

## Preface

When it comes to food, the Chinese have a common saying, “The masses regard food as their heaven,” which means that food is people’s primal want. This clearly demonstrates the importance of eating in Chinese people’s lives. Eating is not just meant to fill the stomach; having food at one’s disposal, being able to consume a good amount of food, and knowing what and how to eat are all viewed as indicative of good “fortune.” Those who promote food culture often use the words of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, “diet and love-making, all primal needs of every human being,” finding these an inspiring and positive basis for an epicurean



Rice fields by the Fuchun River (Photo by Miao Wang, provided by the image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)



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lifestyle. There is perhaps no other place in the world that has as great a variety of delicious fare as China.

Extremely developed culinary techniques can make seemingly inedible ingredients to foreign eyes into dish after dish of delicious treats at the hands of Chinese chefs. The Chinese cookbook contains quite an extensive list of foods, including just about anything edible, with very few taboos. The Chinese have not only created various kinds of regional food styles in their own vast lands, but have also spread Chinese food culture far across the seas. Today, when even the farthest corners of the world can seem as close as one's back yard, Chinese food can be enjoyed in each and every metropolitan area throughout the world.

Like many other countries with a vast territory, Chinese cuisines are differentiated largely by northern and southern regional tastes. Although the best quality rice in China is grown in its northeastern regions, people in those regions prefer to eat noodles or pastry. In the north, classic dishes include Beijing's lamb hotpot and Peking



Vegetable sections in supermarkets supplying all kinds of fresh seasonal vegetables. (Photo by Huiming Shi , provided by Imagechina)



roast duck, and Shandong province's Lu-style cuisines. In the south, the principal sources of carbohydrates and dietary fibers are rice-based. A greater variety of dishes is found in the south. There you can find the hot and heavily spiced Chuan (Sichuan) food, Xiang (Hunan) food, sweet and delicate Huaiyang cuisine and the Yue (Cantonese) style, which features seafood and soups. Visitors to China are often pleasantly surprised by the great differences in taste and food types between regions.

Having Chinese food not only indulges people's sense of taste, the sense of sight is also entertained. The Chinese culinary arts rely on the canon of "color (aesthetic beauty), aroma and taste," missing any one element would not make a good dish. To make the food pleasing to the eye, usually the appropriate meat and non-meat ingredients are selected; it should include a single main ingredient and two or three secondary ingredients of different colors. Green, red, yellow, white, black and brown colors are to be mixed in the right combinations. Through proper cooking techniques, aestheticism in food is achieved. "Aroma" is achieved by using the right spices, such as scallions, ginger, garlic, cooking wine, aniseed, cassia bark, black pepper, sesame oil, shiitake mushrooms and so on, to stimulate the appetite with the aroma from the cooked food. When preparing food, techniques such as frying, stir-frying, roasting, steaming, deep-frying, quick-frying and simmering are put to use, with the goal of preserving the natural taste and juices of the food. One can also add the right amounts of soy sauce, sugar, vinegar, spices, spicy pepper and other seasonings, making the dishes taste salty, sweet,

#### A Scholar's Understanding of Diet before the Qin Dynasty

The Pre-Qin period was a time of great turmoil and change in Chinese society, but it produced a number of great thinkers who were to have a deep and long-lasting influence. With regard to systematic reflections on drinking and eating, Mozi, Laozi and Confucius are typical in their different ways. Mozi had a very simple lifestyle. He advocated mutual assistance in society and active engagement in agricultural production, and thought that people should not eat unless they also toiled. He suggested that people should get only the food that their stomachs could hold and only the clothes that would cover their bodies: "When it comes to food, there should be no more than suffices to replenish one's energy and fill the empty spaces; all that is required is to strengthen the body and satisfy the stomach." He thought that people should live frugally and moderately and serve society. Laozi drew attention explicitly to the importance of food and drink to self cultivation: "Those who would regulate the body and nourish the spirit must be sparing in their sleeping and resting and moderate in their eating and drinking." He advocated purifying the heart and reducing one's desires, and knowing how to be content. His view of life emphasized spiritual cultivation and indifference to material things. Confucius integrated eating and drinking practices into his ritual system. His widely quoted saying "There is no reason to reject the most carefully selected rice and the finest of chopped meat" is a call to ritual propriety not to luxury. These words had a great influence on the intellectuals of later times.



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Dining rooms with antiques and imitation imperial dishes bind culture and cuisine together. (Photo by Yu Shen, provided by Imagechina)





Detail from the New Year's painting *Abundance & Harvests in Successive Years*, which shows people's best wishes at the beginning of the New Year. (Collected by Shucun Wang)

sour, hot and much more. Using tomatoes, turnips, cucumbers and other sculptural vegetables to create elegant and intricate decorations on the plate, and exquisite fine china for dining ware, Chinese cuisines become a true art form.

Westerners often rely on calculating calories and cholesterol content from food to maintain good health and fitness. The Japanese are known for trying various health foods to preserve an everlasting youth. Different from both, the Chinese way of looking at health lies in its philosophy of "food and medicine sharing the same roots." The firm belief that food has healing powers and therapeutic effects has led to the introduction of many edible plants and herbs. And with the benefits of disease prevention and health preservation, they have become regular dishes in Chinese homes. At the same time, there is the pursuit of refinement in cooking. The amount of food and mixing of ingredients is essential, and it is recommended that meats and



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non-meats be used in combination. Whether making dishes or soups, foods with suitable nutritional contents are put in combination so as to achieve the goal of balanced nutritional intake. And it is recommended to dine until the stomach is about 70% to 80% full, as this practice is passed down the generations as a secret to long life.

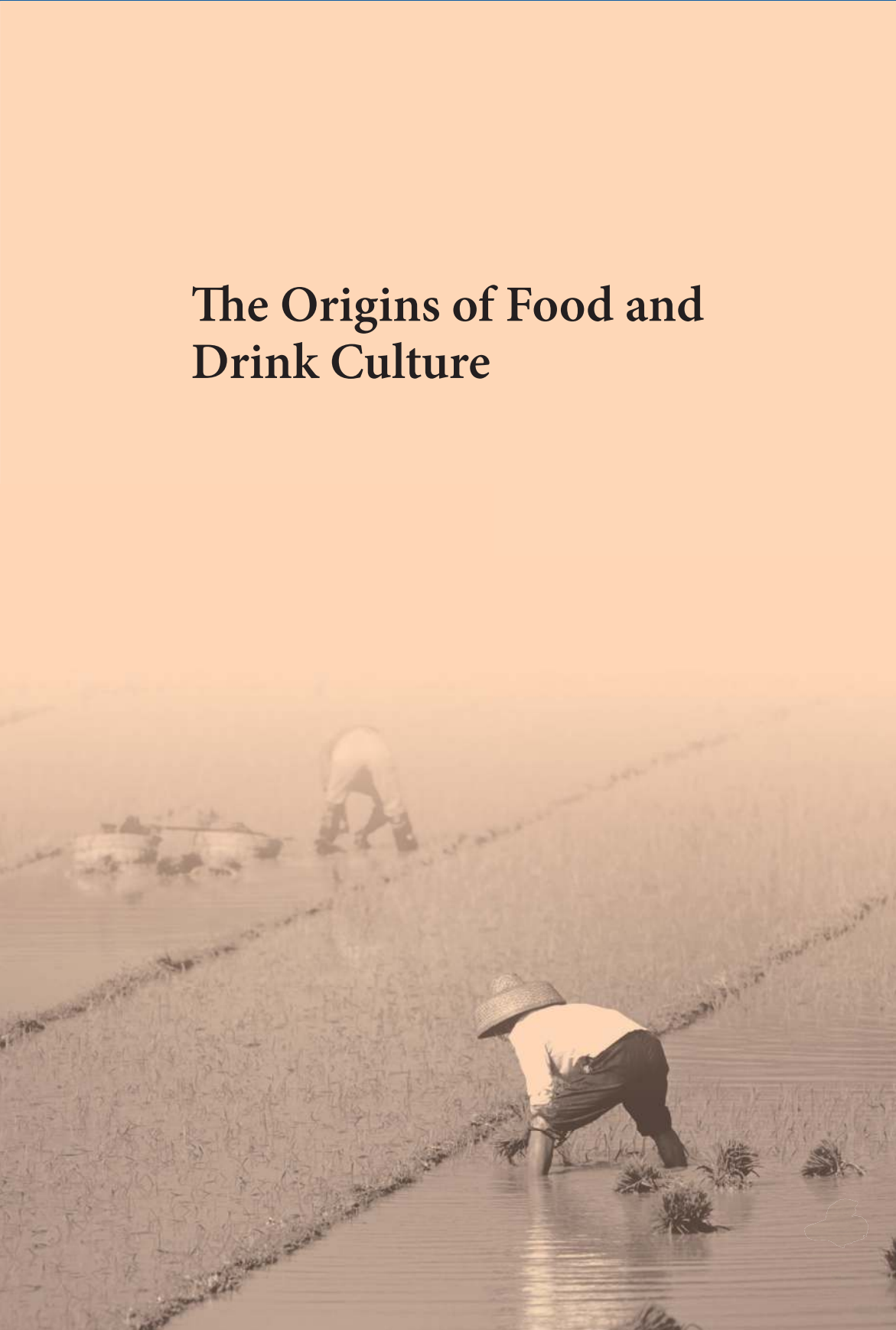
At the dinner table, the Chinese have their own set of manners and customs. When dining, the diner must be seated. When people of all ages and both sexes sit at the same table, the elderly must be seated with priority. One must eat food held with chopsticks; when having soup, a soup spoon must be used. There should be no noise when eating. These rules of etiquette have continued to this day, the biggest change being the fact that more and more Chinese have proactively given up the rule of “No talking when eating.” Indeed, when dining in China, one would frequently encounter a dining environment full of chatter and noise. Many people who have their mouths full still intend to chat away. This phenomenon may be due to the fact that contemporary Chinese people have come to consider dining as an important social opportunity. People need to relax and talk about various topics to increase understanding between those sitting at the table. In recent years, because of the accelerated development of industries and commerce, aside from traditional menu-ordered food services, Chinese fast foods have entered the scene. And not only this, cuisines from every corner of the world have, one after another, made their grand appearances in all major cities in China: Italian pizza, French gourmet, Japanese sushi, American burgers, German beers, Brazilian barbeque, Indian curry, Swiss cheese and more. Anything one can think of can be found, an all-inclusive list of dining choices. The saying “Eat in China” is even more justified today.



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# The Origins of Food and Drink Culture



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2,500 years ago, mountain residents in southern China invented a technique to turn rough mountain lands into fertile lands. They drew mountain spring water to irrigate and grew rice in terraces. This picture shows the terraces reclaimed by people of the Zhuang nationality in Guilin. (Photo by Guanghui Xie, provided by the image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)





## Tracing the Origins of Foods

It has been said that the reason that great differences exist between the eating habits of various regions of the world is the result of a multitude of factors, including variations in ecological environment, the level of population and level of productivity. Most meat dishes are from areas where population density is relatively low and the soil is either not needed or unable to sustain agriculture. In comparison, a dietary habit of mainly grain, and plants' roots, stems and leaves is usually associated with an environment where supply cannot meet demand. The food supply in these places is more dependent on sustenance farming. But with migration of people on a global scale, dietary traditions that were once fixed to a region might now be accepted and adopted by more and more people; and the original regional dietary habit evolves to contain new elements. People can see from ancient Chinese food culture the footprints of the common development of humankind.

China is one originating source of agriculture. The Chinese invented methods of irrigation very early, building canals and using sloped land to develop agriculture by irrigation, as well as other means of farming. As early as 5,400 BC, the Yellow River region already saw growth of foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*, also called foxtail bristleglass or broomcorn millet), and had already adopted the method of crop storage in underground caves. By 4,800 BC, areas along the Yangtze River had been planted with rice (the earliest "rice" pertains to the glutinous types of rice only). Since entering the agricultural age, the Chinese have formed a diet composed of grains as the principal food and meats as supplement, and this tradition has continued to this day.

An ancient piece of writing in China has survived by the title of *Huangdi Neijing*, or *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*. It describes the food composition of the Chinese diet thus: "The Five Grains as life support, the Five Fruits as complimentary aide, the Five Meats as added benefits, and the Five Vegetables as substantial fill." The



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grains, fruits and vegetables are all plant foods. Grain crops in ancient times were referred to as “The Five Grains” or “The Six Grains,” and usually consisted of *shu* (broomcorn millet, sometimes referred to as “yellow rice,” a small glutinous yellow grain), *ji* (what we call millet today, which had the title of “Head of the Five Grains”) - *shu* and *ji* were the principal cereals of Northern China at that time - *mai* (including barley and wheat), *dou* (the general term for all pod-bearing crops growing in wet lowland areas, the main source of protein for the Chinese), *ma* (the edible type of hemp, which was the principal food for farmers in ancient times), and *dao* (rice). The *shu* and *ji* are both indigenous to China, and were introduced to Europe in prehistoric times. Rice and wheat are not native to the north of China. It is generally thought that the origins of rice are to be found in South China, India and South East Asia. In the sites of the Chinese Neolithic Hemudu Culture (5000—3000 BC), archaeologists have found the world’s earliest



Drying crops in the sun on rooftops is a common tradition in the countryside of southern China. (Photo by Xiaoming Feng, provided by the image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)

