Chinese Cultural Logic and Practices in Medicine & Food

Josephine Smart (smart@ucalgary.ca)
Professor Emerita of Anthropology, University of Calgary
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Josephine Smart and Alan Smart
Food, Borders and Diseases.

CHAPTER 20  Biosecurity, Quarantine and Life across the Border

Alan Smart and Josephine Smart

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Alan Smart & Josephine Smart

Department of Anthropology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

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How I got into “food and disease” studies:

- 2000-2004 SSHRC funded project “Chop Suey and Egg Roll – Chinese Immigrant Cuisine in Canada”
- 2004 invited presentation at Centre for Disease Control (CDC) annual meeting in a panel on SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)
- 2006-2008 APRI funded project “Social and Economic Impact of BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) in Canada”
Countries affected by SARS in 2003 (total infected cases)

- Australia (6)
- Canada (251)
- **China (5327)**
- France (7)
- Germany (9)
- **Hong Kong (1755)**
  - India (3)
  - Indonesia (2)
  - Italy (4)
  - Kuwait (1)
  - Macao (1)
  - Malaysia (5)
  - Mongolia (9)
- New Zealand (1)
- Philippines (14)
- Ireland (1)
- South Korea (3)
- Romania (1)
- Russian Federation (1)
- Singapore (238)
- South Africa (1)
- Spain (1)
- Sweden (5)
- Switzerland (1)
- Thailand (9)
- United Kingdom (4)
A restaurant advertisement in Shenzhen, Guangdong – civet cat
Food safety, emergent infectious disease risks, & food choices

- SARS in 2003, extensive culling of civet cats in China
- An underground trade of civet cats emerged
- “It is good for you.”
- Tonic food (*bu pin* 补品) – food as medicine in daily practices, folk medicine intended to restore balance
- “I have reliable sources; these are caught in the wild, the best.”
- Wild animals = safe, pure, virile
- Rare and exotic animals considered particularly potent & desirable (= more expensive)
CDC invited presentation conclusion:

- Biomedical interventions (e.g. vaccination, surgery, drugs, dietary restrictions) and biosecurity protocols cannot always solve all biomedical problems perfectly.

- Human behaviour is governed to a large extent by cultural logics that may be incompatible with the western centric approach to medicine and biosecurity.

- Effective biomedical interventions must include a sound knowledge of context-specific cultural foundations and practices.
Chinese humoral theory of health

- The human body contains yin-yang forces (qi)
- Imbalance $\Rightarrow$ illness
- To remain healthy is to maintain the balance
- The optimal balance varies from person to person
- All elements have specific attributes which can be utilized to enhance or restore the humoral balance within one’s system.
- Food, like everything, is defined as yin, yang or neutral. Food can enhance or disrupt one’s humoral balance.
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<th>Western</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
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<td><strong>worldview</strong></td>
<td>Binary opposition Good–bad; healthy-sick</td>
<td><em>Yin-yang</em> complementarity (humoral theory)</td>
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<td><strong>causes of illness</strong></td>
<td>External pathogens</td>
<td>Imbalance of <em>yin-yang</em> forces within one’s system</td>
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<td>Pathogen specific interventions – drugs, surgery</td>
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“Doing the Month*

• ethnomedicine, Taiwanese Chinese in USA
• man yue 滿月 (full month) – banquet, boiled eggs dyed red, ginger & pork hock cooked in dark vinegar
• post-partum rules regarding food & behaviour
• to restore balance: birthing is **depleting** and **polluting**

Chinese post-partum rules (pp. 13-14):

1. Do not wash yourself …for the entire month.
2. Do not go outside for the entire month.
3. Do not eat any raw or …cold food.
4. Eat chicken.
5. Do not be blown on by the wind.
6. Do not walk and move around.
7. Do not go to other person’s homes.
8. Do not get sick during the month.
9. Do not read or cry.
10. Do not have sexual intercourse.
11. Do not eat at the table with family/guests.
12. Do not burn incense.
Chinese post-partum food rules

• Birthing is depleting due to the loss of blood and fluids, and all the energy involved in the making of a child. There is a loss of “yang” (hot) energy from the female body.

• A woman after giving birth is in a state of “yin” dominance (cold) – this creates an imbalance which can be and should be corrected by ingesting lots of “hot” food during the month of recovery.

• Eating “cold” food further aggravates yin dominance – not recommended.
Chicken cooked in sesame oil ("hot" food) chicken, lots of sesame oil, rice wine & seasoning
Hot or Cold? Food or Medicine?

- Banana – cold attributes, good for people suffering from high blood pressure & chronic constipation.
- Banana cooked with alcohol neutralizes its “cold” attribute because alcohol is “hot”; banana cooked in alcohol is a cure for head cold.
- Food as medicine / medicine in food.
- (Tacit) knowledge.
The highly open and inclusive food choices in Chinese culture

- Explanation 1 – poverty and necessity driven culinary inventiveness and inclusiveness
- Explanation 2 – the Chinese worldview based on yin-yang complementarity (humoral theory) regarding health; everything (including food sources) has these attributes (yin-yang) and can be utilized to restore health (balance)
Cured field rodents, 38 RMB yuan each

Photo by Josephine Smart, 2009, Guangzhou
Soup menu at a Guangzhou restaurant

Photo by Josephine Smart, 2009
Restaurant menu in Guangzhou - chameleon

蒸變色龍

變色龍的食法可煮可清蒸，如愛清蒸的話就加上紅棗、冬菇、火腿和薑絲一起清蒸。變色龍的口感似食鰻魚肉，又比田雞肉爽口，而變色龍有滋陰養顏功效，女士們唔晒。

（￥168/一隻）
Restaurant menu in Guangzhou – water snake

Ch.2 The Cultural Complexity of the G-P
Ch.3 The Meat Produced
Ch.4 The Meat Transformed
Ch.5 The Healing Meat
Ch.6 The Meat as Commodity
Ch.7 Social and Cultural Logics