sooner or later became incorporated into the repertory of possible ingredients. In some cases this involved such luxury items as birds' nests and sea cucumbers but imports also included such New World imports as peanuts and the sweet potato, subsistence crops that would grow where nothing else could be cultivated and hence could enlarge the food supply. Also derived from abroad was the taste for certain types of foods that could, however, be produced at home, such as yogurt and other milk products popular among Central Asians. Such foods sometimes fell out of favour for political reasons (e.g., because of association with the Mongols), but not because of any absolute Chinese distaste for dairy products. Thus a second major characteristic of Chinese food culture was that imports affected cuisine at every level and, as a corollary, what constituted 'Chinese cuisine' changed constantly.

Finally, but no less significant, diet was closely linked to health. This meant that eating properly – choosing the right ingredients and combining them in appropriate ways – was seen as the most reliable path to good health and longevity. This view gave rise to an extensive literature of nutrition and dietetics, which itself formed part of a much wider textual corpus covering everything to do with the production and consumption of food. It was also closely connected to classical ideals of frugality, moderation and balance.

To understand the context in which these characteristics took shape, we turn to a consideration of the position of gastronomy in the larger scope of Chinese philosophical thinking about the nurturing of the physical and mental aspects of human life. As we will see, these ideas remained important in Chinese food culture even as the pursuit of pleasure in eating became more prominent.

The period from approximately the fifth to the third centuries BC saw a revolution of ideas in China according to which, despite a lack of consensus as to whether human nature was originally good or bad, thinkers generally agreed that humans were capable of perfecting themselves. From this emerged a devotion to self-cultivation, whose ultimate purpose was, precisely, the attainment of perfection, or sagehood. In conformity with a broad understanding that everything within the cosmos was interconnected, no sharp separation was seen between the mind and the body. Thus nurturing the body was just as important as the quest for intellectual and spiritual perfection. They were all part of an organic whole in which nothing functioned in





Confucius was quite clear that the purpose of eating was to satisfy hunger, rather than gastronomic indulgence. He himself ate sparingly, and carefully balanced his diet between grains and such flavorings as meat or vegetables. He also was fastidious about the freshness of the food he ate and about cleanliness, setting high standards of hygiene for his followers.

isolation. The close relationship between food and health also derived from this understanding, as did a more general view of the interconnectedness of the material and moral worlds.

From these notions it is easy to understand how gastronomy, in the sense of an intimate understanding of the properties of food and a quest to achieve perfect balance in one's physical intake, as well as the pursuit of gourmet pleasures, became an important branch of self-cultivation. In short, it was thought that eating right, understood as essential to physical wellbeing, formed one part of the way to moral propriety, and that neither could exist without the other. Regulating one's food intake to prevent or cure corruption of the body was a moral duty, therefore, not just something to be done for the sake of pleasure. Such considerations were, of course, infinitely more relevant to members of the educated upper classes than to the vast majority of people living at or near subsistence level, but it is likely that on some level these ideas impinged on most people's consciousness.

In this context, the Chinese by no means frowned on deriving pleasure from eating – to the contrary, the ideal attitude was an

appreciation of food's qualities, broadly conceived, combined with a grateful awareness of the labour that had gone into its production. Gluttony, on the other hand, tended to meet with strong disapproval. While Chinese beliefs lacked an equivalent of the Christian-inspired seven deadly sins, which included gluttony, excessive eating clearly ran counter to Chinese ideals of frugality. Of course, frugality was a virtue often born of necessity, but it also constituted an important manifestation of the overall preference for balance and against excess in all matters. A number of seminal thinkers, including Confucius and his follower Mencius, enunciated these principles in their teachings and practice, asserting the authority of the ancient sage-kings for the rule that one should eat only when hungry and then only to satisfy one's needs, as those paragons had done. Confucius, for instance, was said to have eaten only sparingly – pleasure in eating does not feature much in his writings – while, in what became a cliché notable for its linking, once again, of food and government, Mencius and others criticized the ruler who enjoyed a banquet in his palace while outside in the streets people were starving to death.

It was often said that bad people counted gluttony among their failings or that they were brought to badness by gluttony. Some such tales involved luxury-loving rulers and their ministers, such as the stereotypically bad last minister of the Song dynasty, said to have hoarded vast quantities of sugar and pepper, and one Wang Fu, who was accused of possessing three larders full of pickled oysters. Other stories of gluttony surfaced in the folklore surrounding the stove god, the symbolic core of the family whose image adorned virtually every kitchen. The stove god was more often male than female, although tales of women gone to the bad through gluttony, or of gluttony as an indication of poor character, do exist.

Many accounts of the stove god's origin involve gluttony in one form or another, often with the theme of compelling a glutton forever to watch others enjoying food to which he no longer had access. In one such tale, a woman created the stove god by vanquishing a gluttonous king. In another, the stove god was originally an official who compelled every household in his jurisdiction to prepare a banquet for the enjoyment of his entourage, on pain of death. Eventually – not before the official's waistline had noticeably expanded, suggesting an association of plumpness with moral turpitude – a strongman rebelled and locked the official into a wall behind the stove. Nonetheless, in the end, in recognition of the official's talents as an imperial cook, the emperor decreed that he should be deified as the stove god.

Condemnations of gluttony competed with a strong inclination among the elite towards enjoyment of the good things to which their elevated social position seemed to entitle them, including good food. This attitude originated in the ritually reinforced distinctions between social classes. It contributed to the ranking of gastronomy among the arts of the cultivated gentleman, along with knowledge of painting and





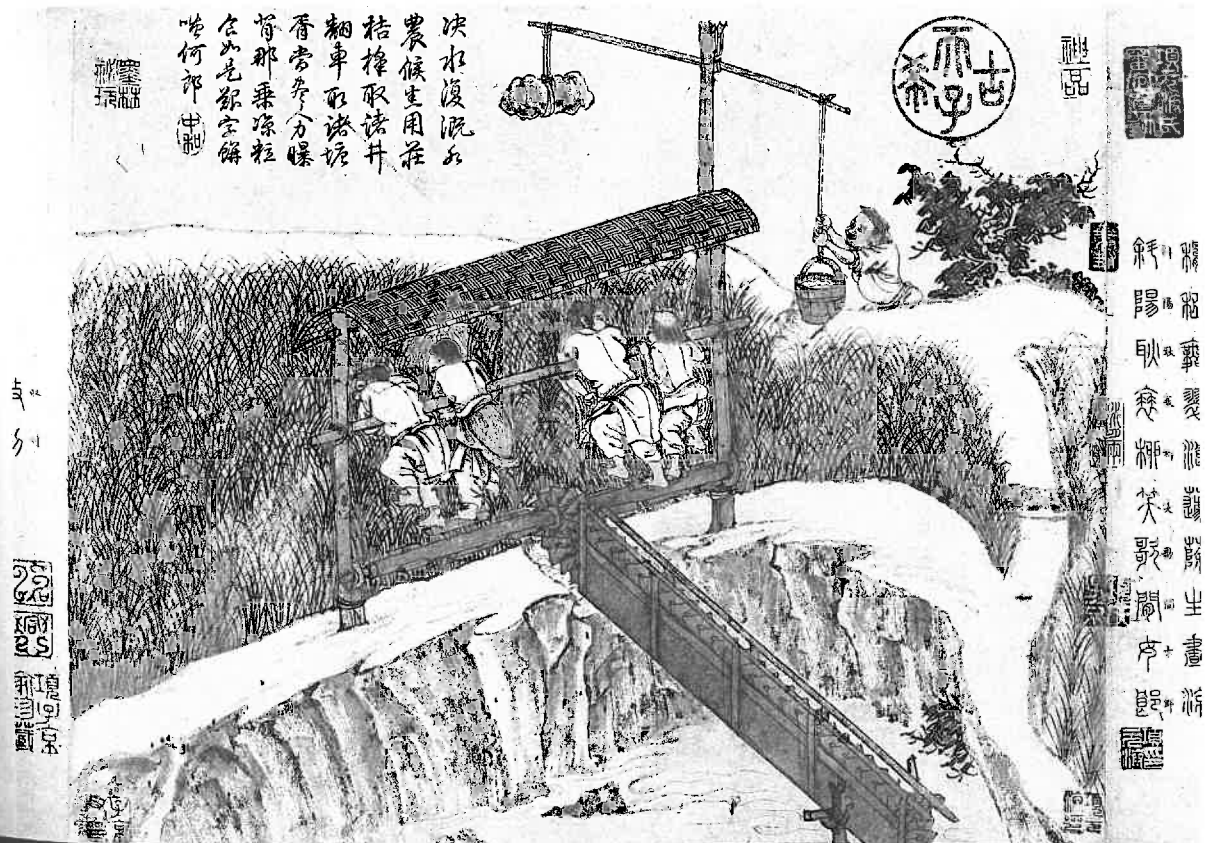
was loose, and that he had to fold it over once or twice, and when he was full he would let out another fold. Whenever the emperor had meat to bestow, he would permit each of the princes, lords and great officials, to bring out a leg of mutton and give it all to Wen'ge, so that it filled up his sedan chair. Wen'ge would slice it up with a knife and eat it, and by the time he got home all the meat would be gone.

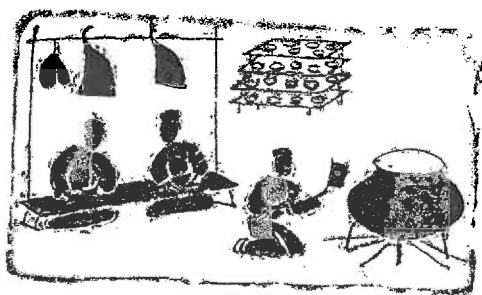
Cao Wen'ge's gorging of meat also smacked of reckless inattention to a diet that properly balanced meat and vegetables with such staples as rice and other grains. This departure from first culinary principles suggests that in later periods pleasure in food may sometimes have prevailed over concerns about self-cultivation.

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The most fundamental principle underlying Chinese cuisine, and its most distinctive characteristic, is the *fan-cai* principle, which divides all foods into two categories. *Fan* literally denotes rice, but in this context encompasses all grains and such other carbohydrate foods as bread and noodles. Its purpose is to fill up the eater. *Cai* denotes the dishes made to flavour the *fan*, and is of secondary importance. All Chinese meals consist of different combinations of *fan* and *cai*. Of Confucius it was respectfully said that: 'Though there might be a large quantity of meat, he would not allow what he took to exceed the due proportion for the grain.'

Different varieties of rice, both dry- and paddy-grown, glutinous and non-glutinous, formed part of the Chinese diet from earliest times. As transportation networks improved after the 11th century, rice became widely available even in the north, where it competed with wheat and millet. Many wines were made from rice and other grains, partly using imported techniques learned from grape-wine manufacture.





Cutting skills are absolutely essential to the culinary process, so that dexterity with the knife carries considerable prestige. There are well over one hundred different ways to cut up food in Chinese cuisine, although generally all the ingredients in a single dish are cut up in the same way. The pottery tomb relief from which this rubbing of kitchen preparations was taken is from the period AD 25-220.

A serving of food without *fan*, such as a snack of fruit or dried fish, is not considered a proper meal. For the poor, not surprisingly, meals generally consisted primarily of *fan* with minimal *cai* as seasoning or garnish, while further up the economic scale the proportion of *cai* increased until, among the wealthy, dishes of different vegetables and meat constituted the main part of the meal, culminating with a bowl of rice served either to clean the palate or to 'fill up the cracks'. In such circumstances, to eat *fan* at the end of the meal could amount to a rude suggestion that the *cai* offered had been inadequate. These general principles have retained some of their force down to the present.

The essence of Chinese cuisine has long been the creative combination of different forms of *fan* and *cai*. This was not so much a case of 'you are what you eat' as 'you are how you prepare and serve what you eat.' When Chinese cooks combined *fan* with different vegetables and meats prepared and cooked in different ways – sliced, chopped or minced and then boiled, braised, or stewed, stir-fried or dry-fried, and so on, with more than one method sometimes applied to a single dish – they were able to create a diet that was almost infinite in its variety. In this way, the universal application of the *fan-cai* principle conformed to the modular approach to aesthetic production found in, for instance, the mass production in terracotta of slightly varied human figures for the tombs of the first emperor of Qin in Xi'an. This similarity underscores the ranking of gastronomy among the fine arts.

Beyond the *fan-cai* principle, much of the thinking underlying Chinese cuisine related directly to medical knowledge and concepts of health and the human body, which themselves derived from traditional notions of the cosmos. An important aspect of the view that everything was connected to everything else was the idea that the human body itself was a microcosm of the cosmos, and that both were animated by energy, or *qi*. In the case of the human body, that energy, which took different forms, resided in varying amounts in food. The goal in eating – the foundation of proper nutrition – is to achieve and maintain a perfect equilibrium between strengthening and weakening foods. This is achieved by balancing *yin* and *yang* forces within the body, *yin* and *yang* being the basic elements into which the cosmos is divided. These terms originally denoted the shady and sunny side of a hill, respectively. By extension, *yin* stands for what is cool (or cooling), dark and moist, and generally associated with female qualities, while *yang* represents what is hot (or heating), bright and dry, qualities generally regarded as male. These were not regarded as diametrical opposites but as complementary poles on either end of a spectrum on which any given item of food (or anything else) would be rather more *yin* or rather more *yang*, rather than categorically one or the other. Foods were divided into cooling and heating types according to their effect on the body – not the temperature at which they were served – with, for instance, green vegetables and such water-dwelling creatures as crabs ranking among cooling foods, and fatty foods, hot peppers and

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The foundation of proper nutrition is to balance yin and yang forces within the body, yin and yang being the basic elements into which the cosmos is divided. This is done by classifying foods as more cooling (*yin*) or heating (*yang*). These ideas resonated with humoral theories similar to or derived from those known in the West. In the painting on silk from the Qing dynasty, two sages study the yin-yang symbol.

chicken soup ranking among heating foods, although the properties of individual foods were not fixed.

These early ideas about cooling and heating foods received further reinforcement and elaboration with the introduction in the early sixth century of the humoral system. According to this theory, the human body was affected by heat and cold, and to a lesser extent by wetness and dryness, and balance was essential to wellbeing. The humoral system may have reached China from the Western world as a consequence of the spread of Buddhism, or may have arisen independently; at any rate, its resonance with the *yin-yang* idea undoubtedly helped it take root in China. It was widely adopted and had an enormous effect on ideas about nutrition; in addition, those responsible for diet and health now sought ways to combine it with another important Chinese classification system – the linkage of items in a particular category into groups of five.

The primary such group divided the cosmos into five successive phases generated by *yin* and *yang*, namely, wood, fire, earth, metal and water. Those phases formed part of a comprehensive system of correspondences in groups of five; each group had its counterpart in every other group. The one most directly connected to food was the five flavours, that is, acidic or sour, as in vinegar; bitter, as in bitter melon and apricot kernels; sweet, as in honey and, later, sugar; pungent, as in ginger and garlic; and salty, as in salt and, later, soy sauce. Closely related were the five viscera, namely spleen, lungs, heart, liver and kidney, whose wellbeing depended on proper nutrition; their relationship to the five flavours affected the understanding of a particular medicine's properties.

Other groupings of five included cereals, namely rice, wheat, soy, glutinous and non-glutinous millet; domestic animals, namely cows, sheep, pigs, chickens and dogs; and any number of others such as seasons, cardinal directions (including centre), colours, social relations and so on. The acknowledged interrelationship between all these groups of five and their individual elements meant, among other things, that reference to one group or one individual element in a group had broader implications. As Su Dongpo observed:

Salty and sour, both are part of what we enjoy;  
But the centre harbours the supreme flavour,  
one that never fades away.

Finally, on the subject of health and hygiene, it is noteworthy that freshness and cleanliness has always played a central role in Chinese cuisine. Confucius, who notwithstanding his canonical status preferred to call himself a transmitter of existing ideas rather than an original thinker, was famously fastidious about what he would and would not eat, and in terms of modern hygiene his principles seem eminently sensible:





Food and food culture became a defining characteristic of city life in Song China. Both memoirs and artistic depictions, such as this scroll, probably partly factual and partly idealized, devote much attention to the pleasures of different kinds of public eating establishments, ranging from simple stalls in the street selling single types of food to large-scale restaurants of various kinds.



He did not eat rice which had been damaged by heat or damp and turned sour, nor fish or flesh which was gone. He did not eat what was discoloured, or what was of a bad flavour, nor anything which was ill-cooked or was not in season.

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The remainder of this chapter focuses on questions of gastronomy and taste from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century, a span of time in which China is variously considered to have shown both late imperial and early modern characteristics, depending on the criteria used. Scholarly opinion varies on the question of when China's early modern age may be said to have begun. Most historians, however, would agree that in the last millennium China saw three major periods of what we would recognize as large-scale consumerism, a trait associated with modernity in the West. These periods were the southern Song (1127–1279); the late Ming (c. 1550–1644); and the latter part of the eighteenth century, which marked the turning point in the fortunes of the Manchu Qing dynasty (1636–1912). In each period the consumerist phenomenon involved food as well as a broad spectrum of other goods and manufactures.

In 1127, northern invaders forced the Song court to move its capital from Kaifeng in Henan province to the port of Hangzhou, south of the Yangzi river. During the Song, two linked transformations took place, in agriculture and in commerce. Cultivators increasingly moved beyond self-sufficiency, growing cash crops as well as diversifying into producing handicrafts and weaving textiles. They sold these at market and bought food with the proceeds, often using money instead of a system of direct exchange. In consequence, a market for certain goods developed on a national scale. The effects of these transformations were far-reaching. For our purposes, the important point is that much more food, especially rice, became available, and that the variety of foods was enormously increased. This was partly because of the commercialization of agriculture, partly because of imports, and partly because such hitherto limited crops as tea and sugar entered into general use, making everyday commodities out of what once had been luxuries. More people than ever before moved into employment other than food production, giving rise to a new merchant class. Foodstuffs moved with other goods along inter-regional trade routes and were sold at periodic markets in centres both large and small.

These developments contributed to the growth of large cities whose inhabitants – from workers and artisans to merchants, scholars and officials – bought their food at market stalls, in teahouses, wineshops and large-scale restaurants, some of which were capable of serving hundreds of people at a single sitting. Thus public eating establishments arose in China at a relatively early stage in comparison



with, say, France, helping to normalize the idea of eating outside the home. None of the descriptions and memoirs of life in Hangzhou (the southern capital) that have come down to us fails to mention the huge variety and deliciousness of the food available, sometimes in great detail, while much of the poetry of the era dwells on the same topics, signifying unmistakably the pivotal role of food and food culture in the self-identification of the era.

The inland early-Song capital of Kaifeng was already known for its southern-style restaurants that kept gourmets supplied with freshwater fish and seafood in pristine condition and with rice brought up from the south, in addition to those that provided such more usual northern foods as red meats, poultry and wheat noodles. The trend towards restaurant specialization and the importation of delicacies from afar increased once the capital moved south to Hangzhou, because it became a city not only of sophisticated residents and sojourning traders but also of refugees from all over, unable to return home. Restaurants appealing to regional tastes, and to such special dietary groups as Muslims, proliferated at both the luxury and more popular levels, while still others specialized in particular kinds of dishes, as we know from a reminiscence of the first half of the thirteenth century written in 1275, just before the Mongol invasion:

Formerly...the best-known specialties were the sweet soy soup at the Mixed-Wares Market, pig cooked in ashes in front of the Longevity-and-Compassion Palace, Mother Song's fish soup and rice served with mutton. Later...there were the boiled pork from Wei-the-Big-Knife at the Cat Bridge and the honey fritters from Zhou-Number Five in front of the Five-span Pavilion.

Of 'Mother Song' it was said that she had once worked for a rich household in Kaifeng and had moved south with other refugees. Finding others who shared her nostalgia for home cooking, she figured out how to reproduce her specialty fish soup in Hangzhou, using local carp, and sold it at a stall in the marketplace with such success – apparently it smelled irresistible – that the emperor heard about it and became one of her patrons. Although a majority of chefs and restaurateurs were male, she was only one of a number of Song-period women of whose food expertise we know. Another authored a collection of recipes from the Shanghai area and Zhejiang province (in which Hangzhou is located), entitled *Zhongkui Lu* (Records of Home Cooking), one of the earliest collections of recipes to be published independent of agricultural or dietary guidelines. New printing technology meant that at least in theory anyone could buy and read this work; although we do not know the extent to which it did in fact circulate, a number of later collections drew heavily on some of its otherwise lost recipes.



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The state promoted agriculture by encouraging the composition and dissemination of treatises such as the *Gengzhi tu* (Agriculture and Sericulture Illustrated), a series of twenty pictures each on the cultivation of rice and silk, accompanied by an appropriate poem. Qing emperors, including Qianlong, appended their own poems and had the work reprinted several times.

In the late thirteenth century the Song were destroyed by the Mongols, who made China under the Yuan dynasty the easternmost part of a vast transcontinental empire within which ideas and goods, including foodstuffs, travelled freely. Under the Yuan there was, broadly, a distinction between the cuisines of the north-west, which were strongly affected by the Muslim-influenced food cultures of Central Asia, and the south and east, which remained relatively free of these influences.

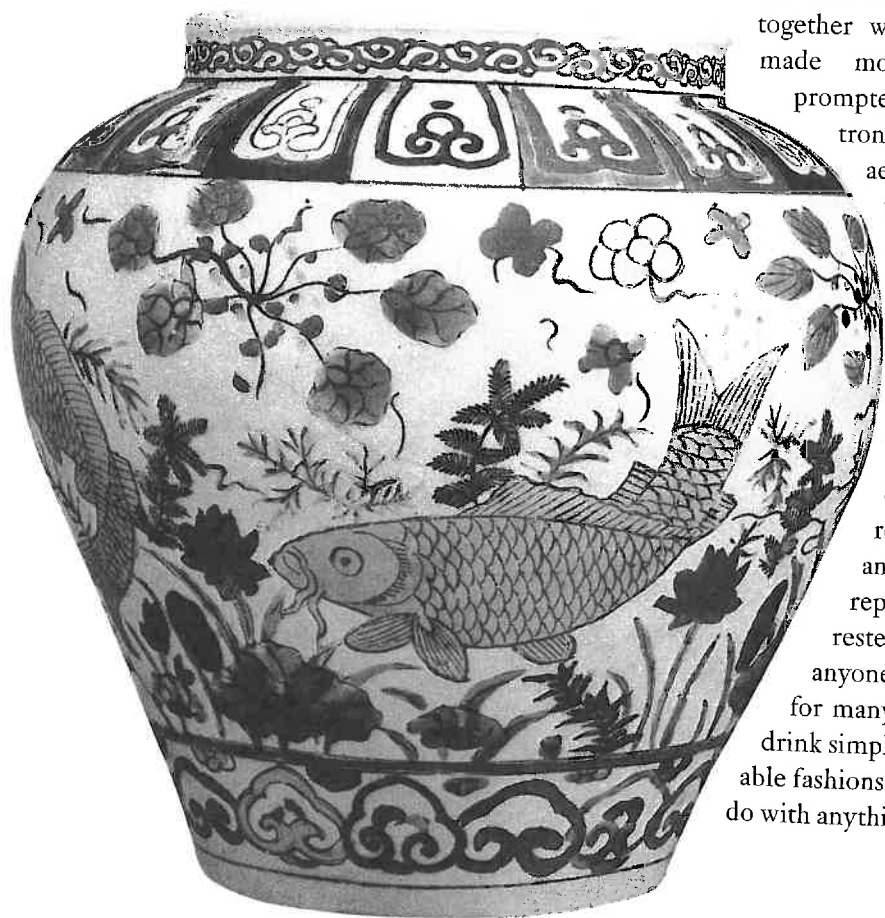
We turn now to the late sixteenth century, the next major period of consumerism, when the Ming who had succeeded the Mongols in 1368

were already entering the declining years of their dynasty. Late-Ming China's unprecedented agricultural prosperity and thriving regional and national markets gave at least the lower Yangzi region a superficial resemblance to Hangzhou under the southern Song, with widespread commercialization and urbanization. But Ming China was not under siege as the Song had been three hundred years earlier, and moreover it was tightly integrated into the developing global economy, not least because silver from the New World and Japan had become a leading commodity just at the moment when the Chinese economy was becoming increasingly dependent upon it. As important in terms of the Chinese diet were such New World imports as maize, sweet potatoes, peanuts, potatoes, chilli peppers and tomatoes, all of which reached China around this time.

Late-Ming China also boasted a burgeoning consumer culture that bestowed enormous prestige upon the possession and enjoyment of material goods, encouraging a new market in luxuries. In this hedonistic atmosphere, not only was collecting all the rage, but the scope of what one might collect continually expanded, until both expert knowledge and eventually taste itself became marketable commodities. At much the same time, the exponential growth of printing and publishing provided further momentum for these developments by making it possible to inform a much wider public about the aesthetic and other possibilities open to them.

The late-Ming commodification of taste, together with the commercialization that made more luxury goods available, prompted a resurgence of interest in gastronomy, in which gustatory and aesthetic taste came together in ways that, because of the still strong connections of nutrition to both health and self-cultivation, could still be framed as morally acceptable despite a primary focus on pleasure. That possibility was particularly inviting to those members of the elite disquieted by the realization that the cultivation and taste upon which their class reputation and identity largely rested was available potentially to anyone with money to pay for it. But for many, the interest in good food and drink simply harmonized with the pleasurable fashions of the age and had very little to do with anything but pure self-indulgence.

A Ming dynasty wine jar from the Jiajing period (1522–66). Both wine made from grapes and the technology for making it were imported into China but more commonly Chinese wines were made of grains such as millet and rice. Drinking games were popular forms of entertainment among the elite, with the loser of each round draining his glass; descriptions abound of drunken parties.



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In Chinese cuisine the flavour and consistency of freshwater fish is considered superior to that of seafood. According to legend, the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722) once stopped for dinner at a simple inn when he was travelling to the south. Entranced by the subtlety of a fish dish he was served, he renamed it 'Palace Gate Fragrant Fish'. This Ming dynasty bowl dates from about 1600.

The writings of three late-Ming authors serve to give some sense of the epicurean life of the period, both in terms of food itself and in terms of the ways in which such men both shared and perpetuated their pleasures and their knowledge by writing about or, in some instances, painting them. Certainly, partaking of food and drink was customary at every social gathering, at some of which, not surprisingly, gastronomy itself was the *raison d'être*. These three authors are Gao Lian, whose prescription for elegant living included lengthy discourses on food and drink; Xu Wei (1521–93), a well-known oil painter and poet whose work is full of references to food, and Zhang Dai, a survivor of the Ming–Qing dynastic transition whose nostalgic reminiscence of the pleasures of life under the Ming abound with descriptions of gastronomic delights. I have selected these particular writers among many possibilities because each represents a different variation on the themes outlined above, in order to give an overview of the gastronomic culture of the time.

All three authors lived in and around the prosperous lower Yangzi region of Jiangnan, which included rich farmland and the great cities of Nanjing, Suzhou, Yangzhou and Hangzhou, centres among other things of a thriving textile industry. In many ways this region's wealth and power rivalled those of the political capital, Beijing, and its material prosperity and cultural efflorescence made it the epicentre of elite social and cultural life. While Jiangnan cannot be taken as typical of the whole of China, there is no doubt that both in contemporary perceptions and in retrospect it served as the repository for the very essence of Chinese elite culture. From a gastronomic point of view, the cuisine of Jiangnan and especially Suzhou, best known for its aquatic fare, became particularly fashionable after prime minister Zhang Juzheng (1525–82), in transit, lavished his praises upon it. A number of contemporary accounts testify that Suzhou chefs and Suzhou dishes became extremely popular at this time, both in elite kitchens of the region and in Beijing.

The first of the three, Gao Lian, a sixteenth-century figure whose precise dates are uncertain, was in many ways the most influential. Gao's social status was ambiguous in that he was both a scholar whose accomplishments made him acceptable to the cultural elite and a successful merchant whose family was known for its patronage and philanthropy. He may have been employed at one time at the imperial banqueting hall. At a time of increasing eclecticism in intellectual and ideological life, Gao was a Daoist who lived in retirement in the city of Hangzhou and devoted his energies to questions of health and longevity. In harmony with a general trend towards articulating standards of good taste, Gao's *Ya Shang Zhai Zun Sheng Ba Jian* (Eight Discourses on the Art of Living from the Studio Where Elegance is Valued) was a work of connoisseurship suggesting ways in which one might perfect both one's material surroundings and one's metaphysical existence. Of its eight main sections, one was devoted to ways

of prolonging life and avoiding illness, one to medicine, and one to food and drink. The latter occupied three of the nineteen chapters of the complete work and drew on the recipes of the Song *Zhongku Lu*, referred to above, among other more recent culinary texts. It was reprinted several times in the thirty years following its initial publication in 1591, indicating that the information it offered was greatly in demand.

Gao discussed, among other things, tea and the best spring-waters with which to make it; soups and broths; grains; noodles; wild and domestic vegetables; preserved meats; sweets; fruits; brewing; medicinal recipes; and the relationship of spiritual matters to food. Nothing unsuited for those such as himself who seek to lead a frugal and quiet life, Gao launched his discourse on food and drink with the following salvo in favour of moderation and healthy eating, identifying the connections between proper eating on the one hand and physical and moral strength on the other:

Nutrition is the essential factor sustaining human life. It is through this means that, within a single person, *yin* and *yang* come into play and the five phases succeed one another (in proper order). Since everything depends on nutrition, once that is delivered [in the appropriate combination] then the stomach's vital force is complete, then the body's energies can flourish and so the bones and sinews are at [full] strength.

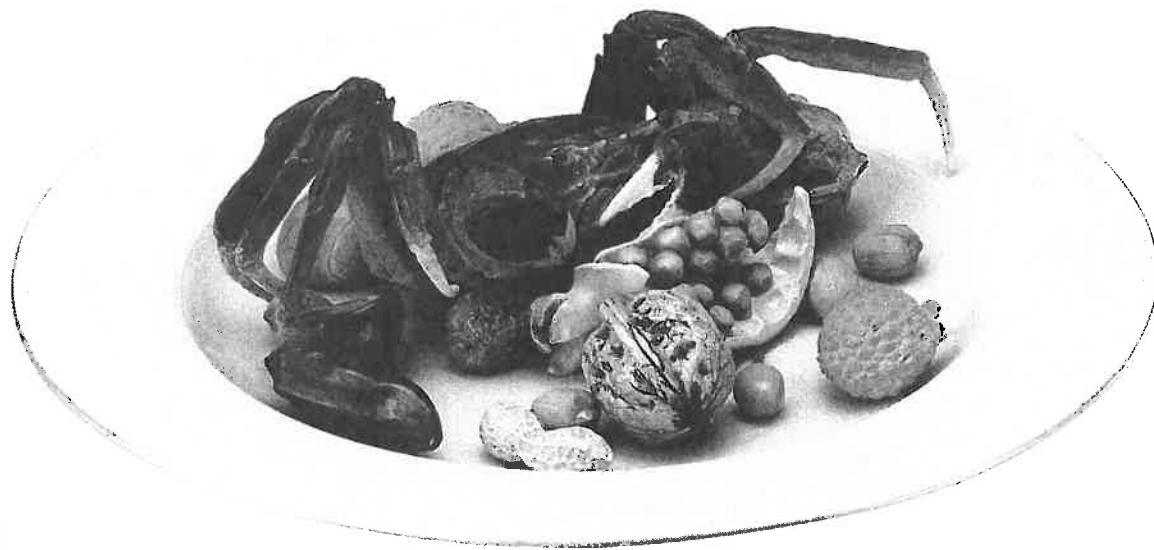
Yet Gao also reproduced mouth-watering descriptions of certain delicacies, showing he had not relinquished a fondness for good food. Thus he echoed, among others, Song poet-gourmet Su Dongpo's poem 'Old Gourmet':

... taste the finest meat from a pig's neck, a crab [in autumn] just before frost, cherries simmered in honey...  
lamb steamed in almond milk. Clams half done then steeped in wine, under-cooked crabs soaked in wine...

The dual concern with the palate and with nutrition and longevity made Gao's work very compelling. But its appeal had a further dimension. By embedding a discussion of food within a work avowedly devoted to connoisseurship and good taste, Gao achieved another, more subtle goal. He expressly placed food and drink among those objects whose connoisseurship was essential for the person of refinement, underscoring his point by claiming the authority of Su Dongpo and Huang Tingjian (1045–1105) — one a poet-gourmet, the other a famous calligrapher who had written a short work on nutrition. In addition, by thus setting out rules of good taste, not least by the elision



Food in Chinese culture can suggest more than just gastronomy. A plate of porcelain delicacies from the Qianlong period cleverly suggests, through a series of puns, a wish for many successful sons. The character for 'seed' is the same as that for sons, so the pomegranate implies fruitfulness; that for the crab's hard shell is the same as that denoting the ranks in the highest level of civil-service examinations, and so on.

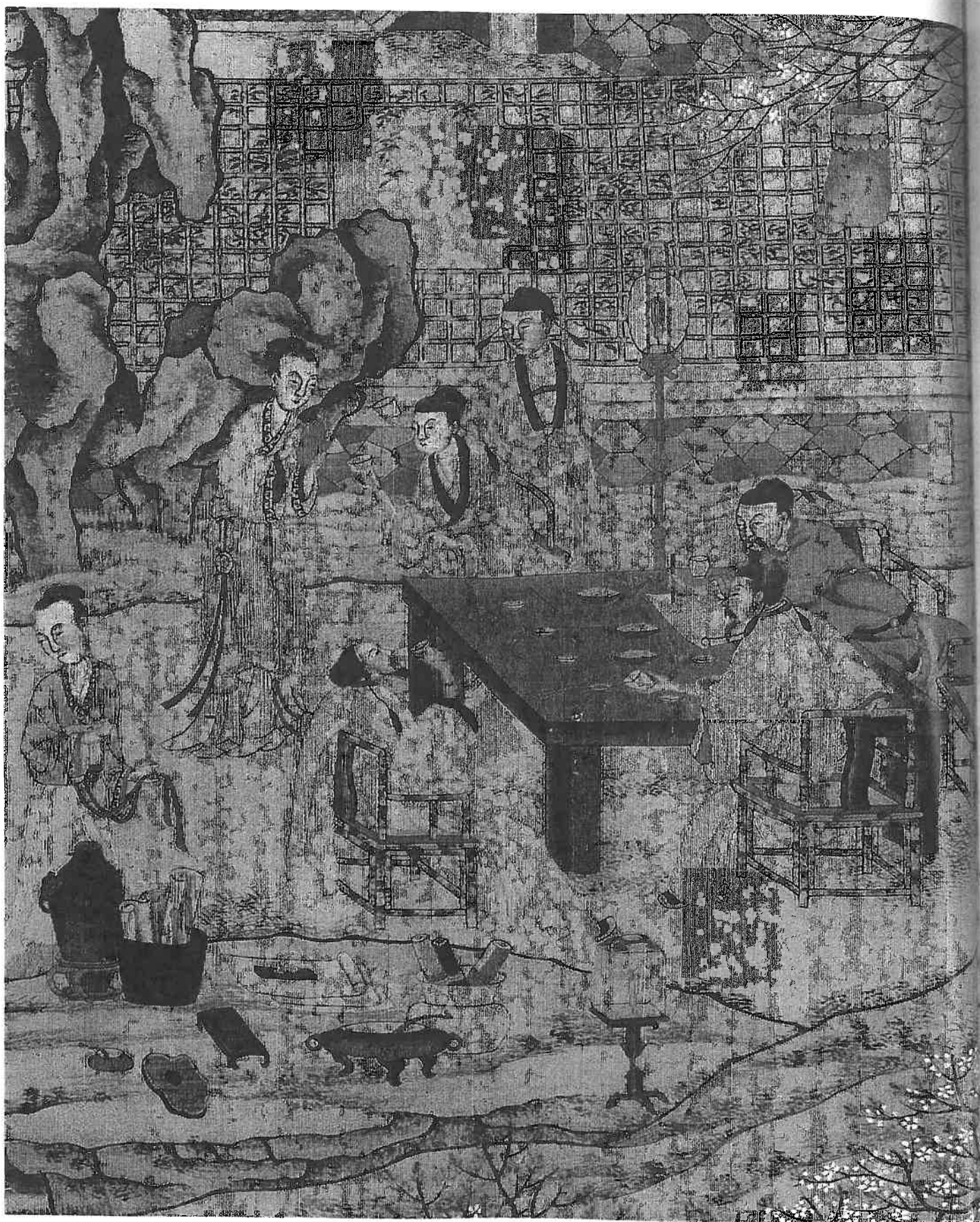


of gustatory and aesthetic taste, he pointed the way forward, for anyone capable of reading his book and following his prescriptions, to attain the level of cultural sophistication to which his work as a whole staked a claim. It was at once a claim for exclusivity and a blurring of the boundaries through commodification, and it bore little relation to eating to satisfy hunger.


As we will see, at least some of the delicacies Gao mentioned, such as autumn freshwater crabs, make such regular appearances in later culinary and gourmet texts as to suggest that he was quite successful in establishing certain benchmarks of good taste – it may, of course, merely demonstrate that he actually did have good taste and that the crabs were, simply, delicious. And he may have been following the prescriptions of others: compilations of lore about crabs, among other delicacies, were a longstanding literary genre. At any rate, as the authors of the great eighteenth-century imperial bibliography, among others, would note, Gao's work both launched and set the tone for what has been called a gastronomic movement among Chinese men of leisure.

For many, the question was not only what represented the acme of good taste, but what they could afford. Every scenic outing, drinking party and poetry-society meeting seemed to culminate in an extravagant picnic, sometimes cooked on the spot by the host's own cook. Contemporaries observed that, along with the fashion for leisure touring, lavish banquets, expensive restaurants and indulgence in pricey delicacies increasingly were becoming a hallmark of elite life in the late Ming. Not surprisingly, this dilemma troubled many less affluent aspirants to the good life, among whom was the well-known artist-poet Xu Wei.

Both Xu Wei's paintings and his poetry reveal a strong interest in food. Xu often exchanged his work for rare and expensive foods that he could not otherwise afford, in a system of exchange that was not



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Evening in the Peach and Plum Garden, a silk tapestry from the Qing dynasty. Gatherings of this kind usually involved more or less elaborate refreshments, which might be provided by a local establishment or by the servants of one or more of the participants, who had to bring along everything necessary to prepare and serve their masters on the spot.

uncommon but seems to have been particularly pronounced in Xu's case. Thus, for example, in return for a gift of bamboo shoots from a military official on the northern frontier he produced a painting of bamboo:

I made a meal of soup with carp and grain  
I rack my brains wanting to respond but with difficulty  
All I can do is cut up a visiting card  
Sketch bamboo to match [your] spring dish.

Later he did another, similar, bamboo painting for the same official, noting that he hoped 'in jest' it would serve as a reminder of the earlier gift, perhaps prompting more bounty. Thus some of Xu's food paintings – which also included crabs, fish, grapes, pears and other fruit – were not reciprocations for gifts already received but were done either in hopes of provoking such a gift, or simply to find a way to obtain seasonal delicacies beyond his means:

At night by my window, guests and hosts talk  
It's autumn on the river and the crabs and the fish are fat  
I don't have the money to buy crabs to go with the wine  
I think I'll paint something to pay for it.

Xu also composed poems celebrating many different foods, including some of the recent imports from the New World, then still something of a novelty.

In the first decades of the seventeenth century the veneer of Ming prosperity began to wear thin. The dynasty fell prey to political factionalism, whose destructive effects were compounded by a series of natural catastrophes. In 1644, peasant rebels brought down the dynasty and occupied Beijing. Shortly afterwards, Manchu invaders from the north-east overcame the rebels, going on over the next few years to conquer the rest of China. The Jiangnan region, once the intellectual, cultural and economic hub of the empire as well as its gastronomic heart, was particularly hard hit because the new rulers, the Qing, understood full well the need to crush Chinese elite opposition at its very core. A ten-days' massacre in the city of Yangzhou was only the worst of many such episodes in the wars of dynastic transition, in which many people lost everything, if not their lives.

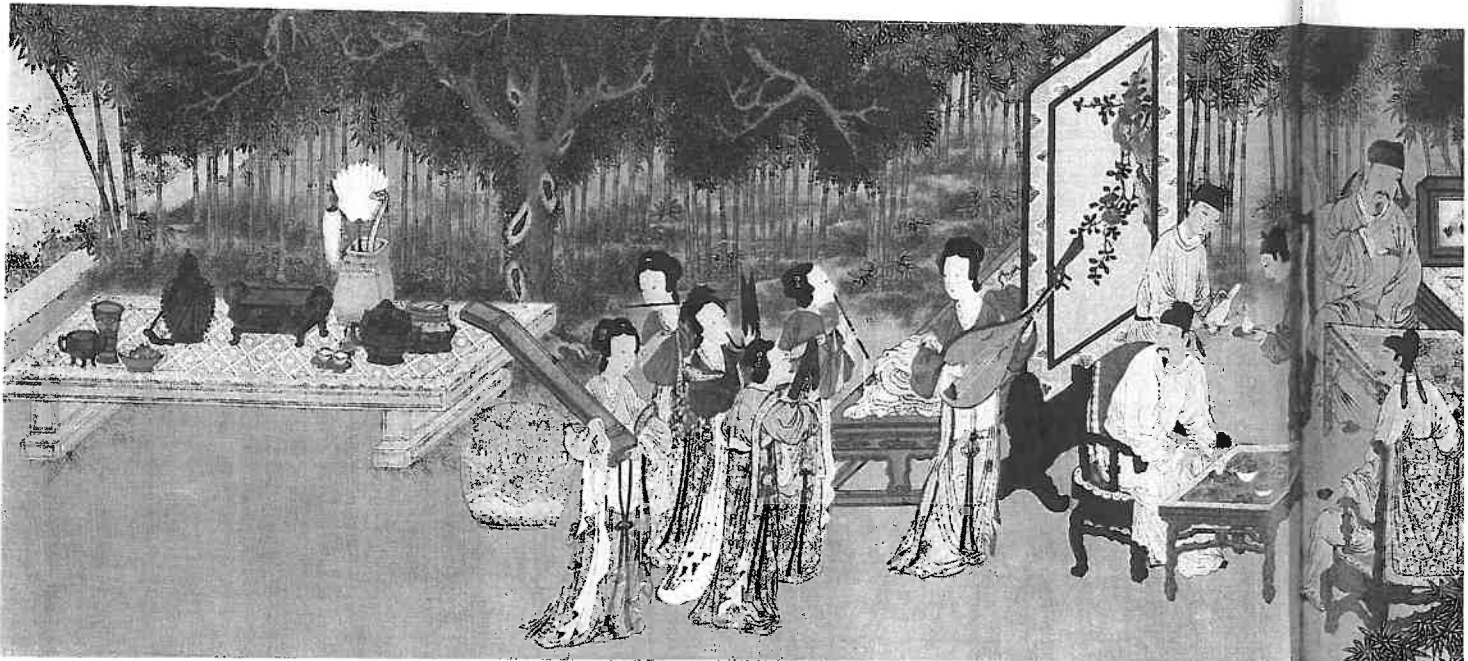
A well-known *bon vivant* of the late Ming who survived into the Qing was the essayist Zhang Dai, once conspicuous for his ubiquitous presence at social occasions and for his extravagant way of life. After the transition, Zhang was reduced to poverty and often went hungry. His poignant and detailed memoir of his earlier life was almost all that remained to sustain him. It consisted of a series of anecdotes and vignettes, many of which describe Zhang's former life

in which, as he put it, he 'painstakingly researched the daily pleasures of the mouth and stomach'.

In one of his most evocative descriptions, Zhang recorded in loving detail the pleasures of a crab club that he and his friends had formed each year expressly for the purpose of gathering to enjoy river crabs during their short autumn season. There is no reason to suppose that the crab club existed only in his imagination, and we may speculate that it was not unique. After asserting that crabs, along with another local delicacy, blood clams, naturally combine the five flavours without needing seasoning, Zhang continued:

Their shells, as big as a serving-dish, curve up, while their purple claws are as big as a fist. The flesh that comes out of their little claws is glossy like an earthworm. The open shell is full of unctuous 'meat', holding together in jade-like fingers and amber morsels. It is a sweet and velvet-smooth dish to which even the 'eight most delicious foods' cannot compare. As soon as October comes around, I get together of an afternoon with my friends in the Crab Club to cook the crabs for ourselves. We plan on eating six apiece, but for fear that if they get cold they will lose their flavour, we cook them as we go along. For side dishes we have plump salted and dried duck, junket, blood clams steeped in wine like amber pearls, and cabbage cooked in duck juices like slabs of jade. For fruit we had mandarins, and dried chestnuts and caltrops; for drink, Yuhubing wine; for vegetables, Bingkang bamboo shoots; for rice, new harvest white rice from Yuhang. Finally, to rinse the mouth, Snow-Orchid tea. When I think of it today, it is really as though we had tasted the offerings of the immortals come from the

A silk handscroll of the 16th or 17th centuries depicts a scene entitled *Whiling the Summer Away*. Leisure touring became increasingly popular in the late imperial period, and might well involve female companionship. Most entertainers were trained in music and dance but some young women also included culinary skills among the range of services they offered potential clients.





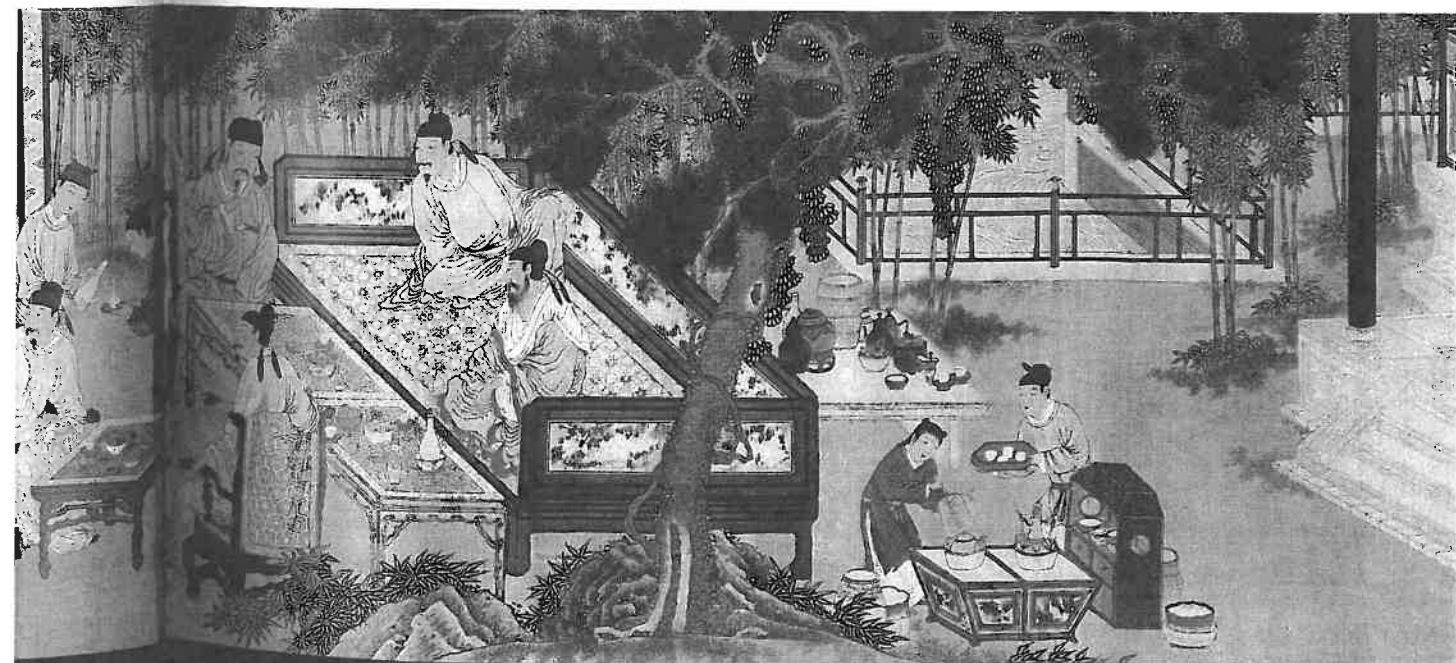
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celestial kitchens, reaching the point of total satiation and intoxication.

Zhang reverts several times to the topic of 'Snow-Orchid tea', a tea he named himself in tribute to its piquant taste, greenish colour and delicate aroma. He recalls a particular teahouse in his hometown, Shaoxing, where he thought the best Snow-Orchid tea was served. He attributed this to the teahouse's exacting standards: they would infuse the tea only in water drawn from a particular spring and only when the water had just come to the boil, serving it only in a pot that was always kept scrupulously clean by being washed after every use, a comment that suggests that such was not always the case. Other vignettes relating to tea show connoisseurs competing not only to guess what kind of tea they were drinking but to demonstrate the sensitivity of their palate and sophistication of their knowledge by identifying the spring from which the water had been drawn. One is vividly reminded of upper-class Englishmen, centuries later, competing to identify the vintage of a bottle of port and even its shippers.

As to the accompanying junket – after lamenting the way it had generally ceased to be made properly, Zhang describes in another passage how he once had devoted considerable time and care to making it himself:

I myself milked the cow and at night I put the milk into a basin. Next morning a layer of curds ('milk-flowers') had formed, about a foot thick. I boiled it for some time in a copper pot. I infused orchid blossoms in snow-runoff water. I added four cups of this infusion to one catty of milk and boiled it and boiled it until the liquid became like jade and the solids like pearls. Unctuous as snow, silken like hoar-frost, this dish gives off a fragrance that surpasses





One of a set of twelve paintings, produced for the future Yongzheng emperor, of beautiful Chinese women surrounded by signs of cultivation and accomplishment, in this case tasting tea. It has been suggested that in part the women are intended to represent a feminine embodiment of Chinese culture, in contrast to the more manly Manchu rulers, and perhaps a warning against the attractions of Chinese culture.

the orchid's and permeates the viscera. It is like a true gift of the gods.

According to Zhang, the junket thus made was both delicious and versatile. It was just as good served hot or cold, preserved in wine or vinegar, or simmered in sugar. In this depiction of a milk-based luxury dish, Zhang also confirms for us the continuing, if occasional, presence of dairy products in the Chinese diet.

The unsettled years of the Ming-Qing dynastic transition were certainly no time to worry about gastronomy, except as an object of nostalgic reminiscence. Many, seeking to understand how the Ming could have fallen, reacted against the devotion to pleasure and the intellectual open-mindedness that they feared might have fatally undermined the dynasty. But life slowly resumed a degree of normality. By the late seventeenth century, Jiangnan was gradually regaining its role as economic and cultural centre of the empire, and rebuilding its great cities. The Ming loyalism of the early post-transition years gradually subsided with subsequent generations, and as it became clear that the Manchus were there to stay. And Manchu suspicions of Jiangnan's political loyalties vied with individual emperors' predilection for luxury goods, many of which, including fine textiles and cuisine, originated precisely in that region.

During the long eighteenth century, approximately from the 1680s to the 1810s, overall peace and prosperity gave rise among other things to renewed commercialization, accompanied by the resumption of an increasingly rampant consumerism. One important consequence was that Jiangnan became ever wealthier and the daily life of the scholars, merchants and other residents who thronged there ever more given over to life's pleasures.

Qing rulers' mistrust of the Jiangnan scholarly and intellectual elite led them to seek ways to draw its members into the imperial orbit. One potential means to achieve that goal was by sharply limiting their subjects' ability to function independently of the throne in any sphere, a tactic that it was hoped would pre-empt any formation of cliques or the factionalism that had laid low the Ming. Especially under the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95), these goals led to imperial involvement in – which *ipso facto* meant assumption of control over – intellectual and cultural trends that had once enjoyed a relatively autonomous existence. The bid to co-opt elite practices was discernible in a number of areas, such as ritual studies and the intellectual movement favouring evidence-based research over abstract philosophizing. This strategy became habitual, so that its extension to the field of gastronomy seemed only natural, whether or not in that particular instance the underlying motivation was really political. In any event, the lavishness and eclecticism of the imperial table could not but make court cuisine a model to emulate. Thus any account of taste and gastronomy in the late eighteenth century needs to take account of what was happening

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A portable tea-ceremony chest dating from the period of the Qianlong emperor. Qing palaces did not have rooms set aside for dining or for taking tea; instead, meals were brought to the emperor wherever he happened to be at the appropriate time. Also, when the emperor travelled away from the palace, as he frequently did, he sometimes took his favourite cooks with him so as not to be deprived of his preferred cuisine on the road.

both at court and among the Jiangnan elite who, according to one contemporary account, 'ate like kings'. Here a caveat is again necessary: it is important to bear in mind that while Jiangnan may have represented a pinnacle of 'good living' outside court circles, as in the Ming it was not necessarily representative of the empire as a whole, particularly when one takes into consideration the strikingly multiethnic and multicultural character of the Qing empire.

Records of earlier imperial kitchens are for the most part limited to statistics about the often astonishing number of people employed to take care of food and nutrition at court and the ways in which they were organized. For the Qing, however, especially under the Qianlong emperor, detailed information is preserved in the court archives about the actual meals served, including daily menus, tableware, and the names of cooks responsible for particular dishes. We know, for instance, that Suzhou cuisine became the Qianlong emperor's favourite – he sometimes recruited good Suzhou chefs away from his officials – but that he also enjoyed such Manchu snacks as sweet- or savoury-stuffed 'bobo' buns, shaped to convey a message such as longevity or happiness. He loved to eat duck, and he often drank tea with milk, a Manchu custom about whose influence on English practice we can only speculate. The emperor's devotion to Buddhism evidently did not prevent his enjoyment of animal foods, but on religious festival days and some other special occasions he ate only vegetarian dishes. Buddhist influence, in combination with the exigencies of sheer poverty, had created a strong vegetarian tradition in Chinese cuisine. At the imperial level, it is likely that many of the dishes served to the emperor were vegetarian imitations of meat and other non-vegetarian fare. Sometimes these meals were prepared for

The Qianlong emperor's tea with milk was a Manchu custom, not unlike the Mongolian custom of drinking tea with milk. The Qing emperor's devotion to Buddhism

Qianlong in a monastery to add an aura of sanctification. On such days the entire court also had to follow a vegetarian diet. Finally, in a strikingly humanizing anecdote, we learn that on at least one occasion the emperor declined to eat some food his mother sent over, and asked his chef to make him something else instead.

Generally, he took two meals a day, one at about 6 a.m., by which time he had already been dealing with affairs of state for some time, and one between noon and 2 p.m.; in the evening he had some light snacks. He always ate alone at a small table, as was customary for everyone dining at court; his food was served wherever he wished to take his meal, and no single room was set aside for the purpose.

The imperial kitchens went to great lengths to procure the best ingredients from imperial farms and orchards, from tribute submitted by senior officials and princes, and from all over the empire, including Jiangnan, as well as employing chefs with particular specialties. Freshness was ensured by the use of ice stored in specially constructed caves, which also served to cool the ambient temperature in summertime, a practice not limited to the imperial court.

The quantity of food required to supply the palace was astonishing, not only because there were thousands of people to be fed but because typically far more food was served to the emperor than he could possibly consume, as we can see from the record of an autumn breakfast in 1779:

hot pot with bird's nest and duck; sautéed chicken with soft bean curd; lamb; a stew of duck, dogmeat and pork; bamboo shoots...bird's nest with chicken; various thinly-sliced meats; deep-fried duck with meat; quickfried pork; quick-sautéed chicken eggs; sautéed chicken feet; cured pork; doughnuts; chicken soup with dumplings...lamb with steamed gruel and a fruit congee (the latter two untouched). On another table were fourteen dishes of eight-treasure bobo buns, four dishes of yellow greens; three dishes of milk. On a third table some baked goods, and on a fourth, eight plates of meats.

The emperor ate lightly, sampling only a few of these dishes; his leftovers were distributed in a prescribed order among concubines, imperial family members, high officials, and occasionally foreign visitors whom the emperor wished to honour. This menu suggests rather minimal attention to issues of nutrition. But nutrition was not the main point; the array of dishes served to the emperor constituted one among many ways of exposing to public view his boundless riches; it formed part of the mythology surrounding the emperor or, in modern terms, was part of imperial public relations. In any event, Qianlong lived to the ripe old age of eighty-eight and, according to

The Qianlong emperor was fond of drinking tea with milk, a custom more familiar to his Mongolian, Tibetan and Manchu subjects than to Chinese, who preferred their tea plain. The Qing court possessed a number of ewers of this kind, which may have been modelled after vessels used for buttered tea in Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies.







In the 18th century, imagined Chinese decorative styles or *chinoiserie* became the height of fashion in Europe. This was mirrored by a taste for things European at the Qianlong court, to which the French presented a set of tapestries intended to adorn the emperor's European-style palaces. François Boucher's study for a tapestry cartoon, entitled *Feast of the Chinese Emperor*, was executed in c. 1742.

British ambassador George Macartney, was still physically spry and mentally acute a few years before his death.

Both at court banquets and for daily meals, each person's food allocation was carefully worked out according to a strict system of gradation. Banquets, in particular, often consisted of both Manchu and Chinese dishes: Manchu cuisine to represent the empire and Chinese dishes to respect the presumed taste of Chinese guests. Still, the prestige of imperial cuisine meant that a number of Manchu culinary preferences, such as roast meat, found their way into elite Chinese kitchens, and Beijing food, with its Manchu inflections, became popular in Jiangnan just as the cuisine of Suzhou and Yangzhou found favour in the capital. It was not long before it would become fashionable, when Manchus and Chinese dined together, for a Manchu host to serve Chinese dishes and vice versa. From this it is evident that considerations of social class and mutual interest, rather than any issue of ethnic distinction, governed elite social relationships.





In the late eighteenth century the city of Yangzhou claimed a particular imperial connection, both because its cultural world was dominated by salt merchants grown wealthy from imperial monopolies and because it was a regular stop on the frequent imperial southern tours intended precisely to reinforce such bonds. Yangzhou was a cultural and gastronomic mecca even among the cities of Jiangnan. Among other things, the leisure activities of its elite often involved picnic outings to view a scenic spot, perhaps accompanied by the exchange of poetry or political views (the two were not necessarily distinct), or visits to one of the restaurants for which the city was famous. In addition to many individual memoirs of city life, we are fortunate to have a detailed account of Yangzhou which pays considerable attention, among many other topics, to its gastronomic delights. Li Dou's *Yangzhou Huafang Lu* (Record of the Painted Pleasure Boats of Yangzhou), published in 1795, offers tantalizing glimpses of a culinary culture at its height, giving us some sense of the epicurean possibilities open to elite Chinese men in the late eighteenth century.

Li's description of Yangzhou's main fish market depicts a scene in which all kinds of different fish were rushed three times daily from fisherman's boat to city restaurants 'as though on wings', to ensure peak freshness. The choice was enormous, for 'Huainan marine resources are the best in the world'; best of all were the bream, whitefish and perch, with abalone ranking not far behind. Crabs came from three nearby lakes and from the Huai river; the latter were larger but the lake crabs were more highly prized by crab connoisseurs for their intense flavour. Near the market one could smell two stores selling dried, salted and pickled goods, for which Yangzhou, then as now, was famous: fish and shellfish; jellyfish; squid; the fins of various ocean fish passed off as sharks' fin, an expensive luxury, and vegetables.

Many teahouses also served snacks, and some had a particular speciality. The finest served sesame buns, stuffed with sweetmeats or meat, or with fresh or dry vegetables, which were so delicious they became all the rage. Other sought-after treats included different kinds of steamed buns and dumplings; soup buns and fried breads, for all of which there was almost continuous demand. Other popular dishes included such regional specialities as pressed salted duck, a Nanjing dish, and five-fragrance wild duck, more often associated with distant Sichuan province than with Jiangnan. Perhaps the popularity of duck-based dishes in Yangzhou partly reflected imperial tastes.

Outings on one of Yangzhou's many waterways always involved eating and drinking as well as musical and sexual entertainment. Most of the famous pleasure-boats of Yangzhou – in effect floating brothels catering to different social classes – were individually huge and often moved in convoy, but lacked their own kitchen. So the one that did offer cooking facilities was in great demand. It was not unusual for a gentleman to bring along his own cook on pleasure outings of this kind, along with all the equipment needed and kitchen hands to help

prepare a feast. Some private cooks had a reputation for particular dishes, such as Wu Yishan's roasted beancurd; Tian Yanmen's deep-fried duck, Wang Yinshan's boneless fish, and Wang Wen-mi's honey-boiled cakes. An alternative arrangement was to have food delivered to a pleasure-boat from one of Yangzhou's many catering establishments. Wine vendors drifted nearby ready to supply whatever was needed.

The momentary delights of Yangzhou gastronomy were replicated in different forms in other great cities of Jiangnan and elsewhere. More far-reaching and more durable may have been another important strand of late eighteenth-century food culture, namely a growing literary genre centred upon gastronomy. As we have seen, neither recipe collections nor interest in gastronomy was in any way new, but from the seventeenth century they formed part of a trend that steadily gathered momentum and, at the same time, gained in respectability.

Scholars created their cookery books for different reasons. For some, writing about food may initially have seemed a safe haven at a time of dangerous politics, although that aspect of its appeal probably diminished in proportion to increasing imperial interest. Others may have been deliberately following such eminent predecessors as the renowned Yuan dynasty painter Ni Zan (1301–74), whose recipe collection was notable among other things for an absence of outside influence despite Mongol rule, perhaps as a form of oblique resistance. Some were primarily concerned to transmit knowledge about health and nutrition as these related to particular types and combinations of food. Still others may have chosen to tread the path taken by the late-Ming writer Chen Jiru (1558–1639), who consciously turned his back on public life to teach and to write for payment, whether in the form of popular books on life's pleasures or more formal eulogies such as tomb inscriptions. Chen was notably successful in this somewhat unconventional career, becoming almost a brand name whose involvement in particular projects sometimes was invoked by publishers as a marketing device. Whether or not Chen was familiar with Gao Lian's *Eight Discourses*, he formed a link between that group of late-Ming writers who supported themselves in part by the marketing of their good taste and connoisseurship and those who, like Zhang Dai, lived to see the interruption of that way of life as the result of the dynastic transition. It was recorded that Zhang once met the well-known older man when, as a small boy, he was out riding with his grandfather.

Those who, consciously or not, emulated Chen Jiru included the late seventeenth-century writer Li Yu (1611–1680), whose *Xianqing Ouji* (Casual Expressions of Idle Feelings) was a collection of essays on such topics as recreation, travel, women, diet, hygiene, drama and architecture. It formed part of a much wider oeuvre that also included erotic fiction, popular drama and the well-known *Jiezi Yuan Huazhuan* (Mustard-Seed Garden Manual of Painting). Other collections of recipes published in the early to middle eighteenth



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Festivals, such as the one depicted here, provided the occasion not only for celebration but for great conviviality, together with abundant feasting and drinking. Zhang Dai recalled attending such an occasion near Hangzhou in 1633 with all his friends. 'Each one brought a bushel of wine, five baskets of grain and ten varieties of vegetables and fruits, and a red carpet on which to sit and eat.'

century included one by the official dynastic historian Zhu Yicun (1629–1709), which focused on health and diet but also included a number of unusual and luxurious foods such as bear's paw and deer tendon as well as vegetarian imitations of elaborate meat dishes. Still others had a regional focus, such as *Tiao Ding Ji* (Records of the Harmonious Cauldron), a huge compendium of recipes mostly from the Jiangnan area.

The best-known work in this genre came at the very end of the eighteenth century. Yuan Mei (1716–98) abandoned a promising official career to make his living as a writer in Nanjing. His *Suiyuan Shidan* (Recipes from Sui Garden), published in 1796 probably after having circulated in manuscript for some time, appeared at almost exactly the same moment as Li Dou's work on Yangzhou, and no doubt Yuan, who lived not far away in Nanjing, was familiar with much of what Li was describing. But Yuan's interests were somewhat different.

*Suiyuan Shidan* is a collection of recipes that Yuan, who had retired from the imperial bureaucracy after a short but evidently lucrative career, had collected over a period of several decades. Some of these recipes he obtained by consulting the cooks of friends at whose house he had enjoyed a particular dish – a practice in which he was not unique among scholarly collectors of recipes at this time, who often prefaced their collections with an explanatory comment to that effect. Certainly Yuan also had some knowledge of cooking rather than relying completely on professionals; it is clear that he tested recipes before including them, although it seems likely that Yuan's cook actually carried out the test, perhaps under his employer's watchful eye. Other recipes Yuan found in earlier collections. Not all met with his satisfaction – he criticized Li Yu – but some he thought worthy of reproduction, such as 'Yunlin Steamed Goose', which he named for Ni Zan (Ni Yunlin) on whose recipe he based his own.

Overleaf: The Jiangnan region, with its fertile land, its network of lakes and rivers, and its relatively mild climate, is famed for the wide range of its local products, including vegetables and aquatic fare. Markets selling fresh and dried goods are a common sight throughout its cities, great and small. Today, pollution is endangering the continuation of some of the characteristic dishes of Jiangnan cuisine.







The Qianlong emperor had his portrait painted in many different guises – as warrior, connoisseur, scholar, Tibetan-Buddhist and so on – in a visual expression of his claim to universal rulership. Here he is depicted enjoying objects from his collection as he sits in a beautiful garden, in part so as to demonstrate his domination of the world of aesthetics.

How did late eighteenth-century writings on gastronomy differ from those of the late Ming? Each group of works reflected the intellectual interests of its time. The earlier books were, in effect, manuals of taste – works that established an aesthetic standard for food, taking account of issues of health and nutrition. The later works, including that of Yuan Mei, shared those goals, but added another that was derived from a movement known as ‘evidential research’ whose operating method was to seek truth from facts. Yuan and others collected recipes either from books or from chefs whose work they had sampled, and then tested them. Empirical observation and practical experimentation was a driving force of the whole project, built upon concern for eating for pleasure, good health and the reinforcement of criteria of taste.

Yuan Mei has sometimes been compared to the almost contemporary French gastronomic writer Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755–1826), whose famous *Physiology of Taste* appeared in 1825. The comparison presumably derives both from Yuan’s strong opinions about cooking and because of his insistence on the importance of gourmet knowledge. Among his many prescriptions, Yuan was adamant that cooks should always use the best-quality ingredients – he endorses some and demolishes others – rejecting anything not absolutely fresh; they should strive to achieve balance in seasoning and to respect the natural flavour of an ingredient; they should pay close attention to hygiene; use separate pans for different flavours; and pour water onto tea-leaves only when it reaches boiling point.

Yuan’s opinions extended to social behaviour and rules of etiquette. He often criticized others for departing from his standards, for instance those who judged quantity more important than quality. He once derided an eminent official at whose house he had been served expensive but, in Yuan’s opinion, completely tasteless food – in fact none other than the birds’ nests often enjoyed, presumably in more palatable form, by the Qianlong emperor. And he claims once to have begged a friend to save their relationship by never inviting him back for a meal. These criticisms demarcated his work from simple recipe collections, yet all shared an interest in researching and recording recipes based on actual practice.

Thus gastronomy in imperial China consisted of two main branches, procuring and savouring the best and rarest foods, and writing about them. One was transient, if time-consuming, while the other was more permanent; a concern for health and nutrition permeated both. Both were a normal part of a gentleman’s activities; while most food writers were also gourmets, many gourmets also wrote about food. The surviving corpus of texts on Chinese gastronomy show an uncanny resemblance to the *fan-cai* principle that ordered gastronomy itself, in that they changed along with broader intellectual trends yet retained the same core concern for flavour, health and good taste. It was a case of infinite variation within a single modular form.

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