Food Nostalgia: Gender and Modernity in Chinese Culinary Discourses

In fall 2012, a report of “The Fifty Legendary Traditional Wuxi Dishes” appeared on the official Website of my hometown Wuxi, a city in Jiangsu Province, on China’s largest Internet portal site sina.com, immediately igniting heated discussions among users. Young or old, male or female, experts or amateur food enthusiasts all pitched in to expose the “inauthenticity” of the list. Some pinpointed the dishes that had originated in other regions of China. Others reaffirmed the “sweet-salty” flavor principle to which “authentic” Wuxi dishes should adhere. Still others lamented the disappearance of authentic dishes due to various factors: extinction of traditional species of poultry and livestock; prohibitive amount of labor that traditional dishes required; and Western “scientific” knowledge that outlawed traditional cooking methods such as air-drying pork for a long time.

A U.S. reader might find in the above debate echoes of the “foodie” phenomenon and Americans’ increasing concern with cooking regional dishes using locally grown foods in recent years (Halweil). Scholars in anthropology, history, and other humanistic disciplines may also note the central role food plays in cultural identity. Indeed, “food nostalgia,” or the recollection or purposive evocation of another time and place through food, has not only proven an essential means of identity construction for the Chinese through history, but also taken on new forms, generated new meanings, and embodied crucial dilemmas facing China in the new millennium. Theme restaurants, “food tourism,” and Web-based food discussion groups have sprung up thanks to increasing Internet coverage and the rise of a market economy. Yet apparent technological advancements and wider embrace of capitalism and consumerism contrast sharply with the collective backward gaze demonstrated both on- and offline in contemporary life, as the masses show an inordinate interest in reviving Confucian learning and time-travel TV dramas that feature modern men or women go back to change history.

My project wrestles with this provocative tension between China’s fast forward motion in economic development and its prevalent cultural nostalgia. I seek to show that food nostalgia has provided comfort for overstimulated urban dwellers during a century of great changes, and produced cultural artifacts that distilled paradigm shifts in Chinese culture. I focus on expressions of food nostalgia in Jiangnan, or south of the Yangzi River—a region including parts of Jiangsu and Zhejiang Province and famous for material wealth, cultural richness, and culinary achievements—for three reasons. Regional food culture, intrinsic to how Chinese people connect to the past, live in the present, and imagine a future, has remained a core component of cultural identity in contemporary society despite or precisely because of rapid changes and geographical mobility—testified by extremely crowded train stations during Chinese New Year, when people who have gone to big cities to find better jobs and a better future return to their hometowns in the country. Further, writing about foods from childhood makes it possible for Chinese intellectuals to create cultural capital by reconnecting with their hometowns and cultural traditions. Because of the rich cultural legacy and vibrant contemporary permutations of Jiangnan cuisine, I can also find ample sources to compare food nostalgia at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I will look at representative literary renditions, such as those appearing in works authored by Qing dynasty (1644-1911 C. E.) scholar Yuan Mei (1716-1797), mainland Chinese writer Lu Wenfu (1928-2005), and contemporary works of “food tourism” by Hong Kong writer Cai Lan (b. 1941) and Taiwan writer Zhou Fenna, in order to construct a genealogy of the culinary discourses of Jiangnan. I will also provide ethnographic accounts of various contemporary
Chinese restaurants and Web discussion forums to scrutinize the changes of Jiangnan culinary discourses amidst globalization.

I aim to excavate the conceptual framework through which intellectuals attributed historical significance to a particular place and linked the idea of the local to a sense of time. I will also scrutinize the ways they constructed cultural and gender identities by writing about food at different historical moments. To provide a fuller picture of the evolution of Jiangnan culinary discourses, it is imperative for me to take into account the dynamic contemporary food scene in China, even as it constantly shifts under the pressure of globalization. Thus, I will bring ethnography into productive dialogue with the historical records and literary representations of Jiangnan cuisines.

In tracing expressions of food nostalgia during specific stages of Jiangnan history, I will provide a clear lineage of the creation, transformation, and deployment of various culinary discourses at different historical moments. In this aspect I follow in Mark Swislocki’s footsteps and try to fill a scholarly gap in book-length English-language studies on Chinese food since K.C. Chang’s and E. N. Anderson’s (with the possible exception of Judith Farquhar, who devotes half of her book to food) works came out more than a quarter of a century ago.

My project will make important contributions to the study of Chinese food in three other ways. It focuses on an as yet unresearched area: the regional food culture and its discursive enactments in Jiangnan. It brings to the fore the cultural landscape of contemporary China by looking at new platforms for food nostalgia, such as the Internet, which fosters a more democratic and participatory culture than traditional venues would allow. Existing studies of Chinese food, Swislocki’s work included, are weighted toward the early part of twentieth-century Chinese culture. My project, in contrast, investigates not only the history of Jiangnan cuisine, but also its contemporary transformation. Further, scholars of Chinese food have failed to take gender into consideration even as they noted Chinese women’s apparent lack of interest in “alimentary writing” (Yue). I, however, will delve into the discursive mechanisms that excluded women from the realm of culture as they were assigned to the roles of mothers and wives who could only attend the family kitchen in the private realm.

Continuing with my past practice, I integrate methodologies garnered from literary, cultural, historical, and anthropological studies, and particularly use discursive analysis and ethnographic research to explore the multi-dimensionality of Jiangnan food discourses. I plan to conduct participant observation and interviews in places such as restaurants, homes, and workplaces in Jiangnan. I will also employ literary and discursive analysis to scrutinize meanings and significances embodied in the representation of food in premodern and modern Chinese works, to shed further light on findings from my fieldwork.

Selected Bibliography


Feng, Jin. “Zhongguo xian dangdai wenxue zhong de meishi huaijiu shuxie: Yi Lu Wenfu wei ge’an” (Food nostalgia in modern and contemporary Chinese literature: Lu Wenfu as a case study). *Fudan daxue xuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* (The journal of Fudan University, social studies edition) no.4 (July 2013): 167-174.


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