Cambridge Elements

Elements in the Archaeology of Food
edited by
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FOOD IN ANCIENT CHINA

Yitzchak Jaffe
University of Haifa
Food in Ancient China

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DOI: 10.1017/9781009408370
First published online: December 2023

Yitzchak Jaffe
University of Haifa

Author for correspondence: Yitzchak Jaffe, yjaffe@univ.haifa.ac.il

Abstract: This Element provides an overview of food and foodways in Ancient China, from Homo sapiens (around 50 KYA) up to its historical beginnings: the foundation of the Zhou dynasty (at the start of the first millennium BCE). While textual data provide insights on food and diet during China’s historical periods, archaeological data are the main source for studying the deep past and reconstructing what people ate, how they ate and with whom. This Element introduces the plants and animals that formed the building blocks of ancient diets and cuisines, as well as how they created localized lifeways and unifying constructs across Ancient China. Foodways – how food is grown, prepared and consumed – were central in the development of differing social, economic and political realities, as they shaped ritual and burial practices, differentiated ethnic groups, solidified community ties and deepened or assuaged social inequalities.

Keywords: food, China, ancient, archaeology, Chinese

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ISBNs: 9781009475808 (HB), 9781009408387 (PB), 9781009408370 (OC)
ISSNs: 2754-2971 (online), 2754-2963 (print)
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