
Jeanette Werning

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Höllmann’s history of Chinese culinary culture is not a stringently academic treatise. Rather, the author ranges widely over aspects of Chinese food—the pleasant, the funny, the horrifying and the scholarly. Illustrations are amply supplied through pictures of archaeological finds, diagrams, paintings, propaganda posters and photographs. Frequent citations of historiographic and literary sources highlight traditional Chinese views on their own culinary history. In addition, the author, an amateur chef and professor of sinology at Munich University, offers up delicious recipes as little treats for his readers.

Yet between the many witty anecdotes that recommend the volume as entertaining bed-time or holiday reading, Höllmann offers a fascinating insight into the social and economic history of China, including archaeological research and sources of early history. An inventory of food plants in China’s history is something new and it deserves to be relished.

Appearing harmless enough at first sight, the table of contents lists eight chapters: (1) To begin with: Rice does not rain from Heaven, (2) Harmony between the teeth, (3) The transforming power of fire and the matching of flavours, (4) A culinary cosmos, (5) Heaven’s dew and jade froth, (6) Conventions, (7) In the tavern of eternal bliss, (8) Seconds. The appendices consist of a 10-page bibliography, an index of figures and a register of recipes. However, each chapter is again divided into numerous sub-chapters dealing with a highly detailed multitude of quite different topics that the reader might never have suspected to find under that heading, and which could easily have deserved a section of their own. For instance, chapter 3 covers a) Ice for deserving officials: preservation and storage, b) A mirror of lifestyle: markets, c) The specialists: butchers and cooks, d) Under the dictate of cleanliness: kitchen facilities, and e) Enhanced delights:
tableware. Chapter 6 examines a) State controls: authority with an expiry date, b) In the Empire of the Kitchen God, c) Proper nourishment, and d) Smacking and slurping allowed?

Such opulence leaves the reader somewhat disorientated. Still, the explanations are easy to digest, not preventing escape into the kitchen to try the Chicken with lemon slices recipe offered in the same chapter without spoiling the excitement.

Excitement abounds in the extensive menu of rich detail, informing on questions like the invention of chop sticks, the mystery of the noodle, and the characteristics of China’s regional cuisines. Alimental preferences are compared with food taboos or culinary disgust. Famous is the elegy of a Han princess married to a steppe potentate for raisons politiques, lamenting her misery of dreary and dairy-rich nourishment as being worse than death. Höllmann also goes into the delicate question of cannibalism (“eaten class enemies”), which may have appeared as a last resort to starvation during the worst periods of need in China’s history. Those expecting horrible tales will be disappointed, though. Being a precise scholar, the author debunks a multitude of such sensational and popular stories that have been hawked without verification for millennia well unto recent times as what they are - rhetorical propaganda designed to discredit toppled dynasty predecessors, political adversaries or other foes. Assigning to them the fiercest denigration through an argument which usually chokes off any need for proof makes them easy prey.

Apropos noodles: Höllmann deals at some length with this well-liked fare and its presumed 4000 year-old history in China by alluding to—amongst other things—a single late neolithic boiled millet noodle of the la mian (stretched) type (p. 79). Healthy scepticism seems to be indicated here, although the sensational find from Lajia near Minhe in Qinghai province has been published even in such distinguished periodicals as Nature, and became exceedingly well-known.3 It was discovered on a high bank of the Yellow River in a semi-subterranean pit house which had been overwhelmed by a mudslide, covering all, including its occupants, in a moment. Among the buried crockery, an overturned pot filled up with loess contained a coiled hollow, yellowish structure, 50 cm long and 3 mm wide, not unlike a lugworm’s cast of sand, which disintegrated immediately after its discovery and photographing. The examining geoscientist held to have identified the remains as containing phytoliths and starch grains of two millets (Panicum miliaceum and Setaria italica). Phytoliths are tiny silica bodies deriving from glumes (husks), stalks or other plant parts. In fact,

situational evidence of the archaeological site context should advise cautious reception of the scoop. Of all the submerged fourteen occupants’ bodies, only their skeletons had remained in the inorganic loess soil; no soft tissue was preserved. How then could a boiled noodle possibly last into the present?

Furthermore, the claim that the noodle was made from millets, produced by stretching dough (a technique of making wheat noodles common in West and North China), could not possibly be sustained. For stretched noodles, gluten-rich dough is essential; but contrary to wheat, millet is gluten deficient. Due to its brittleness, millet dough therefore breaks if stretched out. Chinese archaeologists and archaeometricians have recently verified that it is impossible to make such noodles. The phytoliths and alleged starch grains cannot have been part of the “noodle” and must have derived from the soil sediment— which is not exactly amazing in the case of a mudslide submerging a settlement whose fields may have been uphill and their denudation probably causing the event.

It seems that the perception that noodles appeared as a novelty in China not before the Han dynasty should be preserved for the time being.

After ingesting so much nourishment, a little liquid refreshment should be welcome, and Höllmann’s explanations on beverages (“Heaven’s dew and jade froth”)— water, tea, liquor, intoxication and abstinence— promise relief. However, they pour forth as enumerations of slightly insipid quality. Yet with some passion the author advocates correction of the translation term “wine” where beverages not made from fruit are meant: BEER ought to be the correct term for those made from grain, such as rice wine. For reasons of systematics, this might be convincing, were it not that “beer” rather evokes the image of a foaming, cold beverage in Western minds (certain notorious exceptions allowed). Which is certainly not the case with Chinese rice or millet wine.

Chapter 6 “Conventions” elaborates on state controls and attempts to safeguard quality. These are of particular concern in the light of their frequent failure, and the multitude of recent food scandals. For those interested in the subject, Bee Wilson’s book Swindled: The Dark History of Food Fraud, from Poisoned Candy to Counterfeit Coffee may be recommended here for comparison, exposing as it does the abyss of food counterfeiting and adulteration in Europe and the United States of America since their early periods of industrialisation.

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4 Ge, Wei/Liu, Li/Chen, Xingcan/Jin, Zhengyao, “Can noodles be made from millet? An experimental investigation of noodle manufacture together with starch grain analysis,” Archaeometry 53: 1, 2011, pp. 194–204.

Chapter 7 “In the tavern of eternal bliss”, deals again with conventions (“When distinguished visitors are expected, carelessness is out of the question”) and table manners. But here, social eating is the concern, in public and companionable circumstances and places: picnics with the ancestors, street food, tea houses with a theatre or without, pleasure boats and other establishments.

Slightly exhausted from over-indulgence, the reader turns to the last chapter (“Seconds”), which is concerned with culinary cultural transfer. It starts by listing food and beverages that were introduced into China from abroad, like (grape) wine, milk products, soft drinks and North American fast food. The chapter and book as a whole end with a presentation of Chinese dishes that finally reached the West. Or rather, what was taken for Chinese cuisine, with restaurant owners of mostly Hong Kong origin serving up a drab culinary misery they suspected suited the preferences of their Western diners. It did indeed meet with ardent acceptance!

Even with some subheadings occasionally not living up to all their promises, and the wealth of statistics proving perhaps a little too stodgy at times, the book offers pleasurable reading. Yet those wishing to deepen their knowledge on the subject, having had their taste buds titillated, are left with a plate empty of references. And though a general bibliography is provided, authors’ names are thinly printed in a light brown colour, rather unfriendly to the eyes.

That said, this book regales its readers generously with a rich variety of courses, numerous beautiful illustrations, excursions and cooking recipes. Providing a fascinating insight into the culinary history of China, it certainly deserves a place on the shelf alongside those books that are pulled out again and again.