

## Insight into Chinese Ways™ Series

### Part 4: Chinese Food

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#### The Chinese “Food Culture”



Whenever the Chinese gather together, food is involved. Rich and poor, Chinese people consider delicious food a basic necessity.

As early as 203 B.C., the key Chinese history record *Han Books* (汉书), noted that “people regard food as their prime necessity.” Some 30 years ago, the most common greeting among Chinese people was “have you eaten yet?”

Chinese people travel from near and from afar to be together for a family reunion dinner on the eve of the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year). Business deals in China are more commonly struck over dinner than at the office.

#### How Much Do You Know?

To understand the culture of a country, one should first experience its food and drinks.

You shouldn’t believe for a minute that all Chinese people know their Chinese food. I am telling you a secret: “I am Cantonese and I have not tried even the tip of the Cantonese food iceberg, so let alone food from different parts of China.”

Are you ready for this? There are 56 ethnic groups in China; 22 provinces, 4 municipalities, 5 autonomous regions, 2 special administrative regions; under them are 661 cities and numerous towns and villages – all have their own specialty cuisines.

But don’t worry, Chinese food can be categorized into eight culinary cuisines: Anhui, Cantonese, Fujian, Hunan, Jiangsu, Shandong, Sichuan, and Zhejiang cuisines.

#### Nature Plans What You Eat

There are different seasonal fruits and vegetables at different times of the year. According to the Chinese, they play a special role in our diet and well-being. Using seasonal fruits and vegetables in cuisine not only give us a chance to enjoy their freshness and

nutrients, many of such food also fit into replenishing what our bodies need during a particular time of the year.

Watermelon for example, is a fruit harvests in the summer. Eating this seasonal fruit in the summer not only helps to replenish the water contents in our body, it also helps to lower the internal body heat. Eating daikon radish in the winter helps to clear out the dry heat and the phlegm in the body.

Different regions have their own specialty foods and cuisines, and some are created to help strengthen our immunity. For example, the air in south China is moist and the weather is humid verses the drier north China, and that is why people from south China are more vulnerable to rheumatism. People from Sichuan take out the moistness in their body by using red peppercorns in their cuisine, while people in Guangdong rely greatly on herbal soups to keep a balance in their body.

### “Specific Water and Soil Raise Specific People”

We tend to stereotype people by marking their hometown or their accents – people from Shanghai are good businessmen, people from Wenzhou are risk seeking, people from Sichuan know how to enjoy life and they cannot properly pronounce “hu”, people in Guangdong eat pretty much anything ....

There is a famous saying in Chinese: “一方水土养一方人”, when translating this literally, it is “specific water and soil raise specific people” – you may think that the water and food of a specific region raise/feed their people, a fairly reasonable explanation here especially when we are talking about food.

However, according to the English translation of *Historical Records* (史记), this famous saying should translate to: “each place has its streams in from all over the country.” It actually means each region has its different environment and culture, and based on such differences, people’s character, lifestyle, ideas, and history are different and are subject to change, and for those living in the same locale, their character may be quite similar.

On the one hand, it sounds fair to stereotype people based on where they are from, on the other, it is not particularly useful to stereotype people based on their hometown because mobility of the people negated the origin basis. For example, someone originally from Liaoning may have emigrated to Shanghai for an extended period of time and so may act with more Shanghai traits than Liaoning traits.

Food are the same – when produce is cultivated in different soil, environment and weather, the harvest may be very different from where it originates. This applies to Chinese cuisines as well: Chinese food in the U.S., as many people recognize, are mostly Americanized as the taste of the local hosts are more leaning towards the sweet side.

### Chinese Food is Healthy

For a long time, people were under the impression that Chinese food is healthy. This is how the logic applied:

*Because: Chinese people eat Chinese food*

*Because: Chinese people are thin*

*Therefore: Chinese food is healthy*

Today, as many as 300 million Chinese people are obese. The World Health Organization termed obesity in China as a major health concern. Obviously, this waistline growth in China is due not only to the change of diet but also life style and exercise patterns.

Does the above logic still stand today that Chinese food is healthy?