

STUDENT'S CORNER

Gastronomic Traditions and Eating Habits in the Far East

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ABSTRACT

One of the little known and mysterious regions of the world in the eyes of Western people is the Far East. Most have a very hazy and unclear view of this region's culture, nations, languages, religions and cuisine. Focusing on the local gastronomy of the countries of the Far East, this article aims to clear some wide-spread myths and misconceptions regarding Asian food and Asian people and offer a clear and impartial description of the regional cuisine and culture to potential tourist and curious Westerners alike. The current paper will offer its readers concise descriptions of dishes, beverages, restaurants and elements of history and local culture of China and other countries of the Far East. Furthermore, it will point out some of the more unusual features of the local eating habits and attempt a brief comparison between Eastern and Western cuisine.

KEYWORDS: Gastronomy, China, Japan, Far East, Cuisine, Food, Beverages

JEL Classification I12, L66, L83, N70, N95

Introduction

One of the most defining elements of a country, region or culture is its cuisine. Food represents a powerful part of the identity of a nation, region or people. For example, the image of France has often been strongly associated with that of food and wines and images of food products, vineyards and restaurants have traditionally dominated national and regional promotional strategies and tour operators' brochures alike².

Until not that long ago the role of food in the in the marketing of destinations has received very little attention globally and locally or has simply been ignored. But in the last decades the role of this part of human culture has started to receive much attention from tourism and marketing specialists all over the world. Among others, local cuisines greatly contribute to enhancing sustainability in tourism, increasing the authenticity of the destination, strengthening the local economy, providing for the environmentally friendly infrastructure³ and last but not least raising awareness among tourists regarding the cultural richness of a region.

Studies of local cuisine and its influence in tourism has indeed advanced a lot in the last few decades. Steven Boyne, Derek Hall and Fiona Williams have gone as far as constructing a theoretical taxonomy of consumers. This taxonomy classifies consumers according to the level of importance of food and gastronomy in their destination decision-making processes. Four categories have been proposed: Types I, II, III and IV⁴. For *Type I* tourists, gastronomy is the most important or one of the most important elements of a holiday, while *Type IV* tourists have no interest whatsoever in the local gastronomies of the regions they visit. The vast majority of tourists are in the intermediary categories

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² Frochet, Isabelle, *An Analysis of Regional Positioning and Its Associated Food Images in French Tourism Regional Brochures*, Université de Savoie, Chambéry, 2003

³ Du Rand, G., *The Role of Local and Regional Food in Destination Marketing: A South African Situation Analysis*, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 2003

⁴ Boyne, S., *Policy, Support and Promotion for Food-Related Tourism Initiatives: A Marketing Approach to Regional Development*, Scottish Agricultural College, Ayr, 2003

Type II and *Type III*, while the fewest fall into the *Type IV* category. This very simple example goes to prove that food is a part of tourist science that certainly deserves great attention.

This article aims to analyze the gastronomic traditions and eating habits of a region of the world which is not so well known to Westerners: the Far East. The food eaten by the people of this region is not only very diverse, but also one of the healthiest in the world. Another aim of this article is to destroy some myths and stereotypes which are wide-spread among Europeans and Americans and thus help potential travelers to region to better understand the local culture.

What is the Far East?

We will start by delimitating the geographic boundaries of the Far East. Many Westerners tend to think that the terms “Far East” and “China” are one and the same. This is not true. Even though China, with its 1.3 billion people, is the biggest country in the region, it is not the only one. The other countries of the Far East are: Japan, North and South Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines. The people of these countries belong to distinct ethnic groups and speak languages very different from Chinese and are often offended by the fact that foreigners minimize these differences.

Do the Chinese really eat nothing but rice?

This confusion does not apply only to the people, but also to the local cuisine. Although some similarities exist, there are numerous differences in the cuisine of each of the region’s countries. One of the Western preconceptions about Chinese cuisine is that it consists almost entirely of rice. It is true that rice is one of the basic ingredients, but saying that rice is the only ingredient used is simply an exaggeration. Most side dishes do indeed use rice as a basic ingredient but the main courses use all kinds of meat. Rice can be served with vegetables, fruit, bamboo, fish, sea food and/or other spices. In the north of China rice shares the role of main cereal ingredient with wheat. One possible cause for this is the limited possibility of cultivating rice in that part of the country because of the colder climate.

The number of dishes in the Chinese cuisine is very big. We can make an idea about the diversity of the Chinese cuisine by looking into the menu of a Chinese restaurant. A typical authentic Chinese restaurant from Romania or any other part of Europe allows its customers to choose from more than 200 dishes. These dishes can be split into seven categories:

- *Huo guo* (火锅⁵ – lit.: „pot dishes” – soups with an elevated meat content);
- *Geng tang* (羹汤 – vegetable soups);
- *Dim sum* (点心 – also called *dianxin*; appetizers that usually come in the form of different types of food wrapped in a thin crust that resembles bread; they can be served cold – these typically use pork and fish as a basic ingredient – or hot – these typically use chicken, porc, rice and wood ears⁶ as a basic ingredient);
- Salads (based on vegetables, fish and sea food);
- Rice dishes (including various types of rice noodles);
- Main courses (based on chicken, beef, pork, mutton, duck, tofu, vegetables, fish, sea food and game meat);
- Deserts (fruit – fresh, fried or caramelized).

⁵ The original Chinese names that appear in this article and are written in simplified characters. The transliterations in the Latin alphabet are in the Mandarin dialect are done using the *Pinyin* system. The original Japanese names are given in the *Kanji* writing system and the Mongolian ones are given in Mongolian Cyrillic.

⁶ A type of fungus that grows in areas with continental and sub-tropical climate, very popular in Chinese cuisine. Binomial name: *Auricularia auricula-judae*. Also known as *jelly ears* or *Jew’s ears*.

The most common cooking methods in the Chinese cuisine are boiling and frying. We will continue the article with the presentation of a few of the most well-known and common Chinese dishes⁷. Some of these can be found in other countries in the region such as Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand or Vietnam.

- Beijing rice: fried rice with pieces of omelette, minced pork meat and soy sauce;
- Bamboo soup: contains bamboo, onion and beef;
- Chinese sautéed eggplant: contains eggplant, tomatoes, onion, garlic, soy sauce, bamboo and wine;
- Spring rolls: small pieces of pork meat, carrots, onion, bamboo, rice noodles, cabbage and spices wrapped in a crispy crust;
- Hainan salad: mushrooms, wood ears, algae, chili, soy sauce, vinegar and wine;
- Gong Bao chicken: chicken meat with peanuts, carrots, mushrooms, soy sauce, onion, garlic and chili;
- Five colors chicken: chicken meat with carrots, wood ears, bamboo, onion, tomatoes and garlic;
- Chicken in love: minced pork meat with peas, onion, garlic, soy sauce, sugar, pepper and chili sauce;
- Beef with mushrooms: beef, mushrooms, bamboo, garlic, soy sauce and wine;
- Shanghai chicken: chicken meat in a crust similar to the one of the Wiener Schnitzel;
- Fried pork: pork with wood ears, carrots, chili, onion, tomatoes, soy sauce and garlic.

Apart from the usual dishes, available everywhere in China and in many other parts of the world, there are also certain local specialties. Some of these are:

- Peking Duck (北京烤鸭 – *Beijing kaoya*): a duck left to grow freely for 45 days and forcibly fed for 20 days, cooked in an oven; the best part of this specialty is considered to be the crunchy skin;
- Wonton (also called *huntun* – 馄饨): rice noodles with cabbage, chicken, pork, onion, garlic and wood ears; this original Hong Kong dish can be served either as a soup or as a main course;
- Boiled mutton (涮羊肉 – *shuai yangrou*): mutton boiled in a special way with tofu, soy, cabbage, carrots and garlic; originally from Manchuria, this dish is served in restaurants in a small pot located above a small flame.

Another fairly wide-spread preconception is that all the dishes in the Chinese cuisine are “very spicy”. It is true that there are a lot of dishes which, by Romanian and European standards really can be considered very spicy, but this is definitely not the only flavor used in China⁸. Spicy foods are traditionally eaten in northern China and in the mountainous areas of the south, where winters are cold and harsh. The spiciest Chinese dishes are considered to be those of Sichuan province, which feasts this description.

Beverages of the Far East

Regarding drinks, it is a well-known fact that China is the birthplace of tea. This drink has been exported to neighboring countries such as Japan and India, and from the former, which is an ex-British colony it has reached England and then the rest of Europe. It is believed that tea has appeared in the time of emperor Shennong, who reigned over 5000 years ago⁹. According to a legend, tea has been discovered accidentally when a gust of wind blew some leaves into a pot of water that was boiling in the imperial kitchen. The most popular types of tea in China are green tea, black tea (which is called

⁷ *** <http://www.templulsoarelui.ro/>, <http://www.wuxing.ro/>, retrieved December 8, 2012

⁸ Elisseeff, Danielle, *Istoria Chinei*, Ed. Lucman, Bucharest, 2007

⁹ Buzatu, I., *Istoria Chinei și a civilizației chineze. România și China*, Editura Uranus, Bucharest, 2009

hong cha «红茶» in Chinese, which is actually literally translated as “red tea”) and jasmine tea. For the latter there is a preparation method which involves boiling a whole jasmine flower in a transparent glass and as the water boils the flower gradually opens its petals.

As for alcoholic drinks, these too have been produced for thousands of years in China. There are two types of spirits in China: *baijiu* (白酒 – distilled drinks) and *huangjiu* (黄酒 – fermented drinks). The most popular type of *baijiu* is called *Maotai Jiu* (茅台酒), a beverage that has its origins in Renhai city, Guizhou province. The alcohol content is 45% and depending on the age, one bottle can be quite expensive. Drinks similar to *Maotai Jiu* are *sake* (日本酒) and *shochu* (烧酎) in Japan and *soju* (소주) in Korea. One of the most well-known types of *huangjiu* is *Shaoxing Jiu* (绍兴酒). The alcohol content of most of these drinks is around 20%, which is significantly lower than the ones mentioned before. Wine has been around in China for more than 2000 years, but industrial production began only in the 19th century, as the European influence started to rise in the Far East. The biggest wine producer today in China is *Great Wall Wine* (长城酒 – *Changcheng Jiu*). The same thing stands for beer. The most well-known Chinese beer producer is *Tsingtao* (also spelled *Qingdao* – 青岛), which has its origins in the city with the same name from Shandong province.

The myth according to which Asians have a low alcohol tolerance or “get drunk fast” is only partly true. To be more exact, it is true only in the case of Japanese people. According to a study by the Beckman Research Institute from Duarte, California¹⁰, from 1988, the bodies of 90% of Japanese males lack an enzyme that helps process alcohol, which leads to a significantly lower tolerance of alcohol than Caucasians or even other Asian people. The bodies of most Japanese women on the other hand, do have this enzyme and therefore they have a normal alcohol tolerance level.

Chinese cuisine outside China

As we mentioned earlier in the article, many of the Chinese dishes, including the ones described here, are also found elsewhere in the Far East. Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, are no exception to this. The eating habits of these two countries are strongly influenced by the Chinese cuisine. However there is a notable difference: the lack of pork. This is due to the fact that the vast majority of Malaysians and Indonesians practice Islam, which forbids its followers from consuming pork and alcohol.

Apart from soup, most dishes in the Far East are traditionally eaten with chopsticks. These are a pair of vertical sticks of equal length (around 20 cm), which should be held with one hand. Only one of the chopsticks is mobile. That one is used to grab the food and is maneuvered with the pointer and the middle finger. In order to facilitate the consumption of food with chopsticks, all types of dishes are cut into small pieces. Chopsticks can be made of wood (usually bamboo), plastic, metal and sometimes ivory. For reason relating to environmental protection, the Chinese government is trying to discourage the use of wooden chopsticks although these are the easiest to use ones¹¹. In Antiquity and in the Middle Ages silver chopsticks were very popular among Chinese nobles because it was believed that their color would turn to black when they went into contact with certain types of poison. Kim Jong-il, the former supreme leader of North Korea used silver chopsticks for the same reason.

There are a few principles of etiquette regarding the use of chopsticks:

- Chopsticks should be used solely for eating, not for making gestures, noise or for playing at the table;
- It is not acceptable to use chopsticks to move entire bowls of food;
- Chopsticks should only be used for grabbing food, not for spearing it, except in the case of bread and meatballs;

¹⁰ Shibuya, A., *Genotypes of alcohol-metabolizing enzymes in Japanese with alcohol liver diseases*, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1715547/>, retrieved December 8, 2012

¹¹ *** http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-12/01/content_14193294.htm, retrieved December 7, 2012

- It is poor etiquette to tap chopsticks on the edge of one's bowl; beggars make this noise to attract attention;
- Chopsticks should not be left vertically stuck into a bowl of rice because this greatly resembles the ritual of incense-burning, which is common in Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist funerals;
- Food should not be transferred from one set of chopsticks to another.
- Chopsticks should not be bitten on and should not be dipped into the soup bowl or used to pick up contents from the soup bowl.

The only notable exception from the use of chopsticks in the Far East is Mongolia. Traditionally, Mongolian dishes are traditionally eaten with the bear hands. This habit is undoubtedly related to the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Mongolian people. Even today, about one third of the population leads a nomadic life. Mongolian dishes are quite different from those of other countries in the Far East¹². The ingredients used include horse, beef, sheep and goat meat, dairy products and animal fat. The use of vegetables, fruit and spices is limited. *Buuz* (бууз), *khuushuur* (хуушуур) and *bansh* (банш) are Mongolian dishes consisting of boiled mutton, beef and horse meat. A traditional Mongolian desert is *boortsog* (боопсор), which is similar to Romanian *gogoși*, Hungarian *lángos* and Turkish *lokma*.

But luckily for European and American tourists who may not be familiar with the use of chopsticks, today most restaurants in China and other chopsticks-using countries also have knives and forks. In the Far East, Western-styled knives and forks were first introduced in Malaysia and Indonesia, as these were the first areas in that part of the world that became British, Dutch or Portuguese colonies.

Restaurants – tradition and modernity

There are several differences between Western restaurants and restaurants in the Far East. Tables with more than four seats are round and they have a sizeable glass wheel in the middle. Each customer chooses one or two dishes from the menu and when they are ready, the waiters place them on that glass wheel. This allows every person seated at a table to sample all of the dishes that have been ordered.

Another type of restaurant that stands out is *kaiten-sushi* (回転寿司), which is very wide-spread in Japan. These restaurants almost exclusively serve *sushi* (寿司), a broad category of dishes consisting of fish – raw or cooked – with vegetables, soy, vegetables, spices and rice. Tables in these restaurants can accommodate 10 to 30 people and customers are seated on bar stools. One or more conveyor belts that carry bowls of sushi wind through all the tables in the restaurant. Customers may place special orders, but most simply pick their selections from a steady stream of fresh sushi moving along the conveyor belt. The final bill is based on the number and type of plates of the consumed sushi. Most often the chef prepares the sushi in the very same room where the customers serve their meals.

During the last few decades the fast-food phenomenon has extended into the countries of the Far East as well. The first McDonald's and KFC restaurants in Japan and South Korea appeared in the 70's. In the PRC and Vietnam they appeared later, in the second half of the 90's. Even though the products sold in these fast-food restaurants are the same as everywhere else on the planet, some of them have been slightly altered and were given a more local flavor¹³. For example, the chicken-based products are a lot spicier in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam than in the US and Europe. Also, in China and Vietnam KFC has surpassed McDonald's in terms of popularity and number of restaurants, which is rare in other parts of the world.

¹² *** <http://www.mongolfood.info/en/>, retrieved December 8, 2012

¹³ *** <http://www.businessinsider.com/kfc-facing-competition-in-china-2012-10>, retrieved December 8, 2012

How China came to dominate Far Eastern food

After an overview of the cuisine of the Far East, even a person without any knowledge of the region would realize that the national cuisines of the entire region are heavily influenced by China. There are two possible explanations for this. Ever since ancient times, the dominant nation of the region has been China. Therefore, many parts of the Chinese culture were imported by other Far Eastern nations. These cultural imports have not been restricted only to Chinese dishes and the habit of eating with chopsticks. For thousands of years many of the region's peoples have kept their written records using Chinese ideographic characters¹⁴. In Korea the Chinese writing system was not replaced by the *Hangul* alphabet until the late 18th century. The Vietnamese gave up the Chinese writing system in favor of the Latin alphabet only at the end of the 19th century. The Japanese used almost the exact same writing system as the Chinese until 1946, when a major reform of the writing system took place. There are Chinese influences in the spoken languages of these people too, but on a much smaller scale.

Another explanation for the Chinese influence in the region's cuisines is the very presence ethnic Chinese minorities in these countries. Chinese people form a majority of the population in the PRC, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and Singapore¹⁵. There are also significant Chinese minorities in the following countries: Malaysia 23%, Thailand 11%, Cambodia 9%, Burma 3%, Indonesia 2%, Vietnam 2%, South Korea and Japan 1%.

Western food vs. Eastern food

We have already established the fact that the cuisine of the Far East shows great diversity. Not only this, but it is also healthy, perhaps healthier than the one in the Western World. An easy way to prove this is by analyzing the average life expectancies, which are among the highest in the world, several countries exceeding the threshold of 80. For example: Macau – 84,4 years, Japan – 82,6 years, Singapore – 82,1 years, Hong Kong – 82 years¹⁶. These four countries and dependencies are the first four on the CIA's world list of average life expectancies.

These high values are certainly related to the people's diet. In the case of the Japanese, which rank second in this list, their cuisine has two main features: the abundance of fish, sea food and vegetables and moderation. Every Westerner who travels to Japan will notice that portions served in Japanese restaurants are quite small. This moderation may be one of the keys to their longevity. However, one other possible explanation for this moderation may be the average size of the Japanese, who are small people, compared to Caucasians.

Conclusion

By doing this analysis of the Far Eastern cuisine we have managed to demonstrate the statements made in the article's introduction. We took a small glance at the variety of the local cuisines of the Far East and even though we have barely scratched the surface, the diversity and complexity are more than obvious. Also, by analyzing the region's average life expectancies and by pointing out some of the general features of the local gastronomy have also demonstrated that the Far Eastern cuisine is healthier than the Western cuisine. Finally, some myths and misconceptions about Asian food and Asian people have been clarified. Summing up all of these, we can say that this article is a useful tool for tourists who want to travel to the Far East without any knowledge of the region. Not only this, but it can help open the eyes of anyone interested in getting a clear view of the region's culture and people.

In order to draw a final conclusion to this short analysis we can say that a visit to the Far East can only be beneficial to a person from another part of the world and can greatly help to broaden one's horizons.

¹⁴ McNaughton, W., *Reading and Writing Chinese. Simplified Character Edition*, Tuttle Language Library, North Clarendon, VT, 2005

¹⁵ *** <http://www.ocac.gov.tw/english/public/public.asp?selno=1163&no=1163&level=B>, retrieved December 7, 2012

¹⁶ *** <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2102rank.html> retrieved December 8, 2012

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