

Chinese food for thought

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Chinese food contains a hidden recipe for living, a new analysis reveals.

Writing in a book published this week, Cambridge academic Professor Roel Sterckx argues that the culinary arts supplied some of the key concepts and metaphors in Chinese philosophy and political thought over 2,000 years ago.

Much of the symbolism that pervades Chinese food culture, he suggests, not only influenced the early Chinese but also survives in Chinese society today.

Drawing on virtually the entire corpus of texts that were produced in China for 800 years after the 6th century BCE, Sterckx explores how a

vibrant culinary culture was important for how the early Chinese explained the workings of the human senses.

He discovered that one of the most recurrent portrayals of ministers, advisers, and those offering counsel to rulers and emperors is that they started their careers as cooks or butchers.

"Cooking, eating, feeding, dining and banqueting were a much used craft analogy for good and moral government in traditional China," explained Sterckx, who is the Joseph Needham Professor of Chinese History, Science and Civilisation. "Cooks, butchers and stewards exemplified some of the worldly skills upon which the art of rulership was modelled."

For instance, the ability to combine ingredients in equal proportion to ensure that no individual flavour overpowers the other symbolised the idea of harmony. Likewise, chopping up meat in equal portions, or controlling one's intake of alcohol during banquets and rituals, exemplified a sense for propriety and order.

China's most famous thinker Confucius (551-479 BCE) claimed that a person of good morals should not crave a full stomach. He allegedly found pleasure in coarse food and plain water, did not speak during his meal, and would not eat to the full in the presence of someone in mourning. The Chinese sage was also said to be able to go through an entire day of ritual drinking without getting inebriated.

The ancient Chinese also believed that nutrition influenced the moral character of human beings, including an unborn person's moral development. A mother could 'instruct' the fetus by eating only food that was cut properly and from well-balanced dishes.

Rulers and emperors were admonished to modify their intake of food

depending on the circumstances of the day. This included economising on the amount of dishes served at court in times of famine, or switching to vegetarian fare in times of floods and droughts.

"In political terms, the banquet in China was a coded environment, at times reminiscent of high table at Cambridge colleges," said Sterckx. "Banquets affirmed respective hierarchies among participants that were expressed in the seating arrangements, in the number of allocated dishes, in the sequence in which guests toasted their host or vice versa, and in the utensils, food vessels and cups used during a meal."

Banquets were also venues where matters of political and military honour were settled and drinking parties were often put on as a ploy to trick, humiliate, or eliminate political opponents.

"Chinese culture is remarkably continuous," Sterckx added, "and it is fascinating to observe how many of the ideas and practices I discovered in ancient texts while researching this book survive in Chinese society today: the presentation of food offerings is still at the heart of Chinese religious practice, a lively religious economy centred on hosting and the exchange of gifts is resurfacing in China, and the Chinese language remains peppered with vocabulary and images that draw on dietary culture."

"Remarkably, some of the complex rules and etiquette that surround the banqueting of guests and hosting of visitors and political delegations today differ little from the regulations prescribed in the ritual classics from the time of Confucius!"

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