FUCHSIA DUNLOP

Invitation to a Banquet

THE STORY OF CHINESE FOOD

'A brilliant, passionate and spellbinding tour de force'
CLAUDIA RODEN

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INVITATION TO A BANQUET

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Tom Miller, *Spectator*

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‘In 30 years of exploring and documenting the country, Fuchsia Dunlop has done for China what Elizabeth David did for Mediterranean food and Claudia Roden did for the Middle East’
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‘Fuchsia Dunlop is one of the world’s foremost authorities on Chinese cuisine . . . Each chapter treats the reader to a wealth of information about Chinese food and history. Dunlop’s storytelling is superb . . . *Invitation to a Banquet* captures China’s venerable tradition of mindful eating in vivid detail. As such, it will inspire readers to reflect on their own relationship to one of life’s greatest pleasures’
Miranda Brown, *Literary Review*

‘An authoritative new book . . . Dunlop makes a compelling case for the superiority of Chinese cuisine, but in a delighted and expansive rather than a chauvinistic way’
Economist

‘A vivid account of China’s food culture, going back to its mythical past to trace the diversity of flavours, textures and techniques that blossomed in the millennia that followed’ Andrew Irwin, *TLS*

‘Incredible insights into understanding and eating Chinese food. It’s a mammoth subject matter, one that Dunlop herself admits should take three generations to fully understand. She has spent almost three decades now immersed in Chinese food, exploring, eating, cooking, writing and researching, and this book is the result of that. The stories are told through a banquet of 30 dishes, delving into the ingredients, history, folklore and cultural elements of each dish. This is a book that will leave you hungry in more ways than one’ Ali Dunworth, *Irish Times*, Books of the Year

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'This is a book to sit on your bedside table for late night reading. It's a stunning history and exploration of Chinese food, through the ingredients, recipes and techniques that have lead to it being one of the world's most widely enjoyed cuisines. Fuchsia's writing is almost poetic, and each chapter is a real love letter to its subject, whether it's discussing the recipe for perfect steamed rice or the waxing lyrical about the importance of the soybean' *Good Housekeeping*

'A landmark love letter to Chinese food' *Mail on Sunday*

'Written in lively prose and with a sensitivity to the emotional content of food in culture, [the book] offers a whistle-stop tour of Chinese cuisine . . . Taking in everything from the right consistency of rice to the ideal texture of chicken testicles, it's a lip-smacking read' Alec Ash, *China Books Review*

'For Dunlop, the banquet in question is not only the sensory aspects of Chinese dishes that she covers in detail, describing the cooking techniques, ingredients, smells, sounds and tastes, but also the conversations that this cuisine can inspire. . . . Dunlop has once again shown her work as an ambassador of Chinese cooking, looking to explore it in a way that showcases the people and dishes that have intrigued her since she moved to China, and in turn encourage readers to explore the cuisine as well' Korsha Wilson, *Food & Wine*

'As a young Chinese food writer, Fuchsia Dunlop's books were my Harry Potter. She introduced me to the vibrant, expansive, magical world of Chinese gastronomy beyond the four walls of my Cantonese home. Next to my parents, there's no person I've learned more about the cooking of my people than Fuchsia Dunlop. *Invitation to a Banquet* just might be her magnum opus: the richest English-language accounting of China's culinary history I've ever read. I'm grateful this magnificent book exists' Kevin Pang, author of *A Very Chinese Cookbook*

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‘There are cooks who write and writers who cook, but very few succeed in blending both arts to perfection in the way Fuchsia Dunlop does. The flavours arising from these pages are sprinkled with insight and experience, its narrative is infused with anecdote and historical depth. This book is the perfect dish for anyone curious about the story of Chinese cuisine and a joy for those among us simply in need of food for thought’ Professor Roel Sterckx, author of *Chinese Thought*

‘Fuchsia understands Chinese cuisine better than any other foreigner I know’ Chen Xiaoqing, director of *Flavorful Origins*, *A Bite Of China* and *Once Upon A Bite*

‘Fuchsia Dunlop’s expertise in Chinese cuisine is both remarkable and enlightening. She has devoted her life to intricately intertwining China’s rich history with its culinary traditions, making significant contributions in sharing this delicious knowledge. *Invitation to a Banquet* offers a captivating glimpse into Chinese culture, served as a mouthwatering feast. Indeed, there’s no better way to understand a culture than through its food, and Fuchsia captures this notion with mastery’ René Redzepi, co-owner and chef of noma

‘How the scales fall away from the eyes reading this masterpiece. *Invitation to a Banquet* enthrals as it enlightens as it delights. Fuchsia Dunlop has a way with words and cooking quite unique and mesmerising. I have had to put the book down only out of necessity and wish only that instead of mounting a bicycle headed to work, I had boarded a train bound for China, book in hand, with a blanket, chopsticks and a hamper brimming with dishes prepared by Fuchsia’ Jeremy Lee, author of *Cooking*

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‘One of our very finest chroniclers of food cultures, I want to read everything Fuchsia Dunlop writes’ Caroline Eden, author of *Red Sands*

‘Any book by Fuchsia Dunlop is cause for celebration, but this one is very special. Heartfelt and beautifully researched, *Invitation to a Banquet* serves up an entirely new way to enjoy Chinese food. It is a gift to everyone who ever picked up chopsticks’ Ruth Reichl

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fuchsia Dunlop was the first Westerner to train as a chef at the Sichuan Higher Institute of Cuisine, and has been travelling around China, researching and cooking Chinese food, for some thirty years. Her award-winning and bestselling books include *The Food of Sichuan*, *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper*, *Every Grain of Rice* and *Land of Fish and Rice*, several of which are now published in translation in China. Based in London, she speaks, reads and writes Chinese.

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FUCHSIA DUNLOP

Invitation to a Banquet

The Story of Chinese Food

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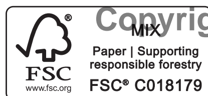

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PROLOGUE

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糖醋肉球

A Kind of Chinese Food

sweet-and-sour pork balls / tangcu rouqiu

In 1994, I went to live in China as a scholarship student at Sichuan University. Ostensibly I was in Chengdu for academic purposes, but I had since early childhood been more interested in food and cooking than anything else, and I quickly abandoned my classes and threw myself into informal study of the local cuisine. After finishing my year at the university, I stayed on in Chengdu and was invited to enrol as a student at the famous local cooking school, the Sichuan Higher Institute of Cuisine – an invitation I readily accepted.

It's funny how small, impulsive decisions can end up shaping one's life and destiny. My original motivation for training as a Chinese chef had simply been a love of cooking, and a desire to spend longer in a city that had reeled me in like a fish. But my exploration of Sichuanese food, and of Chinese cuisine more generally, eventually consumed me and, unlikely though it would have seemed at the start, became a career.

Since those early days in Chengdu, I have travelled widely in China, spent time in kitchens and on farms, visited museums, read a great deal and talked to many Chinese people, both expert and amateur, about food and cooking. Equally importantly, I have eaten more extraordinary ingredients and dishes than I could ever have imagined possible. It is this that has been my real education – to taste, taste, and taste again, to sample the flavours of the different regions, to experience some of the infinite permutations of Chinese cuisine, to

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see what the theories and descriptions and legends and recipes mean in practice, in the mouth and on the tongue. A martial artist or a musician only learns through practice; it's the same for a professional eater.

They say it takes three generations to become a Chinese gourmet. I have had only one life so far, as a neophyte who arrived in China in my early twenties, but I have been privileged to cram into the last two or three decades a greater gastronomic education than anyone could hope for in several lifetimes. This privilege is entirely thanks to the generosity of my Chinese friends and teachers, not to mention many strangers and casual acquaintances all over the country, who have patiently fed me and talked to me and ultimately transformed my barbarian palate.

Of course, when I first went to live in China, the idea of Chinese food wasn't entirely new to me. The occasional Chinese meal had been a small but memorable part of my childhood. Like many other westerners of the last two or three generations, I grew up with Chinese food – after a fashion.

We open the brown paper bag with a rustle and tip out the golden spheres, still piping hot and alluringly fragrant, crisp batter enclosing nuggets of tender pork. With them comes a white polystyrene cup filled with a clear, bright-red syrup: sweet-and-sour sauce. My sister and I are beside ourselves with excitement. A Chinese takeaway is a rare treat, a change from our mother's usual home-cooked food and a chance to mess around with chopsticks. Those stacked foil containers, exhaling the scents of soy sauce and ginger. A set of dishes: prawn chop suey, chicken with tinned bamboo shoots, chunky chow mein threaded with beansprouts, floppy pancake rolls stuffed with more beansprouts, egg-fried rice. It is all delicious, but no dish pleases us more than the sweet-and-sour pork balls, our eternal favourite. There are never enough.Copyrighted Material

My sister and I were not the only children growing up in 1970s Britain to be introduced to Chinese food through sweet-and-sour pork balls, which were then ubiquitous on Chinese menus. There was a Chinese takeaway in almost every town. They had proliferated in the post-war years as a new wave of Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong took over fish and chip shops, first in Liverpool, then in Manchester and beyond, moving into existing businesses, gradually adding their Chinese dishes to the original menus.[1] In 1951 there had only been thirty-six Chinese restaurant proprietors and managers in the country;[2] by the early 1970s, there were an estimated twelve thousand takeaways and three thousand eat-in restaurants.[3]

No one is sure where the takeaway took root: some say it started when customers who were unable to bag a table at the popular Lotus House in London's Bayswater asked to take food home, others that it was invented in Limehouse, the original London Chinatown, at Charlie Cheung's establishment, Local Friends.[4] But as the early immigrants from Hong Kong, most of them men, were joined by their wives and children under the new rules of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, Chinese restaurants became family affairs and takeaways began to sprout up across the country.[5] Their food was a hotchpotch of ideas borrowed and adapted from Cantonese cooking, including chop suey, its name derived from the Cantonese for 'a miscellany of chopped ingredients' (*tsap sui*), and chow mein (fried noodles with beansprouts).

The ingredients were formulaic: a rotation of familiar, boneless proteins (pork, chicken, shrimp and beef) cooked with tinned Chinese vegetables like bamboo shoots, straw mushrooms and water chestnuts, along with fresh beansprouts, onions and peppers, all in a few standard sauces (chop suey, sweet-and-sour, tomato or curry) or stir-fried with noodles or rice. If even these toned-down offerings alarmed the punters, they could opt instead for English dishes like omelette, chips with curry sauce or even roast chicken. As far as the Chinese themselves were concerned, takeaway food was hardly Chinese food at all. As the Chen family in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*, a tale set in a London

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takeaway in the 1960s, put it, the dishes cooked for non-Chinese guests were 'rubbish, total lupsup, fit only for foreign devils'.

The foreign devils, however, adored the stuff. After the blandness and rationing of the war years, Chinese food blew into Britain like an exotic breeze from afar. It was not only excitingly different from mashed potatoes and toad-in-the-hole, but affordable. My mother remembers treating herself to the occasional Chinese lunch in London in the mid-1960s and taking her first, fumbling steps with chopsticks. It was always a set menu featuring a soup thickened with starch, afloat with shredded meat and beansprouts, a main course such as chop suey with rice and then a dessert, ever the same: tinned lychees in syrup. It was unbelievably cheap, five shillings for the meal, no more than a sandwich.

Over the subsequent decades, Chinese food became a treasured part of British life. After Chairman Mao's communists defeated the former Nationalist regime in 1949, ending China's civil war, stranded Nationalist diplomats in London became advocates for Chinese cuisine: one of them, Kenneth Lo, published his first cookbook in 1955 and went on to write thirty more; he also opened the esteemed London restaurant Memories of China. In the early 1980s, the BBC commissioned a pioneering cooking show fronted by the American Chinese chef Ken Hom, who introduced the British masses to the tastes and techniques of the Chinese kitchen; the cookbooks that accompanied his TV series sold more than 1.5 million copies.[6] By 2001, according to a report by *Market Intelligence*, Chinese was the British people's favourite foreign food and 65 per cent of British households owned a wok.[7]

In North America, Chinese food followed a similar trajectory from obscurity to ubiquity, but with an earlier timeline. After the discovery of gold in the Sacramento Valley in 1848, tens of thousands of migrants from southern China joined the rush, arriving in California and sowing the seeds of San Francisco's Chinatown. Chinese restaurants began to pop up, many offering one-dollar 'all-you-can-eat' meals, a mix of Chinese and western dishes including, probably, the first American Chinese chop sueys, made from odds and ends of meat

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and vegetables and devoured by white miners and other labourers. This was just the beginning of a new food craze that would sweep the country, from coast to coast.

Over the course of the twentieth century, as Chinese food became more entrenched in the United States, early menu staples like chop suey, chow mein and egg foo-yong were overtaken by other dishes with an easy appeal for global palates: beef with broccoli, General Tso's chicken, Kung Po chicken and the deep-fried, cheese-stuffed wontons known as crab rangoon, American equivalents of the sweet-and-sour pork balls of Britain. The fold-up Chinese takeaway carton and the fortune cookie became part of the American foodscape, like spaghetti with meatballs and the pastrami sandwich. By the early twenty-first century there were some forty thousand Chinese restaurants in America, more than McDonald's, Burger King and KFC combined: as Jennifer 8 Lee wrote in her book *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles*, Chinese food, in fact, was now 'more American than apple pie'.[8]

From one perspective, the global rise of Chinese food has been a remarkable success story. No other cuisine, powered in the main by small-time entrepreneurs rather than multinational corporations, has had such extraordinary influence or been so much loved, adopted and localized in so many countries. Chinese food is an inescapable cultural presence all over the world, from New York to Baghdad, Stockholm to Nairobi, Perth to Lima. Virtually every nation has its own 'classic' Chinese food, from my beloved sweet-and-sour pork balls to India's chicken Manchurian, Sri Lanka's hot butter cuttlefish and Sweden's 'four little dishes'. As a brand, 'Chinese food' has global recognition.

Yet, from another perspective, Chinese food has also been the victim of its own success. The resounding popularity of a simplified, adapted, even bastardized form of Cantonese cuisine, first developed in North America and then scattered like confetti all over the world, with its childish predictability and limited range, its bright colours, sweet-sour and salty flavours, deep-fried snacks and stir-fried noodles, has clouded appreciation of the diversity and sophistication of Chinese

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gastronomic culture. Chinese food may be popular, but it's still widely seen abroad as cheap, low-status and junky. While western consumers are willing to pay exorbitant sums for sushi or European tasting menus, Chinese restaurateurs still struggle to persuade customers that fine Chinese food is worth its price.

It didn't have to be this way. The first Chinese food to attract the attention of the British public was part of a Chinese exhibit at the London International Health Exhibition of 1884. Here, a gracefully decorated pop-up Chinese restaurant offered a menu of some thirty dishes, created by a team under the direction of an accomplished Hong Kong chef. This was no cheap chop suey, but, as a report in *The Standard* on 17 July 1884 put it, 'a restaurant of the very first order of classical cuisine; and where the epicure may find in the dinners *à la Chinoise* a perfect illustration of extreme excellence in the preparation of food, but also equally perfect illustrations of the practical exercise of scientific pharmacy in the pleasantest and most agreeable of forms – palatable and enjoyable dishes.'[9] The menu included some European dishes such as 'Saucisson de Frankfort', but also featured a giddy array of Chinese delicacies, including bird's nest soup 'even more delicious and more nutritious than the far-famed real turtle soup itself', shark's fins à la Pekinoise, pork meatballs with lychee, dried tofu, preserved duck eggs, hot Shaoxing wine, an assortment of Chinese pastries, and, finally, 'a little cup of Imperial tea.'[10]

This glimpse of Chinese haute cuisine became the talk of London and, according to the contemporary writer Vincent Holt, the 'quaint delicacies were eaten and well appreciated by crowds of fashionable people'.[11] Such was the public curiosity stirred up by the menu that the guest chefs were invited to Windsor Castle to prepare lunch for Queen Victoria, who is said to have particularly enjoyed the bird's nest soup.[12] But this glamorous introduction of the British beau monde to the pleasures of Chinese eating turned out to be a flash in the pan. Outside the 'Chinese court' of the exhibition, the only other Chinese food available in Britain at the time was served in eating houses that

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weren't aimed at local customers at all, but at the small communities of Chinese sailors who had settled around the docks in Liverpool, Glasgow, Cardiff and the Limehouse area of East London. And, over time, it was a less sophisticated form of Chinese cuisine that would eclipse almost everything else in the popular imagination.

In the early twentieth century, as a trickle of new arrivals joined the small Chinese population in Britain, Chinese restaurants started to open in central London and win the affections of customers who were not Chinese. The first in the West End seems to have been the Cathay in 1908; more appeared in the 1930s and 1940s, including the popular Ley On in Wardour Street.[13] Over the next three decades, large numbers of Chinese immigrants streamed into the country from the New Territories of Hong Kong; the vast majority took jobs in the Chinese catering trade.[14]

While some of the restaurants, especially those in London's emerging Chinatown in Soho, had trained chefs, most takeaways were staffed by erstwhile paddy farmers who knew little of the subtleties of Chinese cooking and were simply trying to scrape a living. As one proprietor told the British Sinologist Hugh Baker, for a new chef 'half an hour's training is enough. Tell them to use plenty of ginger, bean sprouts and dried citrus peel, give them a wok and a bottle of soy sauce and they know all there is to know about "Chinese cooking".'[15] Typically marooned in British towns, far from their compatriots, the new Chinese restaurateurs were catering for locals more accustomed to eating fish and chips. Their food needed to be accessible, cheap and only mildly exotic, which is probably why most of them ended up adopting the formula tried and tested in California a century earlier, which bore little resemblance to their native cuisine.

In America as in Britain, almost all the early Chinese cooks came from a single region: the Cantonese south. Moreover, just as the majority of Chinese cooks in Britain were farmers with little training in the culinary arts, the foot soldiers of American Chinese immigration were mostly not the accomplished chefs or discerning customers

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of the eating houses along the Pearl River in the Cantonese capital Guangzhou, a city known for its fine food, but people from a few rural counties who had been driven into exile by the pressures of overpopulation and poverty. Their knowledge of Cantonese cooking alone was limited, and they would have had little, if any, acquaintance with other regional cuisines. In both Britain and America, the new Chinese cuisine developed mostly as a tool for economic survival, not, like the restaurant at the International Health Exhibition of 1884, as a showcase for the glories of Chinese culinary culture.

As the twentieth century progressed, the Chinese populations in Britain and America grew and diversified. But while authentic Chinese food could be tracked down in the Chinatowns where Chinese people themselves congregated, elsewhere the norm was a simplified repertoire tailored to the tastes of westerners. Even in Chinatowns, real Chinese food could be tantalizingly out of reach for customers who weren't Chinese. Restaurants often hid their more authentic dishes on Chinese-language menus, afraid that westerners would shy away from bony poultry, shell-on prawns and bitter melon – as, indeed, many of them did. When, in London in the 1990s, as a young restaurant reviewer recently returned from China, speaking fluent Mandarin and dying to eat real Chinese food, I tried to order anything more challenging than a boneless chicken stir-fry or sweet-and-sour pork, waiters would protest and urge me in the direction of the hackneyed set menus no Chinese person would ever choose.

Their fears were not irrational, because almost since their first encounters with Chinese food, westerners had viewed it with a complicated mixture of enthusiasm and suspicion. Some of the early western visitors to China were deeply impressed by the quality and variety of Chinese food. Among them was Marco Polo. Writing in his *Travels* around the year 1300, he lavished praise on the markets of 'Kinsai' (the city now known as Hangzhou), with their 'abundance of victuals' extending to 'everything that could be desired to sustain life'. Vast were

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the numbers, he said, of those 'accustomed to dainty living, to the point of eating fish and meat at one meal'.[16]

Many of the Jesuit missionaries who travelled to China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made mention in their letters of gastronomic matters. *A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-Tartary*, a translation from the French of Jean-Baptiste du Halde's celebrated study of China compiled largely from Jesuit sources, did note some Chinese delicacies that were distasteful to Europeans, including stag's penises and dog meat, but extolled the flavours of the fish and hams, and eulogized Chinese culinary skills: 'The *French* cooks, who have refin'd so much in every thing which concerns the Palate, would be surpriz'd to find that the *Chinese* can outdo them far in this Branch of their Business, and at a great deal less Expence.'[17]

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, as British and other western adventurers sought to worm their way into trading with a recalcritant Chinese empire, the tone of their commentary on Chinese food became more hostile. According to the author JAG Roberts, many observers described the Chinese as deceitful, slovenly and undiscriminating when it came to eating. 'The *Chinese* eat any kind of Meat,' wrote John Lockman in the late eighteenth century: 'Beasts that die in Ditches, as willingly as those which died by the Butcher's Hand . . . 'Tis said their Rats don't eat amiss; and that Snake-Broth is in Reputation there.'[18] Britain's first envoy to China, Lord McCartney, wrote in his account of his embassy of 1793 that the Chinese were all 'foul feeders and eaters of garlic and strong-scented vegetables' who 'drink mutually out of the same cup which, though sometimes rinsed, is never washed or wiped clean'. The portrayal of the Chinese as filthy eaters conveniently served the broader attempt to discredit them by depicting their country as a decaying empire ripe for exploitation by the more advanced west. Where once Europeans were intrigued by the wonders of Chinese civilization, now they were drawn by the lucrative potential of the Chinese market.

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In the early days of Chinese food in America, tourists flocked to Chinatown in San Francisco for a taste of the exotic, but the suspicion that the Chinese themselves were tucking into rats, snakes, cats and lizards became a recurring trope in popular culture. Railroad workers and gold miners in California enjoyed their cheap chop sueys, but they also saw Chinese labourers as aliens who posed an economic threat; American perceptions of Chinese food became tainted by racialized fear and anxiety. By the 1870s, an American anti-Chinese movement had erupted: it would lead, in 1882 and 1892, to legislation that effectively put a stop to Chinese immigration. In Britain, the early Chinatown in London's Limehouse was portrayed in novels and films as a den of iniquity, rife with opium and crime; Chinese villains were a familiar sight on the theatrical stage. Ignorance and prejudice about Chinese food were common.

Despite the world's enduring love affair with Chinese food, such crass racial prejudice has never entirely died out. I've lost count of the number of people whose opening question to me, as a Chinese food specialist, has been, with an amused grin: 'What's the most disgusting thing you've ever eaten?' Certain assumptions, explicit or implied, have become engrained: that 'eating everything' means a nation is slovenly, perverse or desperate; that preferring tofu to steaks is effeminate; that cooking in oil means that food is oily; that using MSG means you are a cheapskate; that food is cut into small pieces to make ingredients unrecognizable and cheat people; that Chinese is a poverty cuisine and that Chinese food should not be expensive. These are just some of the filters through which 'Chinese food' has been perceived in the west.

As recently as 2002, the *Daily Mail* published a piece denouncing Chinese food as 'the dodgiest in the world, created by a nation that eats bats, snakes, monkeys, bears' paws, birds' nests, sharks' fins, ducks' tongues and chicken's feet'.[19] Was Chinese food everyone's favourite neighbourhood staple, or a terrifying stew of vermin and wild animals? The western world has often seemed unable to decide. Never, perhaps, has a cuisine been simultaneously so deeply loved, and so much abused.

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Disparaging myths about Chinese cuisine have long been a conduit for more general racial prejudice, used to depict Chinese people as alien, subversive, dishonest and uncivilized. In 2020, the suggestion that the coronavirus responsible for the global pandemic may have jumped into the human population from wild animals sold as food in a Chinese market unleashed a storm of vitriol aimed at the Chinese and their eating habits. Chinese produce markets, dubbed 'wet markets', were portrayed in the western media as revolting zoos full of exotic species. Few journalists pointed out that most were just neighbourhood markets selling fruit, vegetables and other fresh ingredients, including live fish and sometimes poultry but rarely wild animals. A video of an Asian woman eating bat soup went viral and was used to accuse the Chinese of uncouth and unsanitary eating habits, despite the fact that bat soup is not a Chinese delicacy and that the video was shot in the Pacific island nation of Palau.[20] This maelstrom of erroneous and exaggerated media reports had horrific real-world consequences in the form of a wave of verbal and physical attacks on Asian-looking people in western cities.

Even the familiar food of British and American childhoods, the old-school sweet-and-sour pork and its ilk, is often beset by criticism. An infamous letter published in an obscure New England journal in 1968 suggested that monosodium glutamate (MSG) in Chinese food could cause palpitations and other symptoms that the author labelled 'Chinese Restaurant Syndrome'.[21] Though the letter seems to have been a hoax[22] and the case against MSG has been totally debunked by scientists, its legacy remains in the widespread, but groundless, fear in the west that MSG is toxic. (Most westerners seem unaware that MSG is naturally present in Parmesan cheese and other ingredients commonly used in western cuisines.)

In recent years, the British media have pounced on studies that seem to suggest that Chinese food is dripping with fat or dangerously salty – without, apparently, noticing that the only 'Chinese food' surveyed in each case has been takeaway fare and supermarket ready

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meals aimed at western consumers.[23] In New York in 2019, a white restaurateur tried to promote her new restaurant, Lucky Lee's, by assuring customers that it offered a refined, 'healthy' version of Chinese cuisine that would not leave them 'feeling icky and bloated the next day'[24] – provoking outrage among Chinese Americans because of the suggestion that normal Chinese food was somehow unclean.

Since the early twentieth century, a number of writers, chefs and entrepreneurs have tried to dismantle these misleading stereotypes and introduce people in the west to real Chinese food. In Britain, TC Lai, Kenneth Lo, Yan-kit So, Ken Hom and Deh-ta Hsiung, and in the United States Buwei Yang Chao, Hsiang Ju Lin, Tsuifeng Lin, Barbara Tropp, Florence Lin, Martin Yan, Grace Young and Carolyn Phillips are among those who have tried to shine a light not only on the diversity of China's regional cooking traditions, but on the richness of its gastronomic culture. In western cities, too, chefs and restaurateurs such as Peng Chang-kuei, Michael Tong and Ed Schoenfeld in New York, Cecilia Chiang and Brandon Jew in San Francisco and Michael Peng, Alan Yau and Andrew Wong in London have striven to elevate the status of Chinese cuisine beyond the milieu of beef with broccoli and sweet-and-sour pork.

More recently, China's own dramatic entry on to the international stage, after decades of isolation, is encouraging greater awareness abroad of its culinary traditions. The country has shed its twentieth-century image as the 'poor man of Asia', a country where people were so desperate they would eat anything. A growing number of westerners have had the chance to live, work and travel in China, experiencing something of the prodigious diversity of Chinese food. Perhaps more importantly, a new generation of Chinese entrepreneurs is unleashing a revolution in the style and presentation of Chinese cuisine abroad. The old-fashioned model, with its roots in Cantonese cooking, has been shaken up by the electrifying spice of Sichuan and Hunan, along with the tastes of the Northeast (Dongbei), northern Xi'an and the eastern Jiangnan region that includes Shanghai. Old-school takeaways

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and Anglo-Canto restaurants have been joined by pop-ups, supper clubs and more glamorous contemporary establishments, many run by young, bilingual Chinese people raised in China and educated abroad. In addition, the internet hums with bloggers and social media stars who are showcasing real Chinese food. Finally, the door is ajar, offering a glimpse of some of the wealth of Chinese cuisine.

Many food phenomena that are widely assumed to be western inventions have precursors in China that date back hundreds – and in some cases thousands – of years. There were restaurants in twelfth-century Kaifeng, about six centuries before they appeared in Paris – and not merely restaurants, but restaurants specializing in particular cuisines and culinary styles.[25] Concern for the provenance and terroir of ingredients, so important to modern western gourmets, was not the invention of the French or Californians, but has been a preoccupation in China for more than two thousand years, as has the ideal of obtaining every ingredient in its proper season – not only for practical but also for gastronomic reasons. The current fashion for imitation meats such as the Impossible Burger, made from soy and potato proteins, has ancient antecedents in China, where chefs have been concocting vegetarian 'meat' since at least the Tang Dynasty, more than a millennium ago.

Why only look to Italy for imaginative pasta techniques, when the northern Chinese have a highly developed culture of pasta-making that is still little known abroad? The flamboyantly hand-stretched noodles of Lanzhou and the smacked *biang biang* ribbons of Xi'an, both of which are gaining followings in the west, are only two of myriad varieties, including hand-rolled, knife-cut, scraped, grated, thumbed, stretched and extruded flour-foods made not just from wheat, but also oats, sorghum and other grains. If you're interested in fermentation, China has innumerable vinegars, sauces, pickles and preserves, most of them still completely unknown outside the country.

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Long before the western craze for the transformations of 'molecular gastronomy', Chinese chefs were transmuting fish into noodles and chicken breast into 'tofu' and composing culinary fugues from every part of the duck. Many of the core techniques and preparations of Japanese cuisine, now so esteemed abroad, originated in China, including sushi, tofu, tea, soy sauce and ramen. The subtlety of Chinese gastronomy, with its minute discernment in matters of cutting, cooking, flavour and mouthfeel, is unparalleled anywhere. And China is vast, with a rich and variegated geographical and culinary terrain. Chinese people have a habit of making crude generalizations about 'western food', collapsing the culinary traditions of the entire western world into one supposed cuisine; generalizations about 'Chinese food' can be just as reductive.

Chinese gastronomic culture offers many useful perspectives on contemporary debates about health and environmental issues. For centuries, there has been lively discussion in China about how to eat properly and in harmony with nature. The traditional Chinese diet was largely based on grains and vegetables, with meat and fish eaten in modest quantities for flavour and nourishment; Chinese cuisine is rich in ideas that could serve as inspiration for modern western societies as they try to rethink their unsustainable consumption of meat. The resourcefulness of Chinese chefs could be a model for making the most of ingredients and minimizing waste. Perhaps most impressively, Chinese cuisine shows how it is possible to combine healthy, sustainable and conscious eating with extraordinary pleasure.

This is a book that attempts to ask: what is Chinese food, how should we understand it, and – just as importantly – how should we eat it? These are not trivial questions. Aside from pertaining to some of our great ethical and environmental quandries, they are among the keys with which outsiders can begin to appreciate Chinese culture more generally – vitally important in an age of growing international tensions. They can also help us to live healthily and to enjoy, unabashedly, one of life's most profound sensory and intellectual joys. Perhaps

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the greatest lesson I've learned from China is how to eat simultaneously for health and happiness.

Those sweet-and-sour pork balls of my childhood are certainly part of the story of Chinese food. They speak of the ways in which Chinese immigrants adapted to their new lives in the west, creating a simple, economical cuisine that would sustain them and their families and appeal to the palates of suspicious westerners. They are part of a story about how economic anxieties, the fallout of geopolitical events and racial prejudice conspired to muddy western appreciation of real Chinese food. They also highlight the irony of how westerners, over the course of more than a century, have shown an unerring preference for cheap, deep-fried Chinese foods in sweet, sour and salty sauces and then blamed the Chinese for their 'unhealthy' diet.

Now that's enough about sweet-and-sour pork.

Let the real feast begin.

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HEARTH

The origins of Chinese food

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Naked Flame

cha siu pork / mizhi chashao

蜜汁叉烧

Chop, chop, chop goes the cleaver on the board, the halved duck, bones and all, cut neatly into pieces. Slice, slice, slice, through the cha siu pork and the roast pork belly. Behind the chef with his knife and block, the roasted meats hang magnificently in the window, suspended on long hooks from a few bars of shining steel. A slab of pork belly with a golden frizz of crackling skin; bundled strips of crimson cha siu, glistening with syrup, edges scorched and jagged. Whole, bronzed chickens gleam under the overhead lights; roast ducks hang at jaunty angles, their crumpled skin glossy as lacquer. The chef chops and slices, lays the cut meats on beds of steaming white rice, spoons over a trickle of treacly sauce, hands them to the waiters, who relay them to the customers, who, like me, wait, chopsticks poised, mouths watering.

My Chinese food adventures may have begun with sweet-and-sour pork, but they took off when I was in my late teens, in London's Chinatown. A Singaporean friend led my cousin and me between the writhing dragons that flanked the dim sum emporium Chuen Cheng Ku for a Sunday lunch of steamed buns and dumplings, prawns in rice paper, golden slabs of radish cake flecked with morsels of pork. Some years after that, my interest in China sparked through work, I began to learn Chinese. Later, as a postgraduate student, I went to live in China, where I began to devote myself to the study of Chinese cuisine. Whenever I was back in London, I frequented Chinatown for

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meals with friends. Chinatown was the place where the anglicized set menus of my childhood met proper Chinese food, where tentative westerners could find a foothold in boneless beef in black bean sauce and crispy duck with pancakes, while Cantonese families and anyone more adventurous could gather for a feast of stir-fried calamari laced with pungent fish sauce, spiced duck hearts and emerald pea shoots crowned with glossy crab meat.

Ornate red gates marked the entrance to Chinatown and strings of red lanterns swayed in the breeze. Along with these decorative flourishes, the barbecued meats suspended in restaurant windows were a visual emblem, not just of London's Chinese district, but of Chinatowns worldwide. They were a Chinese delicacy on which both Chinese and non-Chinese tastes could agree. They were relatable for westerners accustomed to eating roasted meats and poultry, and yet, unlike the sweet-and-sour pork balls that emerged from the collision of Chinese foodways with 1970s British palates, they were authentically Chinese. Cha siu pork was a direct culinary import from Hong Kong and the Cantonese south of China, one of a family of delicacies known as *siu mei*, 'roasted and barbecued flavours'.

And yet it began to dawn on me, as I learned more, that despite their iconic status, cha siu pork and those other roasts were far from typical of Chinese cuisine.

In three decades of eating in China, I have never seen anyone roasting meat at home. Until western-style baking and fitted kitchens began to appeal to young urbanites in the early twenty-first century, virtually no one in China had an oven. Neither did most of the restaurants in which I studied during my apprenticeship in the 1990s; the majority of restaurants still don't. When I trained as a chef at the Sichuan Higher Institute of Cuisine, there was no roasting or baking on the curriculum. In most of China, both cooking methods have long been left to specialists, to

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the roast duck vendors with their huge domed ovens, the Cantonese *siu mei* masters and the commercial bakers. If you want to eat roast meat at home, you buy it from a cookshop or a specialist restaurant and serve it alongside homemade dishes

In Central Asia, people have baked their bread in tandoor ovens, urn-shaped vessels with a fire at the bottom and an opening at the top, for thousands of years. Today, in northwestern China, where Central Asian influence runs deepest, the Uyghur people also rely on tandoors to cook nan bread, skewered meats and sometimes whole sheep. Meanwhile, far away in Yunnan in the southwest, some minority groups like to roast and grill over an open fire. But in most of China, bread is steamed or griddled, noodles are boiled, and everyday dishes of both meat and vegetables are cooked on the stovetop. When I've invited Chinese friends visiting Europe for the first time to my home for an English Sunday roast, they've found it thrillingly exotic.

Cha siu and other roast meats do have an ancient pedigree in China. Cha siu literally means 'fork-roasted', a reference to the great forks (*chazi*) once used for roasting large slabs of meat. While forks never caught on as eating instruments in China, archaeologists have unearthed bone and metal forks at Neolithic and later sites,[1] and Han Dynasty tomb paintings show cooks using them to roast cubes of meat.[2] One of the 'Eight Delicacies' described in the *Book of Rites*, compiled more than two thousand years ago, is 'the Bake', an elaborate recipe in which a young pig is stuffed with jujubes, roasted in a casing of straw and clay, fried and then stewed in a cauldron for three days with fragrant herbs.[3] Chinese food historians see this as a precursor of the Cantonese roast suckling pig, which is still produced for clan sacrifices and other occasions and presented whole, the shatteringly crisp skin resting gently on succulent meat, with sometimes (these days) a couple of flashing red lights for eyes. In the not-so-distant past, these small pigs were speared on the curved prongs of a fork and turned in the radiant heat of gold-glowing embers. Nowadays, while its name lives on in cha siu pork, actual fork-roasting is an extreme rarity, though professional

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Chinese cookbooks published as late as the 1980s include instructions for impaling a whole pork belly on a fork and roasting it slowly over a firepit filled with embers, a crouched chef turning it by hand.

Fire-roasting was the earliest, most primitive form of cooking, predating the invention of pots and pans. When I was a student at the Sichuan Institute, I was surprised to find that our textbook began, on the very first page, by describing the prehistoric discovery of fire and the origins of cooking. Alluding to a famous phrase in the *Book of Rites*, it said humans had been able to leave behind the desolate epoch of 'drinking blood and eating feathers' (*ru mao yin xue*), otherwise known as eating raw food, through the harnessing of fire.[4] It was hard to imagine a European culinary textbook finding it necessary to go back as far as the origins of cooked food to make the point that cooking is what separates us from savages. But this textbook, with its strange mixture of Marxist theory and classical allusion, was no local eccentricity, because the idea that cooking liberated people from a feral past and marked the birth of human civilization is one that has pervaded Chinese culture since the dawn of history.

According to Chinese accounts, ancient and modern, early humans dwelt in caves and nests, scavenging for food and plagued by disease. Only rarely, when lightning struck and wild beasts were caught in a natural conflagration, did they sniff the heavenly scent of roasting flesh, sink their teeth into cooked meats, and glimpse the possibilities of culinary transformation. Then the mythical tribal leader Suiren, the Fire Man, taught them how to drill two pieces of wood together to make a spark, and fire was within their grasp. Suiren was one of a team of legendary sages who guided human beings towards the light of civilization, including also the Great Yu, father of irrigation, who tamed the floods, and the Divine Farmer Shen Nong, inventor of agriculture and herbal medicine. But it was the discovery of fire that enabled people to cook, avoid sickness and become fully human.

The age-old Chinese belief that cooking is what separates civilized human beings from savages and animals strikingly prefigures the work

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of later western thinkers, including the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who found in the myths of the indigenous South American people he studied that cooking symbolized the transition from nature to culture and was key to defining the human state. The primatologist Richard Wrangham has argued, more recently, that cooking literally made us human because heating ingredients unlocked their nutrients, sparing us the exhausting labour of crushing and chewing and allowing us to mainline the nourishment that would grow our brains from ape-like organs into computers capable of scientific and philosophical thinking.[5] Without cooking, we would not only have persisted in 'drinking blood and eating feathers'; we would have remained intellectually stunted.

But if cooking was key to the evolution of humans in general, only the Chinese have placed it at the very core of their identity. For the ancient Chinese, the transformation of raw ingredients through cooking marked the boundary not only between humans and their savage ancestors, but between the people of the civilized world (that is, China and its antecedent states) and the barbarians who lived around its edges. The *Book of Rites* noted that some of the wild tribes of the east and south were not only tattooed, but ate food untouched by fire; another ancient text portrayed barbarians as being like animals in the way they were unmoved by the tempting fragrances and flavours of the (cooked) food they encountered on tribute missions to China.[6]

Some foreigners were less uncouth than others. While those who were beyond the pale could be described as 'raw' (*sheng*), more amenable barbarians were 'cooked' (*shu*). Eating cooked food was a bridge to civilization: in an early example of gastrodiplomacy and perhaps even the notion of soft power, one writer of the second century BC suggested that the Chinese might subjugate their rough northern enemies by enticing them with roast meats in eating houses on the empire's borders: 'When the Xiongnu have developed a craving,' he said, 'for our cooked rice, *geng* stew, roasted meats, and wine, this will have become their fatal weakness.'[7] (In much the same vein, a reader

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of the Chinese edition of one of my books recently suggested that China should maximize its soft power by changing its controversial overseas Confucius Institutes into top-notch Chinese restaurants.) If a barbarian did develop a taste for eating Chinese food, it was viewed as tantamount to submitting to Chinese rule.[8] The ancient Chinese didn't avoid raw food completely: in fact one great delicacy, *kuai*, consisted of raw or sometimes pickled meat or fish, a precursor of what would become Japanese sushi. But on the whole, to be Chinese, to be civilized and properly human, was to cook, to transform the world through fire and seasoning.

This may all sound like ancient history, but it still reverberates in modern China, where, despite the recent appearance of leafy salads and sashimi on metropolitan restaurant menus, most food is transformed from its untouched natural state by heat or at least by pickling, and the old disdain for raw foods lingers. Vegetables are most commonly cooked; raw meat and fish dishes are extremely unusual. Many Chinese friends of mine have blanched at the sight of rare meat in western restaurants or criticized Japanese food for being 'too raw'. Within China, raw meat is only eaten by minority groups living beyond the borders of classic Han Chinese cuisine. In Yunnan, a favourite delicacy of the Bai people around Dali is *sheng pi*, an array of chopped raw pork and singed pork skin served with a spicy plum dip, while the Dai in the tropical south of the province sometimes eat raw beef in *sa pie*, a soup-stew spiked with bovine digestive juices. Both dishes would be unthinkable on a Beijing dinner table.

In the early 2000s, I accompanied three Sichuanese chefs on a trip to the Culinary Institute of America in California. We were working in the campus kitchens, where students would prepare a buffet lunch every day. There might be cold cooked beef or salmon, perhaps a soup, but mostly there were salads: glorious salads, many and various. But over the days a sadness settled into my companions, because for people accustomed to eating cooked food, nothing really satisfied. Eventually,

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with rude amusement, one of them exploded: 'If I eat any more salad, I'll turn into a savage!'

As the strips of cha siu pork, dripping with marinade, hang in the oven, the Maillard reaction works its magic, browning the surface of the meat and turning its carbohydrates and amino acids into a gamut of alluring scents and savours. In Chinese, the word used to describe the delicious smells of roasting is *xiang*, typically translated into English as 'fragrant' yet far richer in its connotations, because *xiang* also refers to incense, to the smouldering aromatics whose smoke wafted heavenwards to the spirit world during ancient rites of sacrifice, along with the scents of sacrificial food. These rising tendrils of aroma, it was hoped, would not only beguile human senses, but attract the attention of the spirits who held sway over human destiny. For the Chinese, cooking was not merely about the transformation of dangerous raw ingredients into delicious, wholesome food, and savages into men; it was also at the heart of ritual, because ritual began with the offering of food and drink.[9]

In every society, people feed and nourish one another. But in ancient and modern China, edible offerings were and are also a conduit to the spirit world. On the fringes of the human realm hover a restless pack of gods, ghosts and ancestors, some of them malevolent, many simply ambivalent, but all thought to be susceptible to persuasion in the form of food and drink. The tempting aromas of the sacrifices, carrying messages into the ether like a sensory Morse code, will, it is hoped, not only feed them but win their favour, bringing good weather, plentiful harvests and general good fortune. From the late Shang Dynasty onwards, the whole social and political order of the Chinese state was centred on placating the spirits with offerings of meat, grain and alcohol. So important were the sacrifices that the *Book of Rites*

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advised that preparing meals for spirits, whatever it cost, should take priority over feeding mortals.[10]

Food also governed the lives and destinies of the populace: 'To the people, food is heaven,' goes the age-old saying. Without sufficient food, people would riot and overthrow the state. The emperor's most important duty was to feed his subjects, so he performed the sacrifices that would bring good harvests according to a strict calendrical schedule.[11] A dedicated imperial staff reared sacrificial animals, sowed and harvested sacrificial grain and prepared the sacrificial foods, at vast expense. During the Zhou Dynasty, according to a later account, more than two thousand people, over half of those employed by the court, were involved with preparing food and wine for both the spirits and the mortals of the imperial household.[12] Working under a grand steward, they included dieticians, experts in meat, game, fish, turtles and shellfish, pickles and sauces, grains, vegetables and fruits, as well as dozens of personnel responsible just for ice and salt.[13] Later, in the first century BC, twelve thousand specialists were charged with preparing sacrificial foods for three hundred temples across the empire, each with its own staff of priests, musicians and cooks.[14] The scale of these operations dwindled in subsequent dynasties, but the principle and practice of sacrifice lasted throughout the imperial era. Today, if you wander around the Confucius Temple in Qufu or the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, you can still find the defunct 'spirit kitchens' (*shen chu*) where the sacrificial meals were cooked.

During the rites of sacrifice, the otherworldly spirits were fed by the *qi* or ethereal essences that floated up from the offerings of food and drink. On earth, high-ranking personages were buried with all that they might need in the afterlife, including food, serving vessels, pottery models of stoves and granaries and sometimes effigies of chefs. One tomb in Hubei of the fourth century BC was equipped with a 'food chamber', a kind of dining room where the deceased man may have been expected to entertain the spirits of his own ancestors before they guided him to heaven. According to the tomb inventory, the chamber

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was supplied not only with serving vessels but with a lavish menu of foods that included dried piglet, steamed and roasted pork, fried and roasted chicken, fruits and sweetmeats.[15] One Han Dynasty king was interred with his unfortunate cook, who, it was hoped, would continue to prepare his favourite dishes after death.[16]

State sacrifices were abolished after the Chinese revolution of 1911, but the folk practice of offering food to spirits has never disappeared. When I spent the Chinese New Year at my friend Fan Qun's village in Hunan in 2004, her father honoured their ancestors and the local land god at an altar laid with half a smoked pig's head, a whole smoked carp, a huge pomelo, a dish of tofu and cups of tea and rice wine; he kowtowed before these offerings, burnt paper money and set off a violent rattle of firecrackers that echoed up and down the valley. Later, the whole family trooped down the road to the grave of a recently deceased uncle, presenting his spirit with a more intimate family meal: sticky rice cakes, pickled beans, tofu, smoked fish and bacon, chicken's feet, tea, rice wine and Coca-Cola. In Hong Kong, shops in the old Chinese district of Sheung Wan are devoted to the sale of funerary goods that include paper replicas of roast ducks and cardboard steamers filled with papery dim sum.

The ancient practice of petitioning spirits through the scents of food and wine has material echoes in contemporary society. On the fringes of most people's lives lurk a pack of officials and business contacts who hold sway over their fortunes, some of them malevolent, many simply ambivalent, but all thought to be susceptible to persuasion in the form of banquets, birds' nests and bottles of Rémy Martin, or an expensive watch slipped into a box of mooncakes. Until President Xi Jinping's 2013 anti-corruption campaign threw a spanner into the works of official wining and dining, many high-end restaurants depended on business brought by customers trying to butter up influential people through food and drink.

For westerners, perhaps, roasted meats represent the pinnacle of eating. We are proud of our Sunday roasts, great hunks of meat presented

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ceremoniously at the table; our steaks and chips; our slabs of flesh thrown on to the barbecue; the geese and turkeys that form the heart of our feasts. But for the Chinese, roasting was just the beginning.

The development of pottery, then bronze, later iron, enabled boiling, steaming, grilling, stir-frying and many other cooking methods. Around two millennia ago, the Chinese were already settling into the habit of cutting their food into small pieces and eating it with chopsticks. Forks were used only for cooking, and knives likewise banished to the kitchen. The 'roast' (*zhi*) was one great delicacy in ancient China, but it was rivalled by *kuai*, a dish of thinly sliced meat or fish. And while the rich, able to feast on flesh, were sometimes called 'meat-eaters' (*rou shizhe*), the common people lived, as they were to do for most of Chinese history, almost entirely on grains, legumes and vegetables. (The vegetarian inclinations of the Chinese, according to archaeologists, may help to explain why they never took to forks as eating implements, because evidence suggests that the use of forks is closely correlated with the consumption of meat.[17])

In the west, the old habit of roasting meats on spits before a fire evolved into roasting and baking in closed ovens. In China, from the Han Dynasty onwards, the open fire was replaced by a kitchen range whose design was to change little for some two thousand years, until the advent of gas and electricity in the twentieth century. The stove range was, and still is in rural areas, a raised platform built of bricks and clay, with small mouths in its side to be fed with fuel, and larger openings in the top for pots, woks and steamers. Above the stove perched a statue or printed image of the Kitchen God, Lord of the Stove, China's oldest household god, a guardian figure who presided over domestic life all over China until he was deposed during the Cultural Revolution (he was revived in some areas in the 1980s but never regained his former status). In some kitchens, there was also a small open fire on the floor, where a blackened pot could be suspended from an iron tripod above the flames, or a clay pot huddled in the embers, the smoke drifting upwards through a hole in the roof. But the

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only roasting that could be done in a traditional domestic kitchen was by poking an aubergine, a fresh chilli or a small crab directly into the fiery fuel chamber, and dusting off the ash after it was cooked.

The rulers of China's last dynasty, the Qing, were Manchus, former pastoralists from the northeast. After conquering China, they adopted many Chinese customs but never lost their native predilection for eating both dairy foods and hunks of meat. In traditional Manchu society, a 'meat gathering' was a rugged affair, where guests used their own knives to cut pieces from enormous slabs of meat that had been simply boiled – a custom that chimed with their history as hunters and herders.[18] The Chinese, in contrast, typically used diverse seasonings to transform a wide range of ingredients, finely cut, into highly varied dishes. As the eighteenth-century gourmet Yuan Mei wrote, 'roasted and boiled dishes dominate in Manchu cooking, while the majority of Han Chinese dishes are soups and stews'.[19] Qing palace cuisine combined the two styles: the delicacy of Chinese cooking with the robust roasts and boiled meats of the Manchus.[20]

One writer of the late eighteenth century, Li Dou, describes a 'Manchu–Han' feast laid on in the wealthy southern city of Yangzhou that is said to have combined the finest delicacies from both cultures. The menu of this fusion extravaganza involved five sequences of lavish dishes (some ninety dishes and snacks in total), including clearly Chinese items such as shredded tofu soup, steamed fish and congee, along with a carnivorous section under the heading 'platters of fur and blood' that featured suckling pig, roast ducks and geese, charred pork and lamb and other meats boiled and steamed, which were presumably of Manchu origin.[21] In the same era, the Qianlong Emperor dined mostly on southern-style Chinese dishes while at home in Beijing, but remained partial to Manchu pastries and roast duck[22] (he ate the latter eight times in one fortnight in 1761).[23] In a similar vein, the wedding feast of the Guangxu Emperor in 1889 included several dainty slivered dishes, but also spit-roasted pork and lamb.[24] During the late Qing Dynasty, the semi-sinicized Manchus carried about with them

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personal dining sets consisting of a pair of chopsticks and a knife in a sheath that could be tucked into boots or slung from a belt: equipment for eating both Chinese and Manchu foods.

In many respects, the Chinese resented their foreign overlords, and the imposition of Manchu customs such as shaving the forehead and sporting a pigtail.[25] But the prestige of imperial cuisine encouraged them to appreciate some Manchu foods, including roasted meats. Outside the palace, the grand roast became an unusual treat for certain Chinese rituals and special occasions, but was never prepared at home. Former palace chefs opened restaurants in Beijing specializing in a kind of roast duck that had been perfected in the kitchens of the Forbidden City and later became known as Peking duck. Manchus went on using their own knives to cut meat at a feast, somewhat like Europeans, who carved their roasts with a grand knife and fork before inviting each guest to continue the cutting with their own metal cutlery. But for the Chinese, even Peking duck and Cantonese suckling pig, both dishes of likely Manchu influence, had to be cut into pieces in the kitchen before they were presented to diners (the tableside carving of a Peking duck is a modern innovation).

When Chinese specialist chefs do roast meats, their methods tend to be meticulous and sophisticated – a far cry from the simplicity of, for example, English roasting. Peking duck is made by a complex process designed to maximize the glossy crispness of the skin and the tender succulence of the flesh, involving inflation with a pump, wind-drying, lacquering with a maltose solution, adding moisture and roasting while hanging in the fierce heat of a domed oven fuelled by a fruitwood fire. Cantonese *siu mei* are also cooked with minute attention to the texture and taste of every part. So different are Chinese roasts from English that members of the first British embassy to China in 1793 found the provisions supplied to them by their imperial hosts, in what appeared to be a considerate attempt to suit foreign tastes, somewhat unpalatable: 'The roast meat,' wrote Aeneas Anderson, one of the party, 'had a very singular appearance, as they use some preparation of oil, that

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gives it a gloss like that of varnish; nor was its flavour so agreeable to our palates, as the dishes produced by the clean and simple cookery of our European kitchens.'[26]

For westerners, great chunks of roasted meat cooked over fire are prized centrepieces of culinary culture. They are seen as hearty, straightforward, honest and masculine: the barbecued steak; the Sunday roast carved ceremoniously by the male head of a household. From a western point of view, Chinese food, with meat typically cut into small pieces, mixed with vegetables and cooked with great elaboration, might seem fussy, perhaps even emasculated. During the Qing Dynasty, some Manchus apparently worried that they might lose some of their rugged machismo if they assimilated too much to Chinese ways: the Qianlong Emperor, though a lover of Chinese food, insisted on cutting his own pork with a personal knife, while the founding Qing emperor reportedly said: 'If [we Manchus] give up riding and shooting . . . and are served with cut-up meat, then [we are] no different from those left-handed [i.e. ineffectual] people.'[27]

But from a Chinese angle, while roasted meat might be delicious enough to tempt the spirits, it's also a little primitive, perhaps even atavistic, a relic of the origins of cooking rather than a reflection of civilized gastronomy. 'The roast can be placed on the side of nature, and the boiled on the side of culture', wrote the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, because boiling requires a receptacle, 'which is a cultural object'.[28] One of the most famous Chinese fire-cooked dishes – beggar's chicken, in which a whole chicken is baked in a carapace of leaves and clay – is said to have been created by a thief who lacked any kitchen utensil with which to cook his stolen bird: roasting it in the fire was not a culinary choice but an act of desperation.

If roasting was the earliest cooking method, the Chinese have, in a sense, left it far behind. The cuisine that emerged from simple beginnings was one that emphasized the transformation of ingredients from their raw, whole state into something less primitive and more conspicuously shaped by human endeavour. A practitioner of Chinese

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culture cuts, seasons, transforms and civilizes his or her ingredients. Cooking was and is the practice of civilization. In that sense, a stir-fry of slivered meat and vegetables is more essentially Chinese than a slab of roast pork.

In the Four Seasons restaurant in London's Chinatown, the waitress lays down my plate. The rosy-edged slices of cha siu pork are fanned out neatly on the steaming white rice, streaked with gravy, a few ribbons of blanched Chinese cabbage tucked in at the side, the archaic roast hunk of meat transformed into a Chinese dish. It's a classic Cantonese repast – sustaining, affordable and delicious. But in the end, roast meat is also what savages and barbarians eat, from the threatening nomads on the fringes of the ancient Chinese empire to modern Europeans and Americans. The pearly rice grains that lie beneath the meat are actually the heart of the meal. To be really Chinese, you have not only to eat cooked food; you have to eat grain.

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Sacred Grain

steamed rice / bai mi fan

白米饭

It's lunchtime on Dai Jianjun's farm near Suichang, in eastern Zhejiang Province. We've already enjoyed the other dishes; the plates and bowls lie around the table, their contents in postprandial disarray. The remains of a salad of slivered tofu with coriander, another of blanched seasonal greens; a dry-braised carp in soy-dark sauce; a soup of slow-cooked trotters with taro. Our minds and palates tickled by this variety of tastes and textures, it's time to fill up with our starchy staple, a bowlful of rice, eaten along with a trickle of the remaining sauce from the fish or a few morsels of pickle.

'*Chi fan,* eat rice,' says Zhu Yinfeng, Dai's private chef. He scoops some rice into a bowl and hands it to me.

The cool afternoon light catches steam rising from the blue-and-white china bowl in languid curls. The rice has a moon-like glow, almost translucent. The grains are distinct but blurry-edged and they cling together in gentle clumps. I raise the bowl and breathe in their soothing, nutty fragrance for a moment, then ply my wooden chopsticks to tease apart a fluffy mouthful and place it in my mouth. The rice is plain, without oil or seasoning. Yet while it might seem modest and unremarkable, it is the cultural, moral and emotional centre of the meal.

Here in Zhejiang, and in southern China in general, if you haven't eaten your rice, you haven't really eaten: to have a meal is *chi fan*, which literally means to 'eat cooked grain'.

As a British eater of potatoes and bread, at first I found myself dissatisfied by the ubiquity of plain, unsalted rice in China. It seemed

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