

## *Regions and 10 Locales*

awareness of food in general. Indeed, they talk about it a great deal, with a complicated and specialized gourmet language. The concept of *ts'ui* has been discussed. Related evaluative words in Chinese include *shuang* (resilient, springy, somewhere between crunchy and rubbery, like some seaweeds) and *kam* (translated "sweet," but including anything with a sapid, alluring taste). Fried foods should be *su*—oily but light and not soggy—rather than *ni* (greasy). Above all, foods should taste *hsien*, which means not just fresh but *au point* in general. A vegetable just picked but past its prime would be very dubiously *hsien*, while a ham at the proper stage of maturity would be *hsien* even if not literally fresh. In south and east China particularly, foods are often praised by being described as *ching*, "clear" or "pure." This means that they have a delicate, subtle, exquisite flavor—not obtrusive and above all not overdoctored with spices, monosodium glutamate, or anything else that would give a heavy, harsh, or nonharmonious taste. Other evaluative words include *hsiao joi*, meat that is rich but not greasy (processed with sodium carbonate, which breaks up the fat). *Pao* is "thin," *sunj* is "puffy," *neng* is "tender." A different *neng* means "tenacious." *Fen* is "mealy," *suan* "cleaning," *tan hsing* "resilient," and *chuan huo* is "mel-low." Banquet cuisine is *shan*. A restaurant is usually called a "wine household" or "wine mansion," but sometimes—if very fancy—a "*shan* hall." One could continue indefinitely with increasingly arcane and refined terms. Surely few things give a better measure of the importance of food in Chinese social life than the evolution of this complicated discourse.

### *The Question of Regional Divisions*

Attempts to specify the regions of Chinese cooking are subject to debate. Transitions are gradual, blends of regional cooking typical along borders. One person's subregion is another person's region, while a third may not think the area's cooking is distinctive at all.

The classical way to separate regions is in terms of cities, which gives us Peking cooking, Sian cooking, Canton cooking, and so forth. There is also a grouping of the urban cuisines into five styles or style areas: northern, focused on Peking; Honan (or central), focused today on Chengchou; eastern (or Lower Yangtze), focused today on Shanghai but earlier on Hangchou, Suchou, and Nanching; southern, focused on Canton; and western, focused on Chengtu, Chungking (in Szechuan) and Changsha (in Hunan).

This time-honored division is inadequate. First, it is too thoroughly a matter of elite cuisines. Second, it gives a wholly undeserved importance to the rather slight differences between Peking and Honan cuisines. A better division begins with the separation of the north—the region of wheat and mixed grains—from the rice region in the center and south. Mutton is the important meat in the north; dogs, cats, and snakes in the south (although these were formerly eaten in the north, too, as history attests). The fruits and vegetables are different, the north being the land of peaches, jujubes, apricots, pears, apples, and turnips (among other things), while the rice region uses citrus, litchis, bananas, taro, lotus, and so on. Southern fruits have always been northern luxuries, while the south imports soybeans from the north. Only the China-wide onion tribe and the cabbage-and-radish family transcend both agricultural and culinary barriers to become important throughout.

This division is quite different from that current in the restaurant trade. In that business, "North Chinese" cuisine is anything that is not Cantonese. A geographically comparable American division would be between the food of south Florida and that of everywhere else. Thus, "North Chinese" restaurants often serve the rice, oranges, and taro characteristic of the south. They tend to represent a cuisine of the Yangtze Valley, well north of the Cantonese homeland but south of the center of China. Moreover, in recent decades rice has invaded the north; fast-ripening new va-

riceties are grown as far north as Manchuria. The rice-based meal is now typical of fancy cuisine throughout China. Conversely, wheat products became ever more popular in the rice region—where government policy encourages diversification—and in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the overseas communities, whose cuisines derive from southern Chinese areas. Today, there is two to three times as much rice as wheat in the rice region, but rice makes up only a small percentage of the northern fare and is still virtually absent from remote regions.

Within the great division, there are many minor cuisines. These sort naturally into four—not five—great traditions, as Emily Hahn (1968), Fu Pei-mei (1969), and other recent writers have recognized. The north remains as a single great whole. The south is divided into three parts, east, west, and south.

### *The East*

The east is basically the lower Yangtze Valley and the coasts north and south of it. Eastern cooking was developed in an area where land and water (fresh and salt) meet and interpenetrate; thus it is preeminent in its treatment of crabs (Chinese gourmets swear that the best in the world are the green crabs of the Shanghai area), shrimp, water plants, seaweeds, and everything that lives at the edges of great waters. A prosperous and densely populated area, it cooks with much oil, vinegar, sugar, sweet bean paste, and rice ale. Vinegar is said to be popular because it kills the taste of the bad water and can be used to wash away deposits of salts (Isabella Yen, pers. comm.). The best vinegar in China—and in the world, loyal Yangtze Delta folk would say—is that of Chinkiang and some cities near it, where some vinegars are aged for decades (allegedly for centuries) and refugees fled the area during wars with nothing but the clothes on their backs and their precious vinegar pots. (The same cult endures in Shansi, where vinegar is even more popular.)

Chinese recipes that call for generous amounts of oil, sugar, and chiu are usually of eastern Chinese origin. Sugar is most typically used in the solid, clear, crystalline form that has been called “rock sugar” in China for perhaps two thousand years. This form is supposed to be more healthful than other sugars; in traditional times it was purer and less subject to adulteration. Eastern cooks delight in making simple dishes—braised white cabbage, mushrooms, crabs, or fish slices—into complex ones by incredibly subtle variations in the quantity, quality, origin, variety, and sub-variety of oils, vinegars, and liquors. Cooking in chiu lees—pungent and unique with a slightly sweet tang—is common. Shrimp-flavored soy sauce is primarily an eastern taste.

Since it is not only the richest and most multicropped area in China but has also been the trade center for centuries, the Yangtze Delta has long had access to almost every kind of ingredient. Shellfish, fish, and the tenderer vegetables are probably the most favored items—in that order. A long tradition of Buddhism has led to the creation of superior and subtle vegetarian traditions. Almost every city in the delta has its own variant of the basic pattern and its own special dishes. Suchou and Hangchow are the most famous among these; Ningpo is also important. Shanghai—a

modern city that arose in the nineteenth century via trade with Europe and the resulting “unequal treaties” and exploitation—has developed the most eclectic of all China’s cuisines, incorporating dishes and ingredients not only from every part of China but also from the West. Large British, French, and Russian colonies left their marks before being phased out after 1949; Shanghai has thus been the focus for the diffusion of bread, cakes, pies, candy, and many other Western snacks through much of China during the last century. Russian influence is probably seen in the spectacularly lavish cold appetizer platters that frequently precede (and sometimes render unnecessary) the main courses. The kitchens of the Chinese Empire produced such things, but their importance in Shanghai must owe something to the similar *zakuska* tradition. The Russians, most of whom came to Shanghai through Siberia as refugees from the Bolsheviks, also contributed to the city’s baking traditions.

Shanghai, in its early twentieth-century heyday, was a city perhaps unique in the world for its contrasts of opulence and squalor. The city’s famous restaurants, such as the 3–6–9 and the Winter Garden (both of which have spawned imitators—not always worthy—in every city on earth with a Shanghainese colony), catered to warlords and international bankers, serving banquets whose cost could run into five and six figures in modern currency. Today the city is a radical stronghold and its cooking is much toned down, but it remains excellent, and Shanghainese restaurants in Hong Kong and Taiwan continue the tradition with reduced but discernible style. Shanghainese managers introduced the “eating palace,” with pseudo-imperial decor and garish painted decorations running heavily to dragons, to these realms; previously, restaurants had been relatively unassuming with an ambiance of peace and quiet. Dragons with flashing red light-bulb eyes do not improve the flavor of food, although they may indicate that the restaurant has enough money to hire a good cook—if so inclined.

Outside of the Delta, eastern cuisine begins to blend into neighboring cuisines. The cooking of Shantung, north of the Yangtze lowlands, is a famous and classic tradition that long predates the rise of Peking, let alone Shanghai. Confucius, a native, left enough comments on food and manners to verify the highly developed level of both, but he does not give us much of an idea of what was served. We do learn that game, fish, vegetables, millet, and millet ale were important in his day. In modern times, Shantung is probably best known for its wheat products, especially filled dumplings; these developed long after Confucius’ time. More recently, the Germans extracted a concession at Tsingtao and began a brewery there that produces much of China’s beer, especially for the export market. The beer is said to have been better under the Germans. It hit a dismal low point in the early Communist years but has improved since—not enough, however, to avoid stiff competition from other and newer breweries in the major cities of China (and other East Asian countries). For the rest, Shantung cookery today is intermediate between the eastern and northern styles. One is most apt to encounter it in a Shantung chiao-tzu cafe, specializing in many different small dough-wrapped dumplings filled with chopped meat.

Inland from the delta provinces of Chiangsu and Chekiang lie Anhui and Kiangsi.

Little is known of their cuisine in the outside world. Buwei Yang Chao's deservedly famous book, *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese* (Chao 1947), is based on the food of her native Anhui; however, it reflects a generalized "Chinese home cooking" or at least "Eastern China home cooking." Northern influence extends well into this area, where the North Chinese language (Mandarin) borders on the local languages (Wu and Kan).

Down the coast from the delta is a very different and much better-known realm, the most distinctive and best of all Eastern subregions after the urban delta core. This is the Fukienese area: Fukien Province and its borderlands. Here a distinctive cluster of languages, the Min dialects, is spoken. A dialect of the Wu language of the lower Yangtze extends a bit into Fukien, and a Min tongue—the well-marked Teochiu dialect of Southern Min—is centered in northeastern Kwangtung Province, but by and large the Fukien boundaries define the area of Northern and Southern Min and of the distinctive cuisine that goes with these two languages. (The so-called "Chinese dialects" are languages as different as the romance languages are from each other. Mandarin or *pu Ping hua* is used in the north and west and as a national language; there are also at least seven local languages, one for each major region of east and south China. These eight are, in turn, broken up into actual dialects.) Fukienese cuisine is so distinctive and good that it has sometimes been elevated to the status of a separate regional cuisine. But Fukien cooking is distinctively Eastern.

The first important thing about Fukienese cuisine is its great focus on soups. Almost every class of soupy dish on earth is represented by numberless forms. At a banquet, people think nothing of consuming three different soupy courses and may easily manage five. These range from the thinnest of clear soups—the pure essence of chicken or fish—to thick stews. Rice is often eaten as congee (porridge). Since shark fins and birds' nests are eaten in stewed form, they are best handled in Fukien cooking. In *kuopien* (wokside) batter is cooked on the wok and then soup is cooked in this soft crust.

The Mongolian firepot chafing dish, although invented in the north, may also reach its pinnacle here. This is a dish with a central chimney stoked with charcoal and ringed by a shallow, doughnut-shaped pan. (Nowadays it can be done in any old pot on a gas burner or hot plate.) The pan is filled with stock and diners are provided with plates of raw food, which they pick up with chopsticks and hold in the stock, heated by the charcoal in the central chimney. The thinly sliced food cooks quickly; it is then eaten with sauces. The stock, enriched by all the things cooked in it, is drunk to end the meal. This dish is a complete meal in itself—about the only case in China where a full-scale banquet has only one dish. Variants include firepots or "steam-boats" featuring lamb (like the "rinsed lamb" of Peking), skewered clams and mussels (Teochiu satay), and so forth. Known all over China, this arose as a winter dish, providing warmth and entertainment as well as nourishment.

Another thing that distinguishes Fukienese cooking is the widespread use of lard as cooking oil. This is virtually the only area in all East Asia where this occurs. It de-

veloped because the area is mountainous, with much fodder for pigs but little land to raise oilseeds; now it is simply a preference. Even in Fukien, it is by no means a universal rule, but when lard is routinely used to fry food, it indicates Fukienese influence.

Fukienese food is apt to be cooked more slowly than other Chinese foods: the influence of slowly simmering soups and stews has spread to other dishes. Mixed vegetables that would be flash-fried in seconds in a Cantonese home are apt to be slowly simmered in lard in a Fukienese one. At worst, this produces grease-sodden, heavy fare. Steamed and roasted foods are also taken well beyond the stage that would be considered ideal in a Cantonese kitchen. Deep frying is also relatively popular here (as in many other parts of the Eastern realm). The fat is usually brought to a very high heat and the food plunged into it, so that it sears instantly and is sealed against intrusion of the fat, thus not becoming greasy. This ideal is not always maintained.

Fukien food is characterized by a fondness for dip sauces. Many dishes have their particular accompaniments: garlic crushed in vinegar for poultry, sweet malt syrup for fried fish balls, and so on. For such things as the firepot, many different dip sauces are provided, and the diner is expected to mix and choose.

As far as ingredients go, Fukienese is similar to other Eastern cuisine, except for such minor matters as a fondness for blood. Blood is eaten in the spirit of avoiding waste. It is coagulated the way bean milk is (suggesting the origin of the latter technology), sliced, and steamed or stir-fried with alliums. Pigs' blood is considered a plebeian dish, but fresh poultry blood, served along with the bird itself (boiled or roasted), is choice.

Fukienese cooking has several marked subvarieties, which sort with dialect and subregional differences. The finest and most elaborate is the Teochiu. *Teochiu* is the local pronunciation of Chaozhou, the northeastern district of Kwangtung province, centered on the rather new city of Shantou (locally pronounced something like *Sinatow*, and sometimes so spelled). Chaozhou is pronounced *Chiuchoy* in Cantonese, and since most Teochiu cooking one encounters is in Hong Kong or in Cantonese-dominated Chinatowns in the Western world, it is often seen under this spelling. The region entered history when the great eighth-century statesman Han Yu was exiled to it for being too outspoken, and the local people asked him to give a proclamation to drive away a crocodile—believing that anyone so eminent would surely be able to sway even a saurian by his oratory. He delivered an exquisite performance, attacking his foes at court in a scathing and quite transparent satire. The crocodile duly left the area, and Han Yu's foes met a bad end, too. Since then the people have become more sophisticated; they would now no doubt convert crocodile into gourmet fare, if they could find one in this age of endangered species. Teochiu cooking has been influenced by Cantonese since the district came to be in Kwangtung. Compared to other Fukien-type cooking it is done much faster, with a lighter hand and a better sense of timing; dishes are made more flavorful and spicy, more succulent and piquant. Fried fish and shellfish balls, roasted and stir-fried poultry, stewed

turtles and other water creatures, deep-fried vegetables, and thick taro desserts are among the specialties. Goose, marinated and then roasted or barbecued, is also noteworthy. Combining the best of eastern and southern cooking, Teochiu cuisine is one of the finest and most distinctive in China.

Another odd extension of Fukienese culture into Kwangtung province is found on the island of Hainan. South of the mainland, this large tropical island has its own aboriginal population, but most of the present inhabitants speak a very divergent dialect of Min. Their most famous dish is chicken rice, which is probably at its best in Singapore rather than Hainan; a great diaspora of Hainanese to Southeast Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to the founding of countless small cafés and coffee shops. The whole bird is used, from the blood (steamed) to the cleaned intestines, and from the head to the claws. Meanwhile, rice is first fried in sesame oil, then finished by boiling in some of the stock. This is the pilaf method native to the Near East, and I suspect it is a Southeast Asian contribution, borrowed by Hainanese cooks from Indian or other South Asian peoples. It is the only extension of this method into the Chinese world; true Chinese fried rice is boiled first, dried, then fried.

Less need be said about the cooking of Fukien Province itself. It is based on pork and vegetables, of which Fukien produces an enormous quantity and variety. Southeast Asian influences have come here too, via returning emigrés to that region. One interesting case is the aforementioned Sinicization of *saté* or *satay*. Many Chinese, unaware of the borrowing process, have wondered at the odd name for a sauce that has absolutely nothing to do with either sand or tea. Fukienese cooking also runs heavily to noodles; like other easterners and unlike deep southerners, Fukienese often get half as many calories from wheat as from rice. Most of these are in the form of soup noodles, but all sorts of stir-fried noodles are popular, from wide, thick rice-flour noodles to hair-thin wheat ones. The variety of forms and names is comparable to the variation in pasta in a comparably sized region of Italy; nowhere else in China does the noodle reach such apotheosis. In most of China it is basically a fast food or snack, but in many Fukienese areas it becomes the body and bones of much of the most favored cuisine. Noodles were so loved and so constantly being devoured in one Hokkien village in Malaysia that I gave it the pseudonym "noodle village" in my writings.

Fuchou, the capital of Fukien, has its own cuisine, noted for use of rice reddened by a fungus that imparts a beautiful port-wine color to dishes but has little taste. Fuchou also produces dumpling skins made of powdered pork and other distinctive dumplings. Fish sauce (similar to *nuoc mam*) is more common than soy sauce. One dish is a sour, hot squid soup, which may include chicken and vegetables.

Most Taiwanese speak Hokkien (Southern Min), "the Taiwanese dialect." Their cooking is similar to that of other Hokkien speakers, but it uses more vegetable oil and more seafood. Its main differences derive from Japanese influence. From 1895 to 1945, Taiwan was a Japanese colony, intensively developed as a showpiece and a rice

and sugar bowl. At one time there was one Japanese for every ten people on the island; most of the Japanese were administrators. Thus Japanese foods became popular and considerably influenced island cooking, making it lighter, more delicate, less greasy (less lard is used), and more oriented toward seafood. Rural areas preserve the lard and noodle heritage, however. Today there are many more Japanese than Taiwanese restaurants in Taiwan, and still more mainland Chinese ones. The mainland refugees who came to the island in 1949 disdained local cuisine and imported their own; by and large the islanders cook at home rather than for customers. However, excellent Taiwanese restaurants exist, the father of them all being the Green Leaves in Taipei.

Taiwan—and to some extent the facing coast, especially the Teochiu district—is China's fruit and vegetable capital. Some of the finest fruits in the world come from here, especially citrus. My Taiwanese field assistant in California was astonished at the poor selection of vegetables and fruits in California markets. I was surprised at this—California is America's equivalent to Taiwan in this regard—and so we counted the species in a couple of California supermarkets and then thought of all we could find at a typical Taipei street market. California scored about forty, Taipei over one hundred. The Taiwanese raise just about every fruit and vegetable in the world, except those restricted to very cold or very hot places; they have developed a major export industry for such items as asparagus and Western-type mushrooms, both virtually unknown in most of Asia. In addition, northern Taiwan and the southeast coast raise most of China's tea, though tea is also grown throughout the southern half of the mainland. The best can cost over eighty dollars a pound.

Various bean curd preparations are popular in Taiwan, especially dried bean curd, which is not only dried but often pressed to get the fluid out. It becomes almost like meat in consistency, thus is used in Buddhist cuisine, but it is really at its best as a snack in fast-food cafés, often simmered in a tea and soy sauce stock along with eggs. Eggs are cooked in the shell this way all over China—the taste but not the grease diffuses through the shell. The addition of the dry bean curd is a more narrowly Eastern, or even Fukienese, trait. Soybean milk, "soybean curd flowers" (a puddinglike preparation of undrained bean curd), soybean skin, and so on are all much used in the region.

### West China

The closest relative of eastern cuisine is western; the two are linked by the Yangtze River: The west is the spicy zone in China (refuting a facile generalization that cooking gets spicier as it nears the equator). Many books ascribe this to the west's nearness to India, and there may possibly be some slight influence from that quarter, but we have ample testimony that western Chinese cuisine originated in the middle Yangtze and was spicy from the start, before India was known to the Chinese. This evidence is both textual and archeological. The main texts are the *Songs of the South*, a collection of poems from the ancient state of Ch'u in what is now Hunan. Dating

to about 300 B.C., they give ample testimony of a cuisine in which Chinese brown pepper, cassia, artemisia, water pepper (a fiery water plant), smartweed, and the like figured abundantly. Later texts bear this out; Hunan had a reputation for highly spiced and herbed food by the Han Dynasty. The archeological evidence consists of the foods offered to the spirits of the dead in the well-preserved tombs near Changsha, the capital of Hunan and of old Ch'u. These tombs date from early Han times, but the people buried in them are the heirs of the Ch'u aristocracy, which was given great local autonomy and power at the time. (It was a deal. The Han couldn't subdue them effectively, they couldn't resist Han effectively.) The foods are as the texts state: rich, varied, sophisticated, and flavored with a wide range of pungent spices and herbs.

The introduction of the chile pepper in about the seventeenth century added a final crowning touch. Today, chile and garlic have replaced many of the old herbs, but brown peppers, cassia, star anise, five-spice, coriander leaves, and so on are abundantly represented in the dishes. Such uniquely Chinese and highly aromatic flavorings as dried citrus peel are particularly favored here. Food is often very delicately spiced, but on the other hand some dishes—particularly those labeled “village style”—are blazing. Similarly, the concentration of garlic can sometimes reach levels unthinkable in most of Italy or south France.

More prosaically, the cuisine's real skeleton and flesh consists of rice, noodles, pork, cabbages, white radishes, river fish (near the Yangtze and its main tributaries), and “mountain foods,” which include bamboo shoots of many kinds, fungi and mushrooms, game, wild roots and herbs, and other derivatives of the lush montane forests that still survive in many parts of the region. Maize has become a major food in many areas; maize cakes or noodles with pickled vegetables and fiery sauce comprise the diet of the poorest. White potatoes, introduced in the eighteenth century by French missionaries, flourish. Among a wide range of fruits, citrus may be singled out; among the *Songs of the South* is one comparing a lovely young person to a tangerine tree. Nuts include a variety derived from conifers: pine seeds, *Torreya* yew seeds (bitter but flavorful), ginkgo nuts, and the like. (These are eaten elsewhere in China too, but they are mountain products and so most readily found in the west.) Walnuts are also common and popular, having been introduced from Iran in the early medieval centuries, and halvah-like desserts are made from them; I assume these came with the tree from the Middle East. Another Near Eastern borrowing is the broad bean, often treated like a nut—roasted for snacks.

The heart of western cuisine is the city of Changsha, the splendid capital of the ancient, rich, and powerful Ch'u state and a major trading and administrative city ever since. At the strategic and economic center of the upper-middle Yangtze drainage, it has powerfully extended its influence in all directions. The cooking of the province of Hunan serves as a base on which Changsha chefs elaborate. Hupei, the province to the north, is also rich and oriented around a great trading center (the Wuhan cities that dominate the lower-middle river) but has always been a sort of balance zone between north, east, and west, thus lacking in cultural definition, culinary or otherwise.

Hunanese cooking has now become known worldwide and has attracted a following who regard it as the finest of all Chinese cuisine. No one would deny that it is one of the contenders for the title.

Up the river from Hunan is the huge province of Szechuan, China's most populous province and one of the largest and wealthiest. With a diverse agriculture and rich mountain forests, it produces a wide range of foods, especially vegetables and tree crops. On the other hand, its rivers are fast and turbid, its lakes few, and its access to aquatic foods very limited. It bases much of its cuisine on bean products—broad beans, mung beans, peas, and others as well as soybeans. Maize is very important as a food for the poor, but nothing of culinary significance emerges from this grain. Several differences have grown up (or persisted) between Hunanese and Szechuanese food. Szechuanese dishes naturally involve much less aquatic food and more mountain products. Bamboo shoots, mushrooms and fungi, wild fruits and seeds (such as pine nuts), hill tree-crops such as walnuts, and herbs are the most significant. Game is still found locally. Szechuanese are connoisseurs of these mountain products; bamboo shoots, for instance, come in many species, varieties, and sizes; they may be young, old, fresh, pickled, dried, sauerkrauted, prepared in countless ways. Long mountain winters make pickling essential, and vegetables are pickled in many ways: fresh or dried; in brine, vinegar, bran, oil, chili, and combinations; liquid-packed or pressed fairly dry; sealed or unsealed; strong or mild. As one would expect in a mountain area, storage of meat is also important, with various kinds of sausage, smoked meat, and dried meat being prepared. However, there is nothing comparable to the riot of such products that one finds in Switzerland or Bavaria, for the Chinese here as elsewhere are basically vegetable eaters. Indeed, such mountains as the sacred Omei have long been centers of Buddhist monasticism, and much of the famous cuisine of Szechuan is strictly vegetarian.

Szechuanese cooking is, if anything, even hotter than Hunanese. Spices abound—star anise, cassia, ginger, brown pepper, and so on—and such strong herbs or herblike commodities as dried daylily buds (“golden needle vegetable”) are heavily used. Garlic and chilis are, however, the preeminent spices and often seem to make up at least half the dish, particularly in small cafés. Dried chilis are often stir-fried, which brings out the full heat of the capsaicin (the spicy chemical in chilis). Won ton soup is significantly known as “red won ton” in its usual Szechuan form. Restaurant tables are adorned with crushed dried chilis, ground chilis in oil, and hot bean paste (crushed chilis mixed with fermented soybean-flour paste), to give the diner plenty of scope to add to the already incandescent food. Szechuanese restaurants in the West are based on the more subtle and less appalling cuisine of the elite and are invariably toned down for Western tastes. Even if you ask for extra spicy, you will get only what a high-born lady would get in old Szechuan, not what the porters and clerks in the markets eat. But it should be noted that not only class but also region and individual preference lend much variety to the spiciness of Szechuanese cuisine. As in Mexico, food ranges from very hot to almost bland.

Another difference between Szechuan and Hunan is the prominence of West

Asian foods in the former. These include baked goods, a mashed walnut dish closely related to halvah, and a fondness for broad beans and pastes made from them. Although Szechuan is relatively isolated in China's far interior, it has been powerfully influenced over the centuries by the outside world. This has been partly a function of Szechuan's important trade; connecting to the Silk Road by a series of passes over the northern mountains and to the Lower Yangtze via the formidable but navigable Yangtze Gorges, it has always been closely linked to China's fortunes.

Among common Szechuan dishes, two of the more famous are sour-and-hot soup and Ma Po bean curd. Sour-and-hot soup is, as the name implies, strongly flavored with rice vinegar and peppers (white, brown, and chili). The Chinese *la* means the hotness of peppers, and that is the word used here (the word for hot temperature is *re*). The soup is typically made with very thin strips of pork, coagulated duck's or pig's blood, bamboo shoots, and sometimes other mild vegetables; it is flavored with large amounts of ginger, daylily buds, and tree fungi. Garlic, garlic leaves, onions, sesame oil, soy sauce, chiu, and other common Chinese flavorings may find their way into it, for there are many variations. The variants served in restaurants in the Western world are usually very pale reflections of the real thing, which should be as thick as stew and as potent as firecrackers, but extremely subtle and rich in flavor. (If you make it yourself and can't get coagulated blood, use boiled chicken livers; it's a "legal" substitution and works fine.)

Ma Po bean curd (also known as "Ma Po tou fu," "Szechuan-style bean curd," and so on) is bean curd and minced (not ground) pork mashed up together and stir-fried in a lot of sesame oil with garlic, ginger, green onions, a great deal of hot bean paste or chilis, and often the other typical Szechuan flavorings such as chiu, soy sauce, tree fungi, or coriander leaves (added at the end as a garnish). It is subtle yet potent. I have had versions with equivalent amounts of chiles and meat. The name literally means "hemp women's bean curd"; *po* means "old woman" and is not terribly polite (it is used to refer to one's wife, as English speakers use "the old lady"). Many myths have arisen to explain this peculiar name, including: (1) the women of a restaurant family named Ma invented the dish; (2) the name is a corruption of a place name whence the dish originated; (3) the dish was invented by or for toothless, old, hemp-raising village women, who could not chew and thus needed minced meat; (4) it was invented by a pockmarked (i.e., "hemp seed marked") woman. The first is probably correct.

Another distinctive Szechuan-Hunan dish is camphor-and-tea-smoked duck. The duck is smoked for a short while over camphor chips and tea leaves as they smolder in a closed pan; then it is fried. This dish is one of the world's great poultry creations; I find it much superior to Peking duck, given equally good ducks to start with. The fame of the classic Peking duck is due to the special breed and special feeding employed. By all means get such a duck for the Szechuan dish. (I once made camphor-and-tea-smoked duck from an old semiwild mallard I had around the yard, with disastrous results.)

South of Szechuan are the remote provinces of Kweichow and Yunnan. The former is heavily inhabited by minorities. Little is available on its cuisine, although a small book of provincial recipes published in Peking some years ago includes a few recipes.

Yunnan is a large province in which Chinese were a minority until recently. Its cuisine draws heavily from Szechuan but has been influenced by local development and by the many minority groups that live in the area. It uses less spices and hot flavorings than the rest of the west and comes closer than other Chinese provinces to the Alpine preserved-meat model. The finest hams in China are made here from specially raised pigs. Usually sold whole with the leg and foot left on, a Yunnan ham commands a high price. They are frequently found in the finest grocery stores and are important gift items, being valuable and useful. Their closest analogues in the Western world are the salt-cured hams of Virginia, which are adopted as substitutes by Chinese in the United States; the Yunnan product has a stronger, meatier flavor. Yunnan also produces sausages, a headcheese-like dish, bacon, and other cured pork products. The most distinctive is the "boneless pig," made by minority peoples in the central plateau of the province. The bones and meat of a huge lard hog are removed, leaving only the thick lard layer enclosed in the skin. The skin is closed up again and the result wind-cured. This is a good way to preserve lard in the cool, dry climate of the high plateau. In the old days, boneless lard hogs could be seen hanging or stacked in well-to-do homes of the Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples of the area.

Another oddity of Yunnan is the use of dairy products by the Chinese there, who have adopted yogurt. The proximity to India, the influence of local Tibetan and quasi-Tibetan peoples, and the important settlement of Mongols in the area in the days of Qubilai Qan probably all contributed to this situation, quite unique in traditional China. Early cultures of Yunnan, back in the last centuries B.C. when both Indian and Chinese influence was strong, were cattlekeepers with Indian-derived humped cattle. Later the plateau fell under Chinese cultural influence, but India continued to dominate the culture of Tibet and other nearby areas, and Yunnan borders on Indian-influenced Burma. This has not directly affected the food (the spiciness is a dilute reflection of Szechuan and has nothing in common with curries) except, perhaps, in this one way. Since the early centuries, India's contacts with China were primarily via Central Asia or the sea; the land route via Yunnan is appallingly difficult and was very little used, and I am unconvinced by the attempts to explain food borrowings (crops, spicy styles, or otherwise) by diffusion along this route. Mediation via Tibet is more likely. Diversity also came to Yunnan with soldiers and government officials who were sent to administer this formerly remote outpost of empire. During some dynasties, many of these were exiles (Isabella Yen, pers. comm.), often officials who were once highly placed and able to introduce elite dishes from various parts of China.

Distinctive Yunnanese dishes include "across-the-bridge noodles," in which the noodles, not quite cooked, are suddenly poured into the diner's soup to finish cook-

ing there; and "crystal chicken," which is made in a volcano pot (see chapter 9). Other dishes include meat strips (or shrimps), fried in a rather soft batter and flavored with cassia. A cold eggplant salad with soy sauce is shared with other parts of the west. Yunnan produces good tea, including the famous "Pu-eh."

### The Far South

Southern cooking means, preeminently, Cantonese cuisine, but first I will deal briefly with an anomalous ethnic group and its cooking. The Hakka moved south from central China about a thousand years ago, and their language is closer to Mandarin than to the southern languages. The Hakka have always been mountain people and have probably mixed heavily with non-Chinese ethnic groups of the high ranges of the Kiangsi-Fukien-Kwangtung border country. This might explain their delicate, fine-boned, sharp features (they are a beautiful people, akin to North Chinese, but distinctive). At present, they live scattered throughout southeast China, but their focus is at the meeting point of the three provinces just named. This is a sort of no-man's-land between the Kan, Cantonese, and Min linguistic groups. Here lies the nearest thing the Hakka have to a center: Mei Hsien (*hsien* is equivalent to county) at the northeast corner of Kwangtung.

Hakka food is simple, straightforward, and well prepared. The South Chinese emphasis on freshness is even more pronounced than usual. No exotic or expensive ingredients are typical. The Hakka are past masters at cooking tripe, liver, kidneys, chitterlings, and the like, and one of their delicacies is spinal cord of cow, chopped and stir-fried with vegetables. It is called marrow in Chinese and appears under that name on menus. The most popular Hakka dish is salt-baked chicken, which is just what its name implies. The salt seals in the flavor and juices while transmitting heat slowly and evenly. Hakka are famous for beef balls and chopped fish (which makes fish stretch far). This fish paste, which includes onion, ginger, and the like, is often used to stuff fresh or fried bean curd and can be used to stuff chilis, eggplants, bitter melon, and other vegetables. These stuffed vegetables are usually deep-fried but can be stir-fried or steamed. These stuffed items are not solely Hakka—they are widespread in the south—but the Hakka are especially fond of them. Hakka restaurants are now appearing in the United States and other Western countries.

But the true core of the south is the Cantonese. Cantonese cooking is unquestionably the one most often mentioned as the finest of all Chinese cuisines. The immortal proverb runs: "Live in Hangchow, marry in Suchou, dine in Canton, and die in Liuchou," since these cities are supposed to have, respectively, the most beautiful views, the loveliest women, the finest food, and the best coffin wood in the world. Modern Westerners, and many North Chinese, often turn up their noses at Cantonese cuisine, believing the chop suey, chow mein, and sweet-sour glop of overseas restaurants to be typical of it. Such restaurants may indicate a lamentable Cantonese tendency to seek the lowest common denominator in business practices, but they show nothing about Cantonese cooking. Unfortunately, Cantonese cooks are easily

corrupted and sometimes scornful of the tastes of foreigners, and it is really difficult to find good Cantonese food away from its native home. I have never had first-rate fare outside of Hong Kong, Canton, and Macau. Alas, even the fine old restaurants of Canton (more correctly Kuangchou—the capital of Kwangtung province) have fallen on evil days. Moreover, dining out in Hong Kong is not always what it used to be, for the huge new "wine palaces" do not pay as much attention to freshness and individual diners as the old-time restaurants did. Pollution and overfishing have devastated Hong Kong's waters; fish tend to be caught far away and kept alive in fetid water that makes them taste as bad as frozen fish. The incomparable fresh vegetables and exquisitely flavorful rice of the old rural parts of Hong Kong have now been replaced by factories and parking lots. To balance this out, it is now possible to get acceptable Cantonese food in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, London, and other cities with large emigré populations.

The very best Cantonese food is found in those homes lucky enough to be run by superior cooks. A very close second is the smaller, older restaurants of Hong Kong, including the rural New Territories, which have been less subjected to the ravages of urban commercialism. But on the whole, even with well-meant recommendations of Cantonese friends (who are often overly impressed with decor, or with one favorite dish), one takes one's chances eating Cantonese restaurant food, and it is all too easy to see how the myth of Cantonese inferiority began.

But it is a myth. Cantonese food, at its best, is probably unequalled in China and possibly in the world. No other cooks insist on such absolute freshness; diners used to visit Castle Peak Bay, twenty miles by bad road, to get live fish simply because the water was cleaner there and the fish tasted better. No other cooks control cooking temperature so perfectly and maintain such split-second timing. Apprentice cooks may be upbraided unmercifully for letting shellfish remain a fraction of a second on the fire after they began to hiss softly instead of loudly—a good chef whisks them off the instant the noise softens. No other cooks insist on such quality in ingredients. Preferred species of grouper cost up to five or more times as much as inferior species (all species of grouper taste the same to me, even after twenty years of eating them), and poultry are fed on particular kinds of feed or scraps to maximize flavor. No other Chinese cooks draw on such a wide range of ingredients; Cantonese use everything Chinese, from Hami melons of Central Asia to the recently introduced guavas, bell peppers, and manioc of their own deep south. No other cooks can be so eclectic while maintaining the spirit of their tradition. European baking has been Cantonized; tomato-potato stew has been taken over and redone; and "hamburgers," made by baking an old-fashioned dumpling and inserting a flattened beef ball, have appeared in Hong Kong. No other cooks excel in so many techniques, from deep-frying (the food is sealed in a crackling, aromatic crust rather than sodden in grease) and baking (a recent Western introduction) to simmering and stewing. No other cooks produce so many dishes; Cantonese restaurateurs who listed only four or five hundred dishes on the menu have apologized to me for the small selection dictated

by lack of space on the card and promised to cook anything else within reason I might want. They mean it, too, and in fact many restaurants (in Canton and elsewhere in China) do not even bother to list their specialties, on the assumption that everyone who is worth feeding knows what the specialties are, and the menu space should be saved for less obvious suggestions. Even tiny cafés and sidewalk stalls turn out literally hundreds of dishes, often superb. No culture is more obsessed with food; not even in France is so large a part of the conversation devoted to restaurants and cooking.

This is not to say that Cantonese food is superior in everything. Cantonese cooks can't touch the Fukienese and Teochiu treatment of soups; they do not like and do not excel in the extremely subtle yet highly spiced and flavored mixtures of much of the food that characterizes the Yangtze Valley from Szechuan to Shanghai; far from wheat regions, they do not do much with traditional wheat products; they do not produce vinegars, chiu, or bean pastes that approach those of the Yangtze country. Nor do they make many desserts. (No Chinese region emphasizes desserts, but the Cantonese would be even lower on the scale than the others were it not for the recent borrowings of bakery goods from the Western world.) Traditional Chinese simply didn't like sweets much, and the Cantonese were especially uninterested.

By comparison with other parts of China, the south uses fewer beans (soy, fresh, or otherwise) and more of the tropical and Western-derived fruits and vegetables special to the region. Such tropical fruits as litchis, longans ("dragon eyes," a litchi-like fruit), papayas, guavas, and citrus abound (though not as they do in the Southern Min areas, nor is the fruit so good; China's best fruit comes from Taiwan and Teochiu, not the deep south). Vegetables more common here than elsewhere include tomatoes, broccoli, cauliflower and other Westerniana. Other tropical products woven into cuisine include the Chinese olive or *kan-lan*, actually the fruit of *Canarium album*. Pickled, it is reminiscent of a Greek green olive, though the trees are not related. Better than the fruit is the kernel, which resembles a large pumpkin kernel or small almond in appearance and taste. One of the world's finest nuts, it is used rather sparingly in the south, but more commonly in Southeast Asia. It extends as far north as Fukien, but not very many trees occur north of Kwangtung. Such plants as coconut and manioc—the latter a recent import from the New World—are even more definitely tropical. An important item of not-quite-food is the betel nut, the fruit of the areca palm.

The best Cantonese cooking is what appears to be the simplest. Boiled shrimps, steamed fish, steamed or stir-fried vegetables, clear soup (such as chicken stock with mushrooms), fried oysters, dried fish roes sliced and stir-fried, boiled chicken ("white-cut chicken," boiled for a very short time and left to finish cooking in the cooling stock), and a few similar dishes make up my happiest memories of Cantonese cuisine. The secrets are timing and ingredient quality. Even relatively rich combinations, such as the famous "winter melon pond" (soup made in a winter melon, often beautifully carved; the whole melon, soup and all, is steamed in a closed

container), are not as elaborate as they would be in many areas. A Cantonese cook will stick to roast pork, a bit of Yunnan ham, and a very few vegetables, letting the subtle flavor of the winter melon speak for itself. This is not to say that combinations are simple to make. The rules for what can combine with what are elaborate and demanding, specifying all the allowable permutations and combinations of hundreds of ingredients taken two, three, and (occasionally) four or more at a time. Dip sauces and flavorings extend the range; soy sauce is usual, but oyster sauce, chile sauce, very hot mustard, ground chiles, vinegars, chilis chopped in soy, sesame oil, and occasionally other flavors may be found at table, along with white pepper. As elsewhere in China, free salt was once rarely seen in traditional restaurants, though the Western custom of putting a salt shaker at each table is now almost universal. The elaborate flavorings listed above are sparingly used except in bland dishes like soup noodles.

One distinctive and common Cantonese seasoning is black beans (*tonsinb* in Mandarin; *taosi* in Cantonese), which are now abundant in the south but rare elsewhere. Here—as in its continued consumption of dogs, cats, and snakes, and in some language traits—the Cantonese world is conservative.

Much of what passes for Cantonese cooking in the Western world would sicken a traditional Cantonese gourmet. Canned pineapple, canned cherries, and even canned fruit cocktail; enormous quantities of dehydrated garlic, barbecue or Worcestershire sauce; canned vegetables, corn starch, monosodium glutamate, cooking sherry, and heavy doses of sugar are found in many of these bizarre creations. This fusion of pseudo-Cantonese and pseudo-Polynesian food can be traced to a renegade Cantonese chef at Trader Vic's in California. The basic formula appears to be: take the fattest, rankest pork you can get; cook it in a lot of oil with the sweetest mixture of canned fruits and sugar you can make; throw on a lot of MSG and cheap soy sauce; thicken the sauce to gluelike consistency; and serve it forth. The Cantonese regard the whole business as proof that Westerners are cultureless barbarians, but they cook it, and now even many Taiwan Chinese (having eaten Cantonese food only in cafés catering to American G.I.s) are convinced that this is typical Cantonese cooking.

About sweet-and-sour pork, the following may be said. Traditionally, this was a rare dish, and not well liked. Cantonese more often cook sweet-sour fish, especially yellow croaker. The recipe is northern and eastern in origin, though long borrowed into the south. It is best with freshwater fish in Honan. Real Cantonese sweet-sour fish or pork is at least as sour as sweet and includes no fruit. Real Cantonese sweet-sour pork is a good dish, although not as good as the yellow croaker, but many Cantonese avoid it now because it is so thoroughly linked with the "barbarians."

Three other dishes that define Cantonese cuisine outside of China are more authentic, but are not the height of the true cuisine. Fried rice (*dy'ao fan*, "stir-fried rice," although it isn't always stir-fried) is a standard method of cooking leftovers, involving frying cold boiled rice with chopped-up meat and vegetables. In really superior restaurants, rice will be specially boiled and dried for this, but usually old, unused rice is served. The common (and favorite) recipe, however, is not Cantonese,

but eastern, deriving from Yangchou in the lower Yangtze country; it involves mixing chopped ham, beaten egg, green peas, green onions, and other ingredients to taste, and then rather slowly sautéing the rice. The rice is neither deep-fried nor stir-fried, but *dm*—left to cook slowly in a little oil, producing a fluffy product with a slight crust. Chow mein is Cantonese *ch'ao min* (stir-fried noodles), a counterpart of fried rice. The noodles are boiled and then stir-fried with bamboo shoots, bean sprouts, slices of pork, and so forth.

Last of all, chop suey is not—as many would-be connoisseurs believe—an American invention. As Li Shu-fan points out in his delightful autobiography, *Hong Kong Surgeon* (1964), it is a local Toisanese dish. Toisan is a rural district south of Canton, the home for most of the early immigrants from Kwangtung to California. The name is Cantonese *tsap sei* (Mandarin *tsa sui*), “miscellaneous scraps.” Basically, it is leftover or odd-lot vegetables stir-fried together. Noodles are often included. Bean sprouts are almost invariably present, but the rest of the dish varies according to whatever is around. The origin myth of chop suey is that it was invented in San Francisco, when someone demanded food late at night at a small Chinese restaurant. Out of food, the restaurant cooked up the day's slops, and chop suey was born. (The “someone” can be a Chinese dignitary, a band of drunken miners, a San Francisco political boss, and so on). Fortune cookies, however, are a true Californian Cantonese invention, created by a noodle company in Los Angeles (loyal Angelenos insist it was in San Francisco). They were unknown in Asia until American tourists began to demand them in the last decade or two.

None of the above dishes ranks high with Cantonese gourmets, since all are mixtures of a lot of things and none demands fresh fixings. In fact, all of them are in the nature of hash—cheap, quick, easy ways to get rid of less than desirable leftovers and other scraps. Their popularity with restaurateurs is easy to explain—all the stuff that would otherwise have to go to the animals can be fed to people. As a matter of fact, they can be excellent dishes in their own right and are widely popular, but their avatars in traditional cafés and homes in Hong Kong are very different from those one encounters in restaurants catering to Westerners.

The real gourmet dishes of the south begin with seafood. Steamed fish or whole fish quick-fried and then masked with sauce; shellfish of every description prepared in countless ways; swim-bladders, sea cucumbers, cuttlefish, squid (fresh or dried), fish roes, and every other imaginable sea product—all are treated reverently. No land meats attract so much enthusiasm or attention. Seafood is most highly regarded when alive and kept in clean water, but some of the salted products are almost as popular, especially salt-dried squid, salted dried fish roes (much like the finest caviar), and salt-hidden white croaker fish. Sea cucumbers and jellyfish are almost always dried, and oysters are not only dried or salted but boiled down and strained to make the thick oyster sauce.

Among land meats, poultry has the cachet of special occasions and religious rites, but pork is the standard meat and the one that brings out the best cooking. Whole

pigs are roasted slowly with a honey or brown sugar glaze that caramelizes to a gold-red color; this makes them “golden pigs,” suitable for sacrifice, the color being of religious import as the color of life and warmth. More famous is *ch'a shao*, *cha sui* in Cantonese, which means “fork roasted.” Barbecued strips of lean pork, marinated in honey, soy, chiu, and other flavorings, are hung up on forks (or equivalent) in a special iron oven with a strong, steady, warm air flow rising through it. Poultry can be *ch'a shao* as well. *Ch'a shao* pork is sliced thin and used in noodle soups, steamed buns (the well-known *ch'a shao pao*), and other snacks and dishes.

Another class is cured meats—*laap* in Cantonese (Mandarin *la*). These include excellent sausages made with rose-flavored vodka; they are known as *laap ch'ening* (literally “cured intestines”). Pressed cured duck is, poetically, *laap aap* (Mandarin *la ya*). The strong, meaty-tasting Cantonese bacon is *laap yeuk* (*la jou*, “cured meat”). One may often see these hanging in a shady, windy place to cure; a beach with a constant sea breeze and shady trees is ideal, and swimmers may mix cheerfully with meat-curers.

The more exotic meats are not really eaten much. Dog and snake are eaten in winter to provide warmth—they are believed to be very heating, in the case of dogs because of the high amount of fat. They are not really very good, though tender young ones can be fair. In spite of all the literature on the subject I have never eaten cat or rat or seen them eaten; Cantonese known to me are repelled by the thought of eating rats. I have never seen anyone bring a live monkey to the table, cut its head open, and eat the brain out as a strengthening food, though this is done in some places. It is a medicine rather than a food in any meaningful sense. The most exotic food that is really common is frog legs, which are less popular than in France but not to be ignored. Known as “paddy chickens” and cooked as one would cook chicken, they are very good, especially chunked and stir-fried with black beans. Wild game of every sort is eaten when available and believed to be strengthening or otherwise medicinal; owls and nightjars cure headaches, “white cranes” (egrets) cure soul disorders and convey long life, and—among items that are less purely medicinal—wild ducks are believed to be tremendously strengthening, probably because the high iron content of the meat once helped many anemic persons.

The Cantonese are less thrifty than their immediate neighbors; they do not normally eat blood or relish intestines and spinal cord. They will use anything in a pinch, but on the whole they prefer the cuts used in the more eclectic parts of the Western world. One major exception is poultry feet, which are greatly loved both for making stock and for nibbling. Well-cooked duck and goose webs are considered real delicacies. I have heard that Hong Kong uses twice as many pairs of poultry feet as it does actual birds. The additional feet are imported from Canada and elsewhere. Milk dishes are found, mostly due to Western influence starting with the Macau Portuguese in the sixteenth century.

The Chinese fondness for snacks and “small eats” reaches a kind of apotheosis in the south. Substantial breakfasts of congee with peanuts, meat, fish, sauces, or similar

foods are common. Noodle soups with meat (red-cooked beef or ch'a shao pork are typical) and won ton soups are even commoner. The amount of noodles per serving is large enough to make these dishes full meals in themselves. The rise of Western-type baked goods has led to a wide range of breads, rolls, and pastries that have fitted into the snacking pattern.

But the ultimate in "small eating" is the Cantonese institution of *iam ch'a* (Mandarin *he cha*: "to drink tea"). Drinking tea traditionally involves the consumption of snacks known as *tim sam* (borrowed into English as *dum sum*, pronounced "deem some"). This phrase (the Mandarin is *tien hsin*) means "to dot the heart," a peculiar idiom of obscure origin, meaning something like "to hit the spot." "Dot-hearts" (as Buwei Yang Chao calls them; Chao 1947) are found throughout China, but in Cantonese culture they become the sole food at huge luncheons or late breakfasts, while elsewhere in China they are definitely "small" affairs. There are hundreds of them. Many restaurants specialize in them, such as the famous Luk Yu Tea House of Hong Kong, which was one of the finest Cantonese restaurants until its recent move from tiny, aged, cramped quarters in the garment district to fancier lodgings uptown. Typical *tim sam* are *ha kau* (Mandarin *hsia chiau*), based on minced shrimp and other items wrapped in thin dough skin; *sin man* (*shao mi*), with meat filling and different skin composition; taro horns, chopped meat covered with mashed taro dough, rolled into a hornlike shape, and deep-fried; ch'a shao pao; other pao of many kinds; beef balls pungently flavored with soy sauce, ginger and so on; *faan kin*, oily chopped fillings wrapped in rice-flour dough skins; duck webs on rice; *tsung* or *jung*, glutinous rice dumplings stuffed with chicken or aromatic seed fillings, wrapped in lotus or broad bamboo leaves, and steamed; and anything else the cook can think of, up to and including rather substantial dishes of stew and chicken, and even suckling pig roasted and sliced. The commonest and most basic *tim sam* follow the pattern of some sort of starch staple wrapped around a filling of chopped meat, soy sauce, ginger, water chestnut, or similar extender and texturizer, oil and flavoring.

The ritual of *iam ch'a* is well established. One sits at a table in a very crowded and noisy restaurant. The waiter brings whatever tea one requests. Then one watches for the carts of *tim sam* being wheeled around the restaurant by young servitors. They cry out what they are bringing, contributing greatly to the high noise level of tea houses (my young son referred to them as "screaming places"). Diners take quite a while over the meal, waiting for favorite items to come round. At the end of the meal, a more senior waiter counts up the dishes and charges accordingly. More expensive dishes are on bigger plates, so charges are always figured by the number of empty plates; waiters have eagle eyes to forestall shifting of plates from table to table.

*Tim sam* travel fairly well—they do not depend on freshness and timing as much as most Cantonese dishes do—and there are now good tea houses in larger Western cities. The level of *tim sam* in Canton is also high, rather more so on the whole than the level of restaurant and hotel food. But one must still go to Hong Kong to get the good stuff; and the like of the old Luk Yu will probably never appear again.

Very common in Cantonese cooking are *ting*, dishes of mixed foods cut into cubes. Examples are chicken diced and stir-fried with cashew nuts and pork diced and stir-fried with vegetables. Stewed duck with barley, stewed chicken with Chinese medicines, and other stewed strengthening foods usually appear. Shark fins, the almost-inevitable showpiece of fancy banquets, are cooked in chicken soup or brown stock. A dish shared with the rest of South China, and rather greasy to anyone outside that realm, is slices of taro alternating with slices of fat fresh bacon in vertical array, the whole being steamed. Casseroles, cooked in the traditional sand pots, involve the tougher cuts of beef, or poultry, often with bean curd, Chinese cabbage, star anise, and soy ferments. Pork ribs are steamed with black beans; pork, chicken, or seafood is stir-fried with pungent little fermented confections. Fish is steamed with sliced ginger, green onion, tangerine peel, fungi, and a bit of chiu and soy sauce.

A strange local feast is *sik pin* ("eat from [the common] pot"). This consists of meats, fish, bean curd, and spices, cooked separately, then combined in a sort of stew. In some villages it is served at formal banquets as the sole dish when the idea is to legitimate a major social event (such as a wedding or adoption). It represents a self-consciously plebeian cuisine, leveling distinctions to involve all equally in the event. Like the socially equivalent U.S. barbecue, it is cooked by men (Watson 1985).

Cantonese cooking admits of many side-branches, but most of them are little known. The great tradition of Canton urban cooking, now established (with Western influences) in Hong Kong and Macau, tends to blank everything else. One exception is the cooking of the Sei Yap–Toisan area. Sei Yap or Sze Yap (four districts) refers to an area south of Canton where a very divergent dialect of Cantonese is spoken. This dialect, virtually incomprehensible to standard Cantonese speakers, extends through neighboring districts. The area is a rich vegetable-raising region but one in which the peasants were traditionally poor; population density and high taxes created the contrast of rich farms and poor farmers. These people lived to a great extent on mixed vegetable fry-ups and fried noodles; this is why the great focus on chop suey and chow mein in New World Cantonese restaurants—since most of the Chinese who came to the Western hemisphere were from the Sei Yap–Toisan region. Including as many as ten vegetables in one dish is standard—one ate whatever the garden was producing in surplus. Not much animal food was available, but the vegetables were unexcelled in freshness and quality, and Toisanese emigrants to Hong Kong and elsewhere spend a lot of time nostalgically recollecting them, or else become vegetable growers themselves.

Other subregions of the south are too poorly known for comment. Even the huge and populous province of Kwangsi, west of Kwangtung, is terra incognita as far as published material on food is concerned, although it has its own dialect of Cantonese and many minority languages as well. Informants say only that food was restricted by distance from the sea and from rich farming areas. Pork and mountain products were relatively frequent but fish, vegetables and many other things were hard to come by.

### The North

The vast and heterogeneous realm of the north is united by several factors into a single region. In this area every province has its distinctive features, but many are not particularly noteworthy. Manchuria in the northeast has yet to produce much distinctive cuisine. Shansi and Shensi in the central west are a sort of Chinese England, characterized by thrift, hard work, industrial development, and solid but stolid fare that merits little comment here. This leaves three great traditions: those of Hopei, Honan, and the northwest (particularly the Muslims).

Hopei is the province centered on Peking, although Peking is now separated in its own capital district. Peking cookery naturally dominates the province. The heir of empire, it is so elaborate as to defy description. The capital (or at least a capital) has been here since about 1000 A.D., and long before that the region was important, populous, and sophisticated. Imperial dynasties left their mark on cooking in the usual ways: cooking became more elaborate and more expensive ingredients were used. Bears' paws, camels' humps, apes' lips, and other exotica are reported in the old literature, and at least the first two were eaten in recent times at the imperial court. Bears' paws are said to be glutinous and sinewy—perhaps rather like pigs' feet on a grand scale. Much of this elaborate cuisine is dead now, lost with the world that created it. The waste and luxury of the old court were as great as one would expect; its disappearance took down with it the destructive conspicuous display.

A favorite Peking dish is rinsed lamb, Mongolian firepot with mutton. A major institution in Peking and elsewhere in the north is the Mongolian barbecue (*Meng-ku Kao-jou*). This dish is originally Altaic—the Mongols, Koreans, and other Altaic peoples have versions—but is now quite Sinicized in its Chinese form. The barbecue is not so much a dish as a ritual, and restaurants specializing in it serve nothing else of consequence. Meats of various kinds—mutton, beef, pork, game, and whatever else may come to hand—are sliced extremely thin. The diners select these and add flavoring sauces to them: soy, chiu, sesame oil, hot pepper oil (sesame oil in which chilis have been soaked), vinegar, and so on. Slivered onions, ginger and the like may be added. The meat is borne to a conical brass grill, on which it is quickly tossed until done. Fresh hot shao-ping (the small sesame-seed-covered pocket breads of Near Eastern origin) are used to make sandwiches with the cut meat. Additional spices are provided at the table. The whole affair is very much an example of the Chinese fondness for letting the diners perform much of the artistry of the meal.

Peking is famous for its "small eats" as well as for its classic dishes. Indeed, in Peking today you can probably eat better at sidewalk stalls and cafés than at the fancy restaurants that cater to tourists. Street vendors sell fruit and wheat dumplings stuffed with sweet or savory fillings. Noodle shops abound. Chiao-tzu halls sell millions of these marvelous dumplings. They are boiled or shallow-fried without stirring, in which case they are "pot-stickers," because the bottoms roast themselves onto the pan, becoming exquisitely crisp. Many of the wheat products are made

with whole-grain flour, thus are not only appealing to Western health-food devotees but also superbly flavorful. (Nothing excels freshly ground whole-grain wheat flour from the hard, red traditional wheats of Asia. The best American commercial flour cannot compete, largely because it is stored for so long.)

Honan is heir to an even longer tradition of civilization than Hopei. Of its major cities, Kaifeng was capital just before Peking was founded; Loyang was capital before that and intermittently for the previous millennium, back to 774 B.C.; Chengchou, the present provincial capital, was the seat of rule of the Shang Dynasty about 1300 B.C. Naturally these cities (and the small towns, some of which were capitals of Shang even before Chengchou was founded) look down on Peking as a mere ephemeral upstart. In my experience, the finest food in North China is to be found here; the extra millennia do seem to matter. Chengchou claims to be the native home of sweet-sour fish. The yellow croaker of the local rivers is quickly fried and then masked with the pungent, aromatic, subtle sauce. Among the countless excellent wheat products, one stands out: noodles that are made by swinging a rope of dough, doubling it over and swinging it again, keeping the noodles floured so they do not stick together. This not only makes them fine as hair, it also develops the gluten in the high-gluten local flour to a maximal degree and is an impressive performance to watch. (The stretching process of pizza crust and strudel dough is similar.) The noodles are quick-fried and serve as a bed for the fish or anything else wanting a substrate. Excellent candied apples and other fruits are made here from Honan's fine produce. Stir-frying is done carefully and gently.

Honan was the birthplace of Chinese civilization and Chinese cuisine. Recall that in Chengchou markets one can still find pottery kettles identical to those made there in the Shang Dynasty. As one would expect, the province is a meeting ground or central radiating point. All the features of Chinese cooking are found here. Skill and painstaking thought are the features of Honan cuisine, which has few local outstanding dishes (primarily because its best dishes have become pan-Chinese) but is absolutely outstanding in the creation of all of them, from the most ordinary wheat bun to the finest sweet-sour yellow fish.

China's Muslims (*Hui*) are mostly ethnic Chinese, converted or descended from part Central Asian lineages of Islamic ancestry. (The word *Hui* is derived from *Uighur*, but now refers to ethnic Chinese rather than to the Turkic folk.) Muslim cooking is localized in China's northwest—Kansu and Ninghsia—and based on the general Chinese cooking thereof, but it has spread throughout North China, since wherever they go the Muslims must have their own butcher-shops and cateries. The reason, of course, is that all regular Chinese eating places are redolent of swine, alcohol, and other fare interdicted by the Koran.

Lying near Szechuan, this area has enthusiastically adopted the chili pepper. It also makes maximal use of onions and garlic (here the influence went the other way: Szechuan evidently picked up its garlic from the northwest). The characteristic dish is thus mutton stir-fried with onions and/or garlic. Young garlic leaves, as well as the

garlicky Chinese chives, are used in soups and other foods. Pocket breads and dumplings are unexcelled here, since they were central Asian—Near Eastern borrowings in the first place. The chiao-tzu are stuffed with mutton, of course, rather than pork or shellfish. Northwestern cities such as Sian feature Muslim eateries with excellent, well-cooked food, and lively atmosphere.

### *The Minority Nationalities*

China's non-Han minorities deserve much more attention than is usually given to them. While they make up only 7 percent of the country's population, that is several tens of millions of people, dominating about half the area (much more than half until the twentieth-century expansion of the Han Chinese). There are slightly fewer than sixty minorities currently recognized, defined as groups with distinctive languages and cultures. This discussion proceeds clockwise around China.

The "Aborigines" or "mountain people" of Taiwan are speakers of widely divergent Malayo-Polynesian languages. They are primarily slash-and-burn cultivators, but settled wet-rice cultivators existed in Taiwan before the Chinese drove them to the hills or assimilated them. The aboriginal groups use rice but usually regard *Sataria* millet as their sacred food, their ancient staff of life. The commoner vegetables and root crops of Taiwan, such as taro, are grown, and chickens, pigs, and dogs are raised. Mushrooms, game, and other forest products are important foods. Food is generally very simple—boiled or cooked by methods learned from the Chinese.

Southernmost China is dominated by groups speaking Thai-Kadai languages. The Kadai languages are a tiny group, the only significant representative being Li of Hainan Island. The Li grow dry rice (hill rice) and maize in slash-and-burn fields, hunt, keep pigs, grow vegetables, and drink a great deal of home-brewed, often spiced rice beer. The Miao of Hainan and the mainland harvest glutinous or regular rice and preserve meat products. The Miao—known as Hmong in Southeast Asia and America—have taken to maize as a main crop and also raise many vegetables (Johnson 1985; Lin 1940). In short, they are typical of the up-country people of Southeast Asia, from the Philippines to eastern India. Many of the smaller Thai-speaking groups have similar life-styles. The larger Thai groups, however—speaking languages close to, but not identical to, the major tongue of Thailand—practice wet-rice cultivation and depend on rice and vegetables, eating foods broadly similar to those of the Chinese. China's largest minority, the Chuang of Kwangsi, are typical. One Chuang locality has attracted attention because of the extreme longevity of its citizens, many of whom are over a hundred years old. Almost 7 percent are over sixty-five, very old for China. The main foods here are corn, squash, hair gourd / winter melon, and wild greens; this healthy diet must have something to do with the longevity but cannot be the full explanation (*China Reconstructs*, no. 5, 1981).

*Zanthoxylum* spp. similar but not identical to Chinese brown pepper is an important spice. The area of Hsishuang Panna (from Thai *Sipsong Panna*, "twelve states") in southern Yunnan is dominated, in the lowlands, by Northern Thais speaking the

same language that is called Laotian in Laos. They depend on glutinous rice, which is rolled into a ball and dipped in very highly spiced sauce featuring chilis—adopted as enthusiastically among Thais as among Szechuanese—and *Zanthoxylum*. In Laos and northern Thailand, and so presumably in south Yunnan, another very popular sauce is made from fermented giant waterbug. Raw chopped beef spiced with brown and chili peppers is another Thai delicacy that I assume is common in the low Mekong Valley of Yunnan. Many medicinal and flavoring herbs grow in the mountains and villages of this area, as well as many Southeast Asian green vegetables and fruits.

Scattered throughout the hills and mountains of the southern half of China are Miao and Yao peoples who depend on slash-and-burn cultivation of maize and rice and on the raising of pigs, buffaloes, cattle, chickens, and dogs. They also grow vegetables, including hot chilis, and obtain much food by hunting and gathering. In Kweichow and Yunnan they border on Tibeto-Burman speakers—minorities with languages related to Tibetan and Burmese, and thus, more distantly, to Chinese. The Tibeto-Burmans of the lower, more level plateaus, such as the plateau of Yunnan, tend to be wet-rice cultivators with agriculture and food almost identical to the Chinese (but simpler). On the higher or steeper mountains, maize becomes the dominant crop, and above the maize belt is a zone of barley and buckwheat. These coarse grains are eaten in the form of thick, heavy cakes, and—with thin vegetable soup, usually involving cabbages—are often almost the only food in these regions. However, the usual animals are raised, and forest products gathered. The Nosu or Yi of Szechuan are typical, living on thick buckwheat and maize cakes and on parched oats ground and mixed with water. They eat boiled meat at major feasts. A popular dish (found widely in South China) is minced raw meat—the Nosu favor internal organs—seasoned with black and red peppers and other spices. They eat raw liver, lungs, and heart, minced with chilis. Oatmeal is used, and so is bean oil (Pollard 1921).

The high altitude agriculture of all East Asia is barley and buckwheat, grown in rotation. The six-rowed Himalayan varieties of barley extend through Tibet and much of Central Asia; two-rowed barley occurs farther north. Barley is a winter crop, buckwheat a spring one. The better buckwheat is *Fagopyrum esculentum*; higher up, *F. tataricum*, which is bitter and low-yielding, must be grown instead. Both mature quickly and survive in the very dry, windy, cold summers of the mountains; the bitter buckwheat, like the barley, grows to over 14,000 feet in Tibet. In such high altitudes, no vegetables will grow, but cabbages and white radishes flourish almost to this level. In lower parts of Tibet, along the Tsangpo (upper Brahmaputra) River and its tributaries, various cool-weather foods such as apples can be grown, and some of Tibet is even low enough for rice and maize. In high Tibet, the only meats are yak, sheep, and wild game, but in slightly lower areas there are pigs and cattle. Cattle hybridized with yak produce an animal of superior size, meat yield, stamina, and milking quality.

The staple food of Tibet is barley, parched and then ground into a coarse meal (tsamba), eaten in buttered tea. Yak butter is usually used. It cannot be kept fresh, and so is fermented into a butyric counterpart of yogurt (like the *men* of North Africa). It is mixed into the coarse, black, brick tea that the Chinese have always palmed off on the Tibetans, and the tsamba mixed into that, to form a paste or porridge which can be eaten with spoon or fingers. Meat and vegetables are usually boiled, which means they stay half raw, for the air is so thin that water boils below 200 degrees Fahrenheit. Milk, yogurt, cheese, and other dairy products are consumed in large quantities. Tibetan elites at feasts ate a provincial version of northwest Chinese food: chiao-tzu, noodles, stir-fried meat and vegetables, good tea, fruits, nuts. The food, either emphatically native or borrowed from China, forms a striking contrast with the heavily Indian-influenced art and religion.

North of Tibet are the vast deserts of Sinkiang, Chinese Central Asia, where farming can be practiced only in oases. These are inhabited mostly by people of Turkic stock, primarily the Uighurs, but also groups known collectively as Turki. A few other ethnic groups, including some Tadjiks speaking a language close to Persian, inhabit the westernmost oases. Food in these areas is not related to Chinese at all, except for recent superficial borrowings; it is part and parcel of the great Persian cultural area. The staple is wheat bread, sourdough-raised or otherwise leavened, and cooked in large, flat, boat-shaped or oblong loaves that puff up on baking. This provides a pocket for inserting anything one is eating with the bread, making a kind of sandwich. The loaves are much bigger and thicker than the equivalent pita breads of the Near East. They are often sprinkled with sesame seeds. Grilled meats, especially small shish kebabs, are traditional accompaniments. Boiled mutton and dairy products, primarily yogurt but also cheddarlike cheese, are common fare. Vegetables except for onions and garlic are few, but this is made up for by the incomparable fruit; apricots, grapes, and melons predominate. The finest melons of the world, according to many gourmets, are the green-and-yellow-striped Persian melons of the Hami area in the Turfan Depression in the center of Sinkiang. (The Uzbeks, close kin to the Uighurs, have a proverb: "For procreation, a woman; for pleasure, a boy; but for divine ecstasy, a melon.") Watermelons of excellent quality also abound. Apricots, mulberries, and grapes are often dried, producing a staple for winter use or for cooking with lamb. Filled dumplings equivalent to chiao-tzu are made.

The nomads of northwest China—Turkic groups like the Kirghiz and all the various Mongol tribes and linguistic groups—live on bread or porridge made from traded grain, and on dairy products. Meat is not often eaten, since animals are too valuable to butcher frequently; when old they are often sold rather than butchered at home. Yogurt is the staple. Mare's milk is typically fermented with staple yeast into *kumys*, which tastes like slightly spiked buttermilk. *Kumys* can be distilled into *ayran* or *araq*, which is said to taste like bad vodka with a little sour buttermilk added. *Kumys* by itself is a staple drink, indeed a staple food, for its nutritional value is higher than its alcoholic content. The nomads grill or boil meat when they do get it, and have borrowed many North Chinese and Persian dishes for feast foods.

Related to the Mongols linguistically are the Tungus peoples of northern Manchuria. The Manchu were one such group; they are now essentially all assimilated into the Chinese population, but other small Tungus groups still exist. Those along the main rivers live primarily by fishing, drying most of the catch and using it as the staple. Some made their clothes and tents out of fish skins until the twentieth century. Other groups live by hunting, gathering, and practicing small-scale agriculture. Game is still a staple food in a very few areas, incredible as this may seem in modern China with its billion people; moose (known as "elk" in the Old World) and deer are the main sources. Deer are now domesticated and farmed on a large scale. Other animals from mole rats to racoon dogs are eaten. Ginseng is an important product of these northernmost reaches of China, but it is far too expensive for most of the people there to eat in any quantity. Sorghum, soybeans, buckwheat, barley and (farther south) maize are pushing their way northward into these forest realms.

Last of Chinese minorities in our clockwise progress are the Koreans, also an Altaic people; there are somewhat fewer than a million of them on the China side of the border. The land is basically montane there, and they live predominantly on buckwheat and barley, typically made into noodles. Maize, rice and other foods are increasing in importance; millets, soybeans cabbages, radishes, and allium crops flourish. Noodles or boiled grain are eaten with meat—beef is especially important—and fish. The fiery Korean pickles, most common of which is kimchi, are consumed in large quantities; they are made of cabbages, radish, or other vegetables cured by lactic-acid fermentation in very strong brine or salt, with enormous quantities of chiles and garlic added. Anything and everything can wind up in the kimchi jar: chickens, fish, onion leaves, pine seeds, wild herbs, mushrooms. Pine seeds are an important food and export; the main source is *Pinus koraiensis*, the cedar pine. Other forest nuts and herbs abound, from hazelnuts to ginseng. These, domesticated deer, racoon dogs (*Nyctereutes procyonoides*, miscalled "badger" in English; a trickster in Japan, a medicinal strengthening food in China), and other forest products are economic mainstays of the Korean autonomous region. Like the other minority zones of China, this area remained backward until recently, the people treated as second-class citizens. This attitude changed dramatically during the 1950s, but the improvement was reversed in the 1960s and bad conditions prevailed widely until the late 1970s. At present development of minority regions is proceeding apace, and much less prejudice is seen than one found a few years ago. This has its costs: Han Chinese penetration and acculturation are increasing today.

What can we learn from this lightning survey of China's regional cuisines? First, the efficiency I stress in this book goes only so far. Cultural and subcultural preferences take precedence much of the time. A clearly inferior adaptation will go to the wall, but when two alternatives are roughly equal in efficiency, the choice between them is made on the basis of cultural valuation. The Chuang eat regular rice, their close linguistic relatives of Hsishuang Panna eat glutinous rice; there is no reason except tradition and a desire to keep one's own culture, foodways, and lifestyle distinct

and marked. The Cantonese avoid chiles, the Hunanese love them; chiles are highly nutritious, but the Cantonese simply cannot get used to highly spiced food. (I have sometimes treated Cantonese and Min people to Szechuanese meals; their reactions are at best polite.) Such exotica as bears' paws may persist in spite of obvious inefficiency because tradition and conspicuous consumption demand. The boundaries between staple crops—maize and barley, wheat and millet—are sharpened by ethnic and regional preference; they often stop short at a cultural boundary, instead of fading out slowly along a climate gradient. Foodways are quite resistant to change, persisting over thousands of miles and years; though acculturation is occurring rapidly now, as it has at times in the past.

Second, it is still true that much is determined by what grows best and most cheaply. Rice is always the staple in the lowland south, wheat in the dry north, barley and buckwheat in cold areas. Animals are raised where they can best be raised. These generalizations transcend cultural differences; the Tibetans may make their barley into tsamba, the Koreans into noodles, and the Chinese into pearl barley, but all raise this crop where the weather is cold and dry.

It seems that people are basically efficient and economically rational in the narrow sense, but that they will also sacrifice a certain amount to keep their cultural distinctiveness. At one extreme, the Turkic peoples of Central Asia are separated by language, religion, climate, agricultural tradition, and classical culture from the Chinese, and have quite different foodways. At the other, the Chuang live with the Chinese and farm like them, and so eat fairly similar foods. In between, religion often makes a barrier—the Muslims avoid pork even where pigs are the most efficient animal to raise—and language or dialect make barriers. The stronger or higher the barrier, the more people will sacrifice to maintain it in their foodways.

All this has led to better food, and to better use of the earth's resources, for it maximizes diversity and experimentation and provides for the retention of good ideas that would otherwise have been abandoned due to some short-term economic concern. Culture has its ecological merits as an encourager of diversity, a conservator of lore, an educational device, and a guide to protection and management of resources. Even this cursory survey should show that human-environment relations are not simple matters of either "tradition" or "environmental determinism," but a complex interplay of or accommodation between both. Long may such accommodation endure.

An interesting part of regionalism is the ways regional foods are used self-consciously as ethnic markers. Many such regional foods are quite commonly served at important and special occasions but very rarely in the home. Knowledge of regional cuisines is spread to a great extent by restaurants, but restaurants rarely serve plebeian but important and clearly regional specialties such as soured milk in west China, thick corn cakes in the west and northwest, buckwheat in the west and north, sweet potatoes in the east and southeast, millet porridge in the north, or pearled kaoliang in Manchuria. Chinese do not seem militantly supportive of their poverty foods

or prone to stereotype their neighbors thereby. This is probably because poverty was until recently an all too familiar fact of life in most of China. When people are poor, they tend to think of the foods of the rich. When people are rich, they *must* afford themselves the luxury of clinging to the familiar foods of their early, and poorer, days. Soul food, for example, was not highly regarded by its creators; only when American blacks became urbanized did soul food become an institution, and then primarily among better-off and better-educated members of the community. The somewhat similar apotheosis of "bitter herbs" in Mao's China seems to have been premature. The memories it revived were *too* bitter; I have heard little about "dinners of bitter herbs" lately.


The other obvious fact that emerges from the survey is that the items are genuinely local and tend to mark off the cuisine involved. This is more true of dishes than ingredients, of which *amount* of use is important but the *kind* of ingredient rarely is. I have overemphasized the regionality of dishes by disregarding cases in which a given area is known for the especially good way it prepares a universally known dish, as for instance Honan is known for a form of sweet-sour fish. A rather more interesting case is the set of what I called *general images*, in which general taste and texture of food is stressed and a given cuisine is distinguished if it has the *most X* of the cuisines of China (*X* being, for example, one of the classic Five Flavors and/or other pronounced flavors or textures).

For a regional dish to reach worldwide restaurant fame, it must be truly regional; it must be a protein dish, including some meat or equivalent; and it should be elaborate and expensive. Ingredients and general images should be pronounced and evident in fairly sophisticated cooking, should be the *most X* in China (if possible), and should not be strictly poverty foods. The more clearly limited an item is to a given region, and the more extremely obvious its use is, the more it labels the region. What is not so obvious is why a region should be labeled by fancy foods more often than by truly typical (i.e., widely eaten) ones. The fact that most people know others' cuisines only from restaurants is only one reason; the rest of the explanation is that people tend to stress foods that they like and foods that are prestigious. Expensive ingredients are prestigious, as are complexity and skill needed for preparation.

There are interesting problems with this approximation of an explanation of why some foods become markers. First, it tends to be eaters of the cuisine in question that make a food a success, by choosing it frequently, serving it to guests, serving it at restaurant feasts, featuring it on menus if they run restaurants themselves, and so on. Second, such dishes as Ma Po bean curd and Hokkien fried noodles have some protein in them, but they are hardly the quintessence of sophisticated cuisine. Out of many cheap and available foods, why are these chosen over other foods typical of the regions they stand for? Why does Ma Po bean curd mean "Szechuan" to a world of eaters, when the equally characteristic West Chinese "home-style bean curd" does not? Why are Teochiu fish balls with malt syrup sauce served frequently at self-consciously Teochiu feasts when other Teochiu foods are not?

These foods are among those that embody most clearly the general traits ascribed to the given cuisine; they are also very popular with the people whose region they are taken to typify. But so are other foods. A food that is particularly striking, extreme, or common will almost always become an ethnic marker, unless it is a poverty food, but some not particularly notable foods are also labels. In these cases, I suspect that pure chance establishes them as markers. At one time perhaps they were particularly common, or particularly well prepared, or no similar foods were known.

In the actual use of these foods we come closer to a structure in the usual sense of that abused word. They stand at the head of a given section on a restaurant menu; they are criterially served at self-consciously ethnic dinners, though few have the really rigid nation/festival connection of our Anglo-American Thanksgiving menu. Chinese of a given ethnic group are faithful to their cuisine. Most of my Hong Kong informants are in restaurants purveying their own ethnic cuisine and rarely or never tried others (although no one in Hong Kong can avoid having a good deal of Cantonese food). There was little of the experimentation with different cuisines that is characteristic of diners out in other cultures. However, it is in the last analysis impossible to separate marker foods from nonmarkers at any single specific breakpoint.<sup>5</sup>



## Traditional Medical 11 Values of Food

"It is hard to find a dish in the Middle Kingdom that is not based upon the recipe of some sage who lived centuries ago and who had an hygienic principle in mind when he designed it." So wrote E. H. Nichols in 1902, with pardonable exaggeration. The truth is, of course, less extreme, but the point is well taken: the Chinese have a complex and very ancient science of nutrition.

In the Chou Dynasty, the *Chou Li* (Rituals of Chou) prescribed that nutritionists be attached to the court as part of the highest class of medical personnel. The imperial household had a large number of specialized cooks. The high position of nutritional medicine and of culinary art, in and out of the imperial court, continued to be characteristic of Chinese civilization throughout historic times.

Chinese tradition categorizes food in several different ways. Foodstuffs are classified according to biological relationship. All these categories cross-cut; a given item can be classed under many heads, depending on context or purpose. This chapter concerns the traditional classification of the foodstuffs themselves—their traditional and folk biology. I begin with some comparisons of Chinese and English names for foods.

The earliest record of plant names from China is provided by the Book of Songs, supposedly compiled by Confucius (see chapter 3). Hsuan Keng found and identified seventy-five plant names therein. Almost all of them, and all the food plant names, are simple, basic terms. By the time of the first agricultural manuals known, in the Han Dynasty, several compound terms were in general use. Today, most common plant names are binomial compounds; scientists can readily give any plant in the world such a name. Some of the more recent coinages are complicated: kohlrabi is "ball-stalked sweet vegetable." Some are delightful: a citron that looks like a clenched fist is "Buddha's hand fruit," and so the Mexican chayote, which looks like the citron, is "Buddha's hand gourd." Some are borrowed words: fenugreek is *hu lu pa* from Arabic *hulba*. Some are translations: grapefruit is *p'u t'ao yu* (grape pomelo). Some are descriptive: fig is "flowerless fruit" (fig flowers are tiny and hidden inside the "fruit," which is actually a swollen twig).

Meanwhile, in English, someone has recently turned the luffa or silk gourd into "Chinese okra," though it is neither related nor similar to okra. Apricot kernels are