

Foodways of Empire: Culinary History and Regional Cuisines of China

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Introduction

What we eat is never only about hunger. It is also about power, memory, and belonging. In China, where dynasties rose and fell alongside canals and caravans, cuisine has long served as a legible record of empire itself. *Foodways of Empire* explores how fields, kitchens, markets, monasteries, and state granaries were bound together in a system that made dinner possible—and meaningful—for emperors and porters alike. The book asks how a polity so vast could cultivate a sense of culinary unity while celebrating—and sometimes policing—profound regional diversity.

Our method follows ingredients and techniques as they travel. We begin with grains—millet, rice, and wheat—that anchored settlement and taxation, then trace the spread of fermentation, the alchemy of salt and soy, and the pharmacological logics that made food a kind of everyday medicine. Spices and stimulants—peppercorns, chiles, tea—reveal the reach of caravan routes and sea lanes, while state monopolies and tribute systems show how taste could be engineered from the top down. The Grand Canal moved more than grain; it circulated ideas of flavor, technique, and class aspiration.

Cuisine, however, is not only a matter of rulers and routes. It is lived in households and alleyways, through gendered divisions of labor and the craft knowledge of cooks and vendors. Migration—seasonal, coerced, opportunistic—reshaped palates and plates. Hakka, Hui, and other mobile communities adapted recipes to new ecologies and markets, braiding religious practice and regional habit into dishes that signaled identity as loudly as language or dress. Across centuries, what counted as “refined” or “rustic” food mapped onto hierarchies of status, education, and urbanity.

Political change left strong flavors. Grain tribute systems disciplined landscapes; famine relief and tax remissions altered sowing decisions; military garrisons seeded new markets; sumptuary edicts codified banquets and prohibited abundance. In modern times, collectivization, factory canteens, and ration coupons narrowed choice while standardizing taste; later reforms reopened trade, accelerated regional branding, and propelled Chinese foods into global circuits. The table, in other words, offers a clear vantage on statecraft, scarcity, and modernization.

Regional profiles form the heart of the book, showing how terroir and technology meet. Cantonese cooks leveraged maritime abundance and merchant cosmopolitanism to refine light, fresh preparations; Sichuanese palates embraced ma-la as both ecological adaptation and cultural preference; Jiangnan kitchens made delicacy a philosophy; northern wheat lands perfected noodles, buns, and bold broths; Yunnan and the northwest wove highland foraging and Muslim traditions into distinctive repertoires. These chapters chart how landscapes, markets, and politics together compose what we call a regional cuisine.

Finally, we present recipes-as-history: annotated dishes that function as miniature archives. Rather than offering a conventional cookbook, we use recipes to illuminate

production regimes, toolkits, and tastes—how a cut of pork indexes land tenure, how a pickling brine encodes salt taxation, how wok hei depends on fuel economies and urban density. Readers are invited to cook with an historian’s curiosity, treating technique as evidence and seasoning as argument.

Foodways of Empire thus links the intimate act of eating to wide systems of extraction, exchange, and meaning. Drawing on gazetteers, tax registers, travelogues, temple records, factory manuals, and oral histories, the chapters that follow argue that cuisine is not a passive mirror of society but an active force in shaping it. By tracing ingredients, trade in spices and grains, and culinary techniques across time and space, we show how class, migration, and state policy have long determined what ends up in the bowl—and why it tastes the way it does.

CHAPTER ONE: Millet, Rice, and Wheat: Grains at the Core of Civilization

Every great cuisine rests on a single, unglamorous foundation: a grain that can be grown in bulk, stored through winter, and cooked with whatever water and fuel happen to be at hand. In China, three grains—millet, rice, and wheat—have taken turns playing that role, their fortunes rising and falling with the climate, the soil, the demands of the state, and the slow drift of farming populations across a landscape so varied that it seems less like one country than like a continent wearing a single coat of paint. To understand how Chinese food came to be what it is, one must begin not in the palace kitchen or the spice port but in the mud of a flooded paddy or the dust of a dry millet field.

The oldest grain in the Chinese story is millet. Specifically, two species of small-grained millet—foxtail millet, known in Chinese as xiaomi, and broomcorn millet, or su—dominated the dry, wind-scoured plains of the Yellow River basin for millennia before rice or wheat made serious inroads. Archaeologists have found carbonized millet grains at the site of Cishan in present-day Hebei Province dating to roughly 6000 BCE, stored in underground pits alongside stone grinding tools. At that point, the communities living along the Yellow River were not yet "Chinese" in any political or linguistic sense, but they were already engaged in the activity that would define Chinese civilization: coaxing edible grain from semi-arid soil with limited and unpredictable rainfall.

Cishan tells a story of careful adaptation. The millets suited the environment precisely because they required far less water than rice and matured quickly enough to escape the worst of autumn droughts. The people who planted them were not simply hungry;

they were observant. They selected seeds season after season, favoring varieties that held onto their grain rather than scattering it, a trait botanists call "non-shattering." This is not a decision made by any single farmer in a single year but a cumulative process of unconscious and perhaps deliberate selection unfolding over hundreds of generations. The grain, in a sense, domesticated the people as much as the reverse: communities organized their settlements, their calendars, and eventually their hierarchies around the reliable return of the millet harvest.

Down south, in the warm, rain-soaked valleys of the Yangtze River, a very different grain was taking hold. Rice—*Oryza sativa*—had been domesticated in the Yangtze basin by roughly 7000 BCE, and possibly earlier. At the Hemudu site near modern Ningbo, excavators uncovered quantities of rice husks, stalks, and wooden paddles alongside bone hoes and water buffalo remains, painting a picture of wet-rice cultivation already well established in the fifth millennium BCE. The technique was radically different from millet farming. Rice, especially the wetland variety that would come to dominate Chinese agriculture, demanded flooded fields, intricate water management, and a willingness to stand ankle-deep in mud for weeks at a time. It was, by any standard, more labor-intensive than scattering millet on dry ground and waiting.

That labor intensity, however, carried its own rewards. A single flooded paddy could yield two or even three harvests in the warm, humid south, producing far more calories per acre than the millet fields of the north could manage. Over the centuries, this productivity advantage tilted the demographic center of gravity southward, a shift that would accelerate again and again through Chinese history as wars, famines, and state projects pushed migrants down the river valleys. The rice farmer's life was harder in daily effort but richer in long-term payoff, and the grain itself—soft, fragrant, and infinitely versatile when steamed, boiled, or fermented—became the staple that most of the world now associates with Chinese food.

For a long time, though, rice was a southern luxury in the north, and millet held firm as the grain of the central plains. The Huai River, running roughly east from the mountains of Henan to the sea, served as an informal but deeply felt culinary boundary. North of the Huai, millet congee and millet cakes were the everyday diet; south of it, rice steamed in bamboo baskets defined the meal. This was not a hard line—trade, tribute, and seasonal migration carried rice north and millet south—but it was real enough that it echoes in modern regional food identities. Even today, a person from Shandong thinks of wheat noodles as comfort food, while a person from Hunan thinks of rice, and both instincts trace back to ecological realities that were already old when the first dynasties took shape.

Enter wheat. Wheat—both the winter variety, *Triticum aestivum*, and the spring variety, *T. turgidum*—arrived in China from western Asia, likely filtering through Central Asian steppe corridors sometime in the second or third millennium BCE. For

centuries it remained a minor crop, treated with suspicion or indifference by farmers who already had reliable millet harvests and saw no reason to replant their fields with an unfamiliar grain that demanded a different rotation and heavier soils. The early Chinese word for wheat, *xiaomai*, literally means "small wheat," a name that hints at the modest regard in which it was initially held compared to the established staples.

The breakthrough came slowly, driven less by flavor than by necessity. As populations grew and the best millet land began to show signs of exhaustion, farmers in the northern plains started experimenting with wheat as part of a broader shift toward crop diversification. By the Han dynasty period, wheat had become a significant crop in the Guanzhong plain around Chang'an (modern Xi'an) and was spreading eastward into Shandong and the North China Plain. Its adoption accelerated partly because of the millstone: wheat could be ground into flour in ways that millet, with its tiny seeds and tough husks, could not. Flour opened the door to a whole new category of food—noodles, dumplings, steamed buns—that would eventually define northern Chinese cuisine in ways that millet never had.

The milling revolution deserves emphasis. A millet grain can be boiled whole or pounded into a rough flour, but it does not lend itself to the elastic, gluten-rich doughs that wheat produces. When Chinese cooks first began working with wheat flour, they were not simply substituting one grain for another; they were inventing an entirely new culinary vocabulary. The hand-pulled noodle, the stuffed dumpling, the layered steamed bun—these were not borrowed from Central Asia wholesale but developed in Chinese kitchens as responses to the material possibilities of gluten. A stretch of dough pulled between flour-dusted hands became something that no millet porridge or rice cake could ever be: chewy, sculptural, and endlessly adaptable to fillings, sauces, and broths.

Even so, rice never lost its prestige in regions where it could be grown. The social hierarchy of grains in early China was not a simple matter of wheat ascending and millet descending. In the south, rice remained the grain of everyday life and of aspiration alike—polished white rice was the mark of a well-run household, while broken rice, bran-heavy rice, or rice mixed with cheaper grains signaled poverty. In the north, wheat products could be equally status-laden: a fine hand-pulled noodle or a golden baked *mantou* demonstrated skill and wealth just as surely as a bowl of polished rice did in Suzhou or Guangzhou. The grain you ate and how you prepared it told the world where you lived, what your land could produce, and how much labor you could command.

That grain was also political is a theme this book returns to again and again, but the roots of the relationship are visible right here in the Neolithic and early dynastic record. The ability to store surplus grain—millet in sealed pits, rice in elevated granaries—was what allowed some communities to support specialist craft workers, standing armies, and a priestly or administrative class capable of keeping records and

organizing collective labor. The granary preceded the palace, and the tax collector followed close behind. Early Chinese states measured their power in bushels of stored grain, and the bureaucratic vocabulary of the first imperial administrations—terms like *caoliang* (granary management) and *tianze* (agricultural tax)—reflects an understanding that the state's legitimacy rested, quite literally, on whether the harvest came in.

Cooking methods followed grain type with almost mechanical logic. Millet, with its small, round grains, was most easily boiled into a thick porridge or congee—a style of preparation that persisted across the north for thousands of years and survives today in breakfast bowls of *xiaomi zhou* topped with pickled vegetables and dried tofu. Rice, by contrast, invited steaming: the fluffy, separate grains produced by a bamboo steamer over boiling water became the ideal vehicle for stir-fried vegetables, braised meats, and savory sauces. Wheat flour, once milled, could be boiled (dumplings, noodles), steamed (buns, *mantou*), baked against a clay oven wall (*bing*, the ancestor of the scallion pancake), or fried into crispy shells for sweets and savory snacks. Each grain, in other words, did not just feed its eaters differently; it made them think about food differently, shaping kitchen tools, meal structures, and even the rhythm of the day around which grain was prepared.

There is a quiet dignity to this story that is worth pausing over. The modern reader, accustomed to supermarket shelves groaning with global produce year-round, may find it difficult to imagine a world in which the arrival or loss of a single grain variety could reshape an entire region's culture. But for most of Chinese history, the margin between abundance and famine was razor-thin, and the grain that grew reliably on your land was not a lifestyle choice but a matter of survival. This is why Chinese food culture, at its deepest level, is not about exotic ingredients or elaborate technique—it is about grain, and the extraordinary lengths to which communities, families, and states went to ensure its supply.

The three grains—millet rooted in the northern loess, rice spreading across the southern alluvial plains, and wheat threading its way between them—did not exist in isolation. They overlapped, competed, and blended. Farmers in the middle Yangtze grew both rice and wheat in alternating seasons. Garrisons on the northern frontier experimented with rice paddies fed by canal water. Merchants carried millet cakes on horseback across the steppe and rice wine in ceramic amphorae downriver. The circulation of grain was, in many ways, the circulation of civilization itself, and the dietary boundaries it created—north versus south, dryland versus wetland, millet versus rice—remain legible in China's regional cuisines to this day.

What is perhaps most remarkable is how little the fundamental equation changed over the millennia. Empires rose and fell; writing systems, pottery styles, and political ideologies transformed beyond recognition; yet the farmer in Hebei in 1500 BCE and the farmer in 1500 CE were both engaged in essentially the same negotiation with the

same three grains, coaxing nutrition from the same soils using tools that a visitor from an earlier century would have recognized. This continuity is not stagnation. It is a testament to the deep fit between grain, landscape, and culture—a fit so tight that when it was disrupted, by war, by climate change, by the arrival of a new crop from across the sea, the effects rippled outward through every layer of society, from the imperial granary to the village breakfast pot.

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