Some Reflections on the Food Habits of China, Japan, and Rural America

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Food is a subject of inexhaustible interest for most people, but the way in which food is approached by various cultures is also richly suggestive about the values and world view of those cultures. A lifetime career of eating has provided numerous occasions to reflect upon attitudes toward food and nutrition in the three cultures with which I am most familiar. I take up the subject as one with no claim to the status of connoisseur or gourmet in any one of these three traditions. The approach is that of a person of rather ordinary tastes and inclinations who is interested in cultural differences.

The food that I grew up with reflected the tastes and habits of the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Family traditions supplied overtones of the American South and Midwest, and of Northern Europe. Of urban cuisines, those of Germany and Scandinavia have the most homely feeling for me. I have been professionally involved with Japan throughout my adult life and a member by marriage of a Chinese-American family for nearly a quarter of a century. For more than half my life I have been habituated to a diet in which rice is the primary staple. This is perhaps a bit more autobiography than popular demand would justify but there is no more economical way of establishing the point of view of these observations which are themselves highly personal in nature.

This discussion is inspired and informed by a superb recent book, *Food in Chinese Culture*, edited by K.C. Chang, who has also contributed the introduction and
the chapter on Ancient China.\textsuperscript{1} Professor Chang’s two essays are followed by seven others to make up a survey of Chinese food habits over more than two millennia. There are four sections of illustrations, each depicting a different aspect of the subject, a glossary of Chinese characters which usually enables one to trace down terms which are often, quite appropriately, given readings in dialects other than Mandarin in the text, a bibliography that is a treasure in its own right, and an index. These parts create a whole which is not only delightful and provocative reading but which will for a long time serve as an indispensable starting point for further discussions of the subject in Western languages.

By concentrating on the subject of nutrition, Professor Chang and his collaborators have illuminated certain aspects of Chinese civilization beyond the table in a way that is possible through no other approach. The contributions are substantial and satisfying throughout, but become genuinely spectacular in the essays on T’ang and succeeding periods when the records have become full enough to permit a fairly complete reconstruction of culinary life.

Scholars writing in the West have long been aware of the fact that the study of food habits is a useful way to illuminate and supplement the understanding of cultures that have been studied exhaustively from other approaches. The writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss are particularly notable. Scholarship tends, however, to absorb the cultural biases that come with the language in which it is written and the lack of interest in culinary matters among scholars writing in English is itself a significant cultural datum. Food is just not a very serious subject in Anglo-Saxon culture. Among the many contributions that Professor Chang has made with this book one is to send an important message from one of the most food-centered cultures to one of the least. We can only hope that it is clearly received.

In his introduction Professor Chang introduces a
four-part scheme with which to organize a consideration of food in China. His first comments on the way in which food styles of a culture are in part determined by available natural resources, an important point in considering the rich store of regional variations in Chinese cuisine. He then notes the division in Chinese cooking between *fan*, the grains and other starches that constitute the main source of calories, and *ts’ai*, the vegetable and meat dishes that are the primary objects of creativity and imagination. (This division is true of Japanese cooking as well.) In his third heading he takes up the flexibility and adaptability of Chinese cuisine, which is perhaps distinguished from other cuisines first of all by its readiness to come to terms with the materials available at any given time and place as well as with both the general inclinations and the momentary impulses of the cook. The final heading takes up the Chinese ideas and beliefs about food, with special emphasis on the relationship between kinds and quantities of food consumed and physical well-being.

This scheme is completely satisfactory for its purposes but it was not designed for cross-cultural comparisons. I therefore propose another four-part schema while acknowledging my indebtedness to Professor Chang’s approach which not only inspired it but underlies its application in the consideration of Chinese food and in most other instances as well. This is as good a place as any to make the obvious point that, for all my indebtedness to Professor Chang and his collaborators, they can in no way be held responsible for any errors or inadequacies in my own willful departures.

Food as a subject of intercultural comparisons may be approached under four major headings: fuel for the body, as the object of sensual pleasures, as a social statement, and as a phenomenon with spiritual implications. When food is viewed simply as fuel for the body, the other aspects tend to be diminished. Flavor, texture, aroma, and appearance are not only not im-
important but may actually be denigrated: the more repulsive a food is the more certain it is to be good for you. Saki takes up this strain in Anglo-Saxon culture in his delightful story, "Filboyd Studge." A perusal of the shelves of any ‘health-food’ store in the United States will assure us that the tradition is not yet altogether dead. When food is no more than fuel for the body-machine, the spiritual and social aspects of the culinary art may also be played down. Eating becomes a simple animal necessity or even a shameful exposure of weakness.

Food appeals to the senses in two ways. Flavor, texture, and scent are enhanced by the somewhat more distanced appreciation of the visual qualities of the food and its presentation. The sensual qualities of food are continuous with nutritional considerations on one side and on the other they shade directly into the function of food in making social statements. The social functions of food, far too obvious to need enumeration, can in their turn be viewed as continuous with the spiritual aspects.

Food can become spiritualized by formal ascription of spiritual qualities through secular or religious traditions: the Thanksgiving turkey or the Christmas goose. It can also carry a less specific but no less strong spiritual message when used as a means of celebration in a society which accepts the world as essentially good. In such societies, the enjoyment of the pleasures of the table are in themselves a celebration of the goodness of this earth and of the sweetness that life on it can have in its better moments.

The way in which one or the other of these four aspects of food: fuel, sense object, social statement, or spiritual expression are ranked in a given society and the nuances of that particular society’s way of giving emphasis combine with the characteristic staples of each region not only to define culinary life but to tell us very basic things about the world view of each society and each age.
It is a commonplace in the scholarly world that while specialists in the history and civilization of some countries tend to be very negative about their subject, the China specialist is typically in love with his. This is one commonplace which observation abundantly confirms. There may be no more fruitful approach to the understanding of this almost universal enthusiasm than through a consideration of Chinese food. The subject is much bigger than food alone but the attitudes which help to make Chinese cuisine are active in other parts of Chinese life as well.

Chinese cooking is the world’s largest and most varied cuisine and the skill and imagination with which it is prepared is universally recognized. The immense variety of materials used in Chinese cuisine reflect a joyful acceptance of the bounty of the earth. Potential foods of doubtful attractiveness are characteristically given the benefit of every possible doubt; they often end up among the specialties for the gourmet. There is an almost total absence of general food taboos and prejudices that is perhaps unique among major civilizations. It is remarkable even to the Japanese, who share much of the Chinese openness toward food. When Hong Kong weekends first began some years ago to be possible for the Japanese middle class, a popular Japanese magazine felt called upon to explain to the potential tourist that “in China, if it has four legs and isn’t a table or a chair, it’s food.”

This tolerance toward all possible sources of food is often attributed to the experimentation inspired by the pressures of famine. Yet famine is if anything less frequent in China than in many other parts of the world where stories of people literally choosing to starve to death rather than defy a food prejudice or taboo are still being heard. A more helpful line of approach to a phenomenon that is probably immune in the long run to neat explanations lies through the continuity between nutritional and medicinal concerns in China; the con-
sumption of gastronomically unlikely materials for medical reasons must have helped to accustom the palate to a wider range of flavors and textures in everyday consumption. This might also help to explain why such food prejudices as do exist in China tend to be relative and particularistic rather than absolute and universal. Since the theory of nutrition was co-extensive with theories of medicine, those foods which were thought to be particularly potent were, like any other medicine, strongly indicated for some situations and strongly counterindicated for others. The purpose of food was to sustain and to improve human life and theories of nutrition were directed toward achieving the greatest possible range of benefits from food.

The skill and imagination of Chinese cooking is also a reflection of a very positive attitude toward the world and man’s place in it. The great work of the traditional state was the reconciliation of the works of man with the works of nature. It is in no way flippant, either in terms of the present discussion or in the context of traditional Chinese thought, to suggest that there are few demonstrations of man and nature reconciled so felicitous as a well-chosen, well-prepared and well-served meal. Nor is there anything quite so conducive of reconciliation between man and man.

Food has always played a part in the spiritual life of China. In his essay on the food of ancient China, K.C. Chang quotes from Hawkes’s 1959 translation of the *Ch’u Ts’e* the two verses calling back the souls of the recently dead. These poems date from the second millennium B.C. but the voice is immediately recognizable to anyone with any familiarity with Chinese culture in the 10th century. The “Chao Hun” or Summons of the Soul puts it this way:

O soul, come back! Why should you go far away?  
All your household have come to do you honor; all kinds of good food are ready:
Rice, broom-corn, early wheat, mixed with yellow millet;  
Bitter, salt, sour, hot and sweet: there are dishes of all 
flavors.  
Ribs of the fatted ox cooked tender and succulent;  
Sour and bitter blended in the soup of Wu:  
Stewed turtle and roast kid, served up with yam sauce;  
Geese cooked in sour sauce, casseroled duck, fried flesh of 
the great crane;  
Braised chicken, seethed tortoise, high-seasoned, but not to 
spoil the taste;  
Fried honey-cakes of rice flour and malt-sugar, sweetmeats;  
Jadelike wine, honey-flavored, fills the winged cups;  
Ice-cooled liquor, strained of impurities, clear wine, cool and 
refreshing;  
Here are laid out the patterned ladles, and here is sparkling 
wine.³

In the other poem of this pair, the “Ta Chao” or Great Summons, the argument is carried in much the same terms: ‘O soul come back! Indulge your appetite!’ Surely any soul that did not respond with alacrity to such a summons was irretrievably lost to this world. It is equally certain that a civilization that expresses itself in this way is going to be immensely attractive in purely human terms to anyone who is fortunate enough to learn anything about it.

As we come to the later articles we see the cuisine developing in range and in sophistication. There is an ever-increasing emphasis on the social importance of food and on the humanizing and energizing aspects of the pleasures of the table. A Southern Sung source, we are told, gives a ‘casual list’ of two hundred and thirty-four famous dishes served in the finer restaurants of the great cities.⁴ Not only was there an extraordinarily varied and sophisticated cuisine available to the privileged, but very good food on a somewhat more modest scale was a lively interest of all classes during good times. Festival food was enjoyed by a wide range of classes and even the food served in laborer’s restaurants was lovingly recorded for our wonder and interest centuries later.
From T'ang there is a doubtful and yet revealing tradition that Yang Kuei-fei, the favorite concubine of the emperor Ming-huang, had highly-perishable fresh lichees brought to the capital from the distant south by relays of fast horses. Refrigeration, already hinted at in the iced drinks of the "Chao Hun", seems to have been a common means of preserving food in warm weather by T'ang at the very latest. In the fourteenth century the use of refrigerated shipping to bring fresh produce up the Grand Canal in winter was already taken for granted, as were various schemes for extending the growing season in the cold north.

One of the best statements of the essential healthfulness, sanity, and humanity of the attitudes toward food in China is this paragraph from the essay on the South in modern China by E.N. and Marja L. Anderson:

... Do feasts per se, with all their status bias (such that the least needy get the most food), actually improve the system rather than merely stabilizing and aiding it? Here again we believe so, and as evidence we may point out that even the intensely practical and economics-minded government of modern China has not abolished good eating. However, we do not think that the benefits of feasts are only or even primarily in the realm of nutrition, of ecology in the narrow sense. "Man does not live by bread alone," nor by nutrients; and food is neither bread nor nutrients alone. If food is universally used throughout the world to maintain and create interpersonal bonds (and it is), if food sharing is the universal method of making humans true companions, it is logical and indeed inevitable that the Chinese should use it in a particularly sophisticated way as a marker and communicator in social transactions. Moreover, of all the enjoyable things of this world, food and drink are the easiest to manipulate and the easiest to manage in public occasions. They can be used to heighten or relax a group's emotions, to communicate trivial or vital messages. Everyone eats and eats fairly often, everyone can learn to enjoy good food, and in a natural environment where diversity is favored, there is every reason to strive for diversity and quality in diet. The good system is the most natural one to draw on for concrete expressions and tangible symbols of shared community realities. Constant and careful attention to quality in diet is the surest and best guard against eating poorly or eating foods detri-
mental to health. Moreover, it is more than a mere guarantee of survival. It is the most constant, the most reliable, and the cheapest of all ways to enjoy life.6

Many of these remarks could refer to any culture in which food is prized and respected, but this particular blend of joyful appreciation with sound, cool, common sense could in its entirety only be describing Chinese practice.

In cuisine as in other aspect of life in Japan, there are unmistakable Chinese influences and parallels almost everywhere one turns. But, in cuisine as in other aspects of Japanese life, these influences and parallels serve in the end only to underline the profound differences in approaches and in values that separate the two cultures.

Like Chinese cuisine, Japanese cuisine is based on rice. In both cultures this is a normative statement only. Wheat and millet take the place of rice in much of North Chinese cooking while the universal availability of polished white rice in Japan is a relatively recent phenomenon. Yet polished white rice has been the ideal staple in both cuisines throughout most of their histories. When rice is the main dish and the primary source of calories, the other dishes all are created to relate to rice. Their purpose is not simply to supplement the rice nutritionally, but to supply pungency, texture, and varied flavors to set against the soft blandness of the rice. The Chinese term for these dishes, 'hsiafan', which might be translated as 'rice downers', makes clear their role. Yet the rice itself is not quite the dead, flavorless paste that comes out of American preprocessed mixes. Without a fragrant and substantial rice prepared from fresh grain of high quality, the finest side dishes cannot fully display their merits. The best way to cook rice, the preferred varieties and the localities that produce the finest rice are subjects that can arouse the passions in both cultures. Still, from this point Japanese
and Chinese cuisine soon begin to diverge due to fundamentally different attitudes toward food and nutrition.

One further quality that Japanese and Chinese cooking share is adventurousness. If the Japanese repertory of dishes is somewhat more limited than the Chinese, this is primarily because Japan is a much smaller and less varied country than China and consequently produces a somewhat more limited range of potential foodstuffs. Yet the first adjustment that the American must make when coming to Japanese food is to accept a much wider range of edibles such as numerous varieties of seaweed, wild vegetables and tubers, sea urchin roe, and other uncooked seafoods. Each locality has its own specialties. The only marked food taboo in pre-modern Japan was against four-footed animals. This seems to be both a legacy of Buddhism, which is some ways struck deeper roots in Japan than in China and of the limited number of large mammals among the native fauna.

One thing that we definitely will not find when checking early references to food in Japan is the joyous catalog of foods and of the pleasures of the table that make up the ‘Summons to the Soul’ and the ‘Great Summons.’ *The Tale of Genji* provides an extraordinarily complete picture of social life at the Japanese court during the 10th century. The one thing it does not tell us much about is food. People consume meals in *Genji*, but almost furtively. Ivan Morris has commented on this notable lack in his study of the times in which this great novel was written:

Not much is said about food in the vernacular literature of the time and virtually nothing in the Chinese-style writings. It was regarded as a vulgar subject and, while we hear a good deal about drinking parties, meals are hardly ever described. Sei Shōnagon disliked men who ate heavily; a gentleman, she tells us, should pick daintily at his dishes. One of the most distressing things about the lower orders is the way in which they wolf down their food.
This reticence about the subject of food has continued to leave its mark among the upper classes right down to modern times. One consequence is that we have much more information about the plebian diet from the late middle ages on than we do about all but a few special cases of upper class practice. One of these exceptions is the banquet fare known as kaiseki ryōri (the Japanese term is as close to a literal equivalent to the English as ever occurs between the two languages). This food is now the model for gala occasions at all levels of society. It sometimes shows touches of Chinese influence, just as one would expect. It has recently begun to register frequent evocations of French cooking as well, a complement to the strong Japanese influence on French nouvelle cuisine. In its most recondite form it shades into the kaiseki ryōri of the tea ceremony.

It is useful to focus for a time upon this form of kaiseki, not because it is the popular food of the masses, for it is not, but because it is the best place to demonstrate some of the fundamental contrasts between the ideal roles of food in Chinese and Japanese society. The nature of these contrasts begin to come clear as soon as we note that the term ‘kaiseki’ when used in the tea ceremony is written not with the characters which may be translated as ‘banquet’, but with two others whose literal meaning is something like ‘breast stone’. The reference is to the placing of a warm stone within the breast of the kimono to enable one better to endure the chills that go with an empty stomach. In the tea ceremony the purpose of food is not to satisfy the appetite but to aid in overcoming the loss of concentration that may accompany prolonged hunger. The food does not so much break the fast as it emphasizes the fast. We are clearly in a very different gastronomical world from that of the Chinese. It is still a very sophisticated gastronomy, but one that reflects the values of a society that expected the person of quality to be indifferent to
hunger, cold, or fatigue.

The tea ceremony, of which this type of kaiseki food is an optional part, is a product of a world view in which the spiritual and the aesthetic overlap almost completely. It is a perfectionist world view which recognizes that the only kind of perfection that is really attainable by human beings is that of a genuine and unfeigned simplicity. In his forward to Tsuji Kaichi’s book on kaiseki, Sen no Sōshitsu, head of the Urasenke School of Tea Ceremony, recalls a famous anecdote about the great sixteenth-century master, Sen no Rikyū:

A man once asked the master to disclose the secret of Tea, and the master answered, ‘First you boil the water; then you mix the tea; then you drink it properly. That is all there is.’ The questioner said that if that is all there is to it, then he knew that much already. Whereupon Rikyū riposted: ‘If there is anyone who knows this much then I will gladly become his pupil.’

The difficult and esoteric characteristically present themselves as the simple to the unsophisticated, who come to recognize the difficulty only after undergoing the long discipline necessary to become truly simple. This is characteristic of all aspects of Japanese civilization. More than four hundred years before Rikyū, the great poet Fujiwara Teika made much the same point in the introduction to his Superior Poems of Our Time:

The art of Japanese poetry appears to be shallow but is deep, appears to be easy but is difficult. And the number of people who understand and know about it is not large.

The tea ceremony is above all a visual experience. The other senses are not neglected but they play a subordinate role. The neophyte unaccustomed to long periods of motionless kneeling on the floor is in fact likely to find that sheer pain will dominate his early memories of the tea ceremony. The ceremony ideally occurs in a small room specially built for the purpose.
This room is finished in natural materials and its austere simplicity helps to create the appropriate atmosphere and to set off the few decorations: a simple flower arrangement and a hanging scroll, perhaps joined by a choice piece of ceramics in the alcove. All have been specially chosen to match both the season and the occasion. Restraint is the dominant tone and the center of attention will be the tea-utensils themselves: cast-iron teakettle over a charcoal fire, water pitcher, tea caddy, tea spoon, tea whisk, and serving bowls. All are austere and understated works of art, often of immense value. The teahouse will be set in the corner of a garden in which an exquisitely disciplined naturalness in the form and placement of shrubs, trees, stones and paths sets the ceremony still further apart from the everyday world of improvisation and imperfection.

When the tea ceremony is accompanied by kaiseki food, the occasion is again matched by the serving implements and by the food itself. Season is always of crucial importance. Two more quotations from Tsuji on kaiseki will illustrate first something of the way in which occasion is defined by the seasons, and then the actual utensils that might be used on this one particular kind of occasion:

The twelve months of chanoyu begin with the Kuchikiri tea. Leaves of the young tea plant are plucked in early spring, at the eighty-eighth moon (sic), and sealed in a pottery jar by pasting paper over the opening. Come November, six months later, the tea has matured in taste and aroma and in the presence of his guests, the host cuts (-kiri) open the mouth (kuchi-) of the jar and removes the tea. When the charcoal in the pit brazier has been set and the Kaiseki meal served, the host takes the year’s first tea into the next room, where he grinds it in a stone mortar to make the powder for the tea ceremony.

The guests enjoy their meal to the sound of the tea being ground. After they have taken sweets and rested in the arbor outside, at the summons of a gong they return to the Tea room for the Kuchikiri tea ceremony which begins the winter cycle. This is a formal tea, always held in November, and preceded by Kaiseki.10
Here is the description of plate 6 from the same book. The kaiseki serving described is one appropriate for the Kuchikiri ceremony:

Shiizakana: Salted jellyfish is soaked in water for two days, changing the water three or four times to remove salt. The jellyfish is plunged into hot water to curl it, removed into cold water, and thinly shredded into one-inch lengths. Sea urchin is crushed with the cut end of a Japanese radish and mixed with the shredded jellyfish.

Porcelain bowl, overglaze gold and cobalt underglaze decoration, late Ming dynasty, Ching-te-chin kilns. Shonzui type, gourd-shaped porcelain sake bottle, cobalt blue underglaze decoration, Ch’ung-cheng reign period (1628-1644), late Ming dynasty. Porcelain sake cup, cobalt underglaze and overglaze enamel decorations, Wan-li reign period (1573-1620), Ming dynasty. Yellow Seto type, hexagonal sake cup, middle Edo period, Mino area. I have never had jellyfish prepared exactly in this way but the recipe sounds delicious. The servings would be on the order of one or two ounces per guest. Nutrition is symbolic rather than literal and it is the visual qualities of the serving that have the real importance, as the description of the serving dishes makes clear. The occasion takes on significance not only from the immediate qualities of this particular occasion but because the guest is aware that this same dish has been served in much this same way on this kind of occasion for centuries. An important tea house will have written records to call upon for confirmation. A guest may be fortunate enough to be in a room and garden which have been maintained for four or five hundred years. The message that the occasion delivers is that it is indeed possible even for fallible, ephemeral man in a chaotic world to achieve something very close to perfection and to feel a genuine sense of continuity with the past if only he performs with discipline and restraint in a sharply limited context.

The choice of a highly-specialized book like Tsuji’s in
comparing Japanese food customs and attitudes with those of China as described in Chang’s vast and far-ranging book is not capricious. It is simply not possible to approach Japanese food practices in the same way that Chinese food had been approached by Chang and his collaborators. Tsuji comes about as close as one possibly can in making clear three basic points about Japanese food: Nutrition *per se* has not been a major preoccupation of Japanese culture. The character of Japanese food varies more sharply with occasion than is usually the case in other countries, and, finally, it is usually the visual rather than the gustatory or nutritive qualities of food that are emphasized.

It is unfortunate that it is not possible to illustrate this discussion. Illustrations of food are always pleasing, but for Japanese food they are particularly important, as the descriptions of the *kaiseki* services makes clear. In Japan, food practices reflect a visually-oriented culture accustomed to making the most exquisite discriminations. In such a culture it becomes inescapably important that, however happy the process of stuffing oneself with food may be, the sight to the nonparticipating observer is less than edifying. People had to feed themselves in traditional Japan as they did anywhere else, but for those for whom good style was everything, eating had to be done with restraint and preferably in private. The surviving traditional inns in Japan still serve their meals in the guest rooms.

Ivan Morris makes clear the long history that these attitudes have in Japan as he continues his discussion of food at the tenth-century court:

> Heian cuisine was remarkably little influenced by China’s. Then as now great stress was placed on presentation, the food always being served with an eye to visual effect. But the dishes themselves lacked the variety and sophistication that . . . had already made Chinese cooking among the finest in the world. The joys of the table did not rank high in Heian Kyō, and on the whole the food was poor both in culinary and nutritive value.¹²
One of the most marked changes in Japanese life during the past hundred years has been the great improvement in both culinary and nutritive value of food. By far the greater part of this change has occurred since 1945. Rene Dubos has recently written of the Japanese population as having been habituated and adapted to a very low level of nutrition up to the end of World War II. This adaptation had its most obvious manifestation in the small stature of the average Japanese. He reports that between 1950 and 1975, Japanese consumption of milk increased 15-fold, the consumption of meat and eggs increased 7.5 times and of fats 6 times. The consumption of rice, potatoes, and other starches has decreased proportionately. Japanese people born in the postwar period now approach the norms of America and Western Europe in height and weight and, as the disorders of undernutrition are replaced by those of overnutrition, the incidence of cardiovascular disease is also approaching American and West European levels.

Not only is there an increasing availability of European and Chinese cuisine and an enrichment of the indigenous diet in present day Japan but an increasingly positive attitude toward food and nutrition has developed during the past generation. Tokyo is one of the world's great places for good food and the native cuisine carries its full share of the credit for this tone of culinary excellence. At the same time, echoes of the old attitudes are to be heard everywhere. The happiest survival is a continuing emphasis on presentation. Every restaurant, no matter how small and obscure, generally tries to create its own special atmosphere, its own distinctive menu and its own style of presentation. The tradition of discipline and restraint with regard to food is perhaps most notable in the staggering high cost of good restaurant meals in Japan. This cost goes well beyond what one would naturally expect in a country that has to import a large share of its food.
supply and which has both a labor-intensive style of food preparation and high labor costs. Perhaps the most immediate contrast between a Japanese and a Chinese community picked at random would be the markedly greater availability of good food at popular prices in the Chinese community. Good food is keenly appreciated and exhaustively studied in present-day Japan, but it still tends to be the marker of a special occasion. Another marker for special occasions is high cost. The social message of food comes more through the ambience in which it is consumed than through the distended gut, even when the meal is a hearty one. For all the great improvement in Japanese standards of nutrition, the observer still gains an impression of public opulence and private restraint in culinary matters. The high prices of restaurant meals have led to a rapid expansion of the fast food industry during the past decade, a development that bodes ill for the maintenance of civilized standards of eating wherever it occurs.

Still, the traditional reverence for excellence in any form has combined with modern trends to assure that good food is readily available almost anywhere in Japan. In food as in other aspects of life, Japan is now in the enviable position of enjoying the best of many worlds. In alimentary as in artistic and intellectual life, Japan offers the excitement of a culture enjoying a peak period of energy and creativity. Food is available for all uses, from the most gluttonous, self-indulgence to the most austere ritual.

The long-established cuisines of China and Japan lend themselves more readily to broad generalizations than does that of America, where there are several problems. The nation is still very new, so much so that the conventional wisdom insists that there is really no such thing as an American cuisine. Here, as so often, the conventional wisdom is wrong and here as so often the American conventional wisdom reflects the folklore of an intellectual establishment that is sometimes ambi-
valent about the phenomenon of America. In her *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, published in 1832, Mrs. Trollope made it clear that she had discovered a native cuisine although in most cases she seemed to find little difficulty in restraining her enthusiasm over the discovery.\(^{13}\)

In contemporary America there is the familiar plethora of fast food establishments in which what passes for flavor is built up on a base of excessive quantities of salt, sugar, fat, and monosodium glutamate. He who flees from this prospect is on the other hand all too likely to find himself in one of the old-fashioned bad restaurants where it is often impossible to distinguish with any of the senses, sight occasionally excepted, between the potatoes, the meat, and the vegetable (usually the dismal pairing of co-canned carrots and peas). Yet in the past several years Calvin Trillin among others has reminded us that there is in fact food that is both unambiguously American, and very, very good if one takes the trouble to look for it.

American cuisine has not been in existence long enough to become a clearly defined entity about which very many national or even regional generalizations can safely be made. It is a complex mixture of ethnic preferences and local tendencies. The characteristic food of any locality is the result of interaction between the traditional national cuisines of the dominant ethnic groups, borrowings from other groups, and the constraints and opportunities imposed or offered by local climate and soil. The phenomenon is a complex one and it is in a constant state of flux.

At this point I am once again compelled to revert to autobiography because autobiography is the only source I have for the following observations. The significance will, of course, be far more restricted than is that of the material with which we have been dealing up to now and yet there are some aspects which seem to me to be of general interest.
When one speaks of the cuisine of rural America, as when one is speaking of any aspect of rural America, one is always caught up in the fact of violent and destructive transition. I am a member of the last generation of Americans for whom it could seem a part of the standard national experience to be brought up on a small family farm. The number of people engaged in agriculture has decreased by something like ninety percent during my lifetime at the same time that total population has nearly doubled. Those who still remain in agriculture are for the most part in the management or labor sectors of agribusiness. This is not the place to go into the social, economic, or long-range nutritional implications of this phenomenon, discouraging as all of them are. It is necessary, however, to remind you that I am talking about a lost way of life, and a way of life informed by a lost vision of America.

One of the salient characteristics of that vision was that the nation would consist primarily of independent small farmers who would be served and supported by independent craftsmen and small businessmen and by professionals in private practice. This approximation of the Jeffersonian version of America probably never existed in its pure form. It has often been observed that the ideal had already been repeatedly debauched, betrayed, and sold out by the time of the Civil War. Yet the vision still informed much of the life of rural America up to a generation ago. Departures from it tended to be seen as temporary aberrations, sure to be corrected in the long run.

In the rural America informed by this vision food was above all an expression of occasion. The American small farm displayed through the kind of table it set both its independence and its largesse. The isolation of most small farms meant that food served outside the growing season consisted largely of fruits, vegetables, and meats that were canned, frozen, or stored in the cellar. Nearly everything that appeared on the table was a
product of the surrounding countryside. Products of the hunt were economically important in my part of the country. Our primary cash crop was cattle but we ate comparatively little beef. Animal food consisted, in addition to the pork from pigs fed on table scraps and left-over skim milk after the cream had been separated out for sale, of venison, partridges, quail, grouse, and the unproductive males from the spring brood of baby chicks. This was in no sense a hardship, well-prepared game being usually more flavorful and satisfying than the flesh of domestic animals and the wild animals had belonged only to themselves before they fell to our guns. There was none of the queasiness involved in the hand-raising of domestic animals for slaughter.

The independent small farmer could at most times preserve at least the illusion of absolute self-direction. The family holdings were in spirit a variety of independent domain. The trespasser would always be aware that his act could bring him under fire. Although this very rarely happened in fact, the tradition was strong enough to be sobering to the adventuresome. The guest, on the other hand, was beneficiary of the productivity, the generosity, and the culinary skills of the host family. The entertaining of guests was carried out in a mixture of the formal and the playful. Table settings tended toward linen tablecloths and napkins, set with china and silverware that were likely to be the only valuable things in the house. Everything was directed toward a sense of occasion and table manners among the young were enforced with terror when example did not suffice.

Both the cost and the physical demands of preparing meals on woodburning stoves in houses that often had neither electricity nor running water ruled out elaborate dining for every day. The entertaining which was its occasion occurred on three kinds of day. Neighbors who were helping with shared work, usually threshing grain, would have to be fed, as they would be expected
to feed us when they needed our help. Friends or relatives from a somewhat wider region formed an intermediate category of guest, those whose lives were recognizably very much like our own, while the more exotic guests were those who came from the urban areas of Western Washington state. Their visits often but not always coincided with hunting season.

For members of a threshing crew, who might perform twelve to fourteen hours of extremely heavy labor in addition to morning and evening chores on their own places, the main concern at the midday meals—‘dinner’ on the farm—was quantity. A vigorous young man might require something on the order of five or six thousand calories a day to maintain his strength and weight under these conditions. Even here, quality was given almost equal place with quantity. The concern with quality had its practical side; the more tempting the food the more likely a tired man was to rouse himself to take in the required amount of nourishment. At the same time there would be a quiet but nevertheless intense competition among the women of the neighborhood to set the best table for the threshing crews and there was a complementary quiet, yet keen, appreciation of these efforts. Typical menus would include fried chicken, hot rolls or biscuits, fresh vegetables from the garden, platters of tomatoes with mayonnaise, apple or cherry pies for desert, with copious servings of strong coffee throughout. The richness of the meals complemented the richness of the harvest and displayed the skills and efficiency of the host family.

For friends or guests from afar, quantity would still be important. The host family might be, and usually were, little burdened with money, but they thought of themselves as competent farmers and competent farmers could set an abundant table in the worst of times.

Non-working guests were not quite so urgently in need of heavy nutriment and the menu presented to them was likely to be a bit more ambitious. Any adven-
turousness would usually be confined to desserts. The main dish would usually consist of roasted or fried pork, beef, or venison. Hot breads would always be accompanied by home-made jams or jellies.¹⁴

There was often a friendly ambivalence toward guests from the cities. On the one hand there was a solicitous impulse to lavish good, wholesome, fresh food upon people who usually had to make do otherwise from the tired and uninspired stock of the typical grocery store of a generation ago. This impulse springs from a general attitude of pity and even of condescension toward urban types who did not own land and who would always be working for someone else. Many of these people would further stimulate our protective impulses by displaying a touching incompetence in rural surroundings, terrified by everything innocuous but unable to appreciate real dangers even after they were pointed out. Urban life often produced delicate digestions as well. The eating of wild game would be beyond the powers of assimilation of such refinement. It would be a particular delight to see these guests go back for repeated servings of that ‘wonderful farm beef’ whose origins we had deliberately neglected to make clear.

As I look back over this very personal review of the food practices and attitudes of the three cultures with which I have lived, I am impressed by certain parallels and by certain contrasts. In all three cultures food ties man to the natural order, a characteristic that sets all three distinctly apart from the contemporary American scene. A good and appropriate table is the product of a wise and highly-disciplined interaction with growing things and with the conditions of soil and climate.

Yet once again the parallels underline the differences. Perhaps the greatest differences between rural America on the one hand and China and Japan on the other lie in the spectacularly smaller range of variety in America and the much greater distance from the natural
state of most of the food served on American tables. Food prejudices and taboos seem to be particularly deep rooted in America and to extend not only to varieties of plant and animal material, but to modes of preparation and even to acceptable textures and forms for those foodstuffs that are accepted. Vegetables in particular tend to be overcooked, often almost beyond recognition, by even the best traditional American cooks. Green salads were by no means universally accepted; they seem to have made their first appearance in our part of the country in the generation immediately preceding mine and they were still an object of deep suspicion to many. Meat was always served well-done or, to be more precise, badly overcooked. Although quality of ingredients was emphasized, the number of ingredients remained quite limited. Quality, given basic competence in cooking, was almost always measured in terms of more demanding and time-consuming methods of preparation rather than in the offering of rare and exciting ingredients. Nature could be abundant and nurturing in rural America, but only when approached with due caution and rendered for the time being incapable of offering further resistance.¹⁵

In China and Japan, both the extremely wide variety of foodstuffs used and the emphasis in most of the cooking on keeping the ingredients as close as possible to the natural state further underline the East Asian perception of man as part of nature rather than as the proper exploiter and antagonist of nature. One libel of French cooking that one occasionally hears in Chinese circles is that the French first systematically cook all the flavor out of their food and then attempt to restore palatability with sophisticated sauces and seasonings. Whatever truth there may be in this claim would apply with greater justice to some of the characteristic faults of rural American cooking, but without the saving grace of the sauces and seasonings. One of my own first recollections of Japanese food was of the discovery of
an exciting new vegetable. Cooked green vegetables has always been objects of loathing to me, and I had never imagined that any representative of the category could be so delicious or so pleasing in texture. I had visions of making a great contribution to American civilization by introducing this paragon back home. In response to my excited questions, my host consulted his dictionary and informed me that the English word for the vegetable in question was ‘spinach.’ My previous acquaintance with spinach had made me a staunch ally of the little girl in the New Yorker cartoon who said “I say it’s spinach and I say the hell with it.” This was my first real revelation about food. Even when American cooking is very good, the excellence seldom extends to the treatment of vegetables. I had discovered a whole new world.

While China and Japan share the whole-hearted acceptance of all of nature’s nutritional resources, they differ sharply on the question of nutrition itself. In this respect, China and rural America are in some ways closer to each other than either is to Japan. But where the Chinese preoccupation with nutrition emphasizes spiritual, physical, and social well-being, the American approach to food is as fuel for the body. The body is a complex and subtle machine, requiring more complex fueling than does a tractor or even a horse, but it is a machine nevertheless. The sensual pleasures of the table were appreciated within sharply defined limits; the culture’s profound ambivalence toward the senses could never be completely overcome. The Chinese approach is in every way more joyous, more celebratory, and more trusting of the senses.

In traditional Japan, nutrition came close to being one of life’s dirty little secrets. It is only with the rise of plebian culture that we find increasing evidence of food being enjoyed for its own sake. The variety and ingenuity of peasant cuisine, a variety and ingenuity in part inspired by harsh necessity, was blended with the
elegance and restraint of the artistocratic models toward which even the most raffish elements of popular culture tended to look for guidance. The problem of the tension between the demands of elegance and the demands of nutrition has never been completely resolved but the continuous assault on the problem has a great deal to do with the extraordinary attention to ambience and presentation in Japanese eating establishments.

There is a temptation, after a rambling indulgence of this sort, to try to draw things together in a phrase or two. It is probably unwise to yield to the temptation but I am going to do so anyway: In China we find a wonderfully sophisticated and warmly human celebration of this world through cuisine. A Chinese meal is an irresistible temptation to indulge the appetite and to reflect on the goodness that can be found in this world and among the people in it. In Japan, the food, however good, tends to play a subordinate role to ambience, presentation, and occasion. The guest is deeply moved that people have gone to such lengths to get everything exactly right. Rural America sent one from the table both fuelled and inspired to perform prodigies of heavy labor. Although the cuisine was quoted limited in range and had certain areas of persistent failure, it too could be genuinely joyful at its best. We can only hope that some of that best will survive the demise of the wonderfully optimistic and creative culture that produced it.

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Notes

3Chang, op. cit., p. 32. Subsequent “Ta Chao” quotation, p. 33.
4Ibid., p. 160.
5Ibid., p. 96.
6Ibid., p. 381
10Tsuji, *op. cit.*, p. 20. ‘Eighty-eighth moon’ should obviously be ‘eighty-eighth day.’
11Ibid., p. 30.
14Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company) No date, preface dated 1894. See particularly the section on American cooking that begins Chapter XXVIII. In the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys where she spent most of her time in America, she seems equally appalled by the crudity of the cooking, the rushed silence and barbarous table manners of the meals and the rigorous exclusion of women from all activities of significance.
15There was another approach to nutrition on the farm in America which was infinitely grudging of the time and expense involved in feeding both owner and help alike. My father used to jokingly explain his slight slump by saying that it was caused by ‘caving in’ over an empty stomach as he sat on horse-drawn cultivators as a young farm laborer in Kansas. Wright Morris has frequently described this philosophy of food in passages which must sound like wild hyperbole to those unacquainted with his originals. See *The Wright Morris Reader* (New York, 1970), p. 43-44, passage beginning, “‘To have survived three months on my uncle’s dust farm, sixteen hours a day, thirty days a month, with a rash on my body from the diet of pork and eggs, had been a point of pride with me for more than thirty years.’”