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Asia's Contributions to World Cuisine

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Abstract

The movement of food ingredients, cooking methods and dishes across the earth's surface is ancient, and in large measure only poorly recorded. While the West has documented its contributions to global cuisine, those of the rest of the world are less well recognized. This paper takes note of Asia's role in enriching the world's foods, both nutritively and in terms of diversity and taste.

If any of us were asked -- in the classroom, or during a radio interview, for instance -- whether Asia had made any significant contributions to a global cuisine, I am certain that all of us would answer spontaneously, and in approximately the same manner: 'Absolutely. Asia has contributed enormously to a global cuisine.' Despite what would probably be our unanimous agreement, this exploratory paper demands that the reader accept provisional definitions of two relevant terms, because the question itself is actually so vague. One term concerns the boundaries of Asia; the other, the meaning of 'global cuisine'. How we delimit and define Asia is open to arguments, both broad and narrow; and precisely what is meant by 'global cuisine' is similarly unclear. I am not by training an Asia specialist, and here I begin with my own quite tentative answers.

For the purposes of this paper only, I take 'Asia' to mean East and Southeast Asia; the northern border states of the Indian subcontinent; and Myanmar, Mongolia, Tibet, and China I intend to deal with food systems that fall within the region as I have arbitrarily defined it here. In drawing what are meant as provisional boundaries I have in mind not so much political systems, as limits set by ecological and cultural factors, which have shaped cuisines over time. Foods and cooking methods can become deeply rooted locally, even without political or religious pressures. They can also diffuse widely, and sometimes quickly, without regard to political boundaries. Group food behavior, like group linguistic behavior, seems to follow rules of its own.

By 'world cuisine' or 'global cuisine', I really have in mind a process, more than a stable system. That process is now nearly continuous and ongoing, but it is also surprisingly ancient. World food history has involved the gradual but uneven spread of plants and animals, foods and food ingredients, cooking methods and traditions, over larger and larger areas, often penetrating and sometimes blending with local food systems, which vary in their openness – and the effects of that spread. This process has gone on intermittently for millennia. Interpenetration of local food systems, which now takes place on a world scale, at times with great speed, has its roots in the past. The current vogue for global analysis ought not to blind us to the ancient history of this phenomenon. Probably of equal importance today is the common disappearance – of species, of other resources, sometimes of whole religions, languages or peoples – and the consequences, often known only imperfectly, if at all, for localized food systems. In any event, my rough approximations here, both of Asia and of the global system, are certainly arguable. Admittedly, it is only by being so arbitrary that I am able to proceed at all.

Students of Asian food may find instructive a wonderful passage in Anderson's The Food of China (1988: 117-18), where he describes the production of wheat in ancient China in relation to wheaten products (bread, dumplings, noodles), both there and in neighboring lands. In a few brief paragraphs, Anderson exposes the wheat-related methods and substances, and the words to describe them, embedded in complex relationships of exchange and invention, distributed over a vast area that stretches from northern China to southern Europe. Much of this complex of wheat-related culinary culture was probably developed several millennia ago. Though Anderson is writing primarily of China, in this description 'Asia' and 'Europe' are not separate entities, but an enormous patchwork of neighboring peoples, some of them migratory, some invasive, who took and gave, both what they grew and what they cooked, over the course of long centuries.

There is no doubt that some regions -- because of their native richness in food resources; because the cultures in them had developed particularly effective means of aggregating and tapping those resources; or because food itself proved to be a central interest to people culturally, beyond matters of nutrition – have contributed more to the global culinary repertory than others. But at least as important as autochthonous or local developments have been the important flows of cultural materials, of the kind labeled 'diffusion' by anthropology, often including foods, food ingredients, and methods of food preparation, as for cooking and preservation. The following is the most famous illustration of such flows.

The Columbian exchange -- as the Old and New World interchange of plants, animals and foods, after the European discovery of the Americas, has been described-- completely remade world diet (Crosby 1972). Specific plants, animals and foods traveled enormous distances. The sweet potato, for example, a vital supplementary food or 'side dish' in Asia despite its lowly reputation, crossed the Pacific westward from the New World in the sixteenth century, probably entering China via the Philippines. Maize and peanuts also reached Asia in that century. All are from the New World, and exemplify old and important changes in the global system. Once such introductions are accepted, of course, their origins no longer matter to their users, and may be remembered, if at all, only in particular words or phrases (often geographically misleading, such as 'Guinea corn') in the everyday course of life. But it is important to understand that all of the interchanges of the present are being superimposed upon those of the remote past.

The Columbian Exchange

I wish to begin here, though, not with some of the most dramatic global borrowings from the East, but with some of the least noticed. It may be of interest that an American in what was then the colony of Georgia, Mr. Samuel Bowen, produced noodles, sago flour and soy sauce from plants imported to and growing in America. He carried them to Britain, was received by King George III and awarded a gold medal for his work, and this happened in 1766, just ten years before the start of the American Revolution. Though little of economic importance resulted from Mr. Bowen's experiments, his success suggests that these Asian foods had already greatly interested European colonists in the New World, as well as the Europeans themselves (Hymowitz and Harlan 1983). A letter from Benjamin Franklin to his friend John Bartram in Philadelphia, written in 1770, explains how one could make 'cheese' (by which he meant curd) from beans – indicating that tofu, a remarkable Asian achievement, and the legume from which it was processed, were known to the pre-revolutionary American colonists and held their interest. I note these matters to remind those readers who are excited by today's global trends in food that modern globalization lies on the surface of a truly lengthy history, one that we ignore at our peril, lest we be ridiculed for our lack of knowledge about plant history and the history of trade.

Though western acceptance of soybeans and of beancurd as food would be delayed for centuries, we know Europe developed an early craving for Eastern spices, and the Columbian voyages and those which followed were inspired by a desire to find a sea route to Asia to obtain such things. Discussions of Columbus's achievements dwell on his courage and his search for that sea route. They do not often mention that marine trade was needed by Europe in the fifteenth century because superior Islamic military and political might had made land trade with Asia both costly and dangerous. Spices figured importantly among the desired items. Most, such as cardamom, cloves, turmeric and black pepper, were drawn first from India and Indonesia, and particularly from the Moluccas of the Malaysian archipelago, the so-called 'spice islands'. But not all of those tastes which Europe desired came from the islands.

Asian spices

Though not often remarked, an important flavoring of Chinese origin seems to have reached Europe in the seventeenth century. Dutch traders carried soy sauce to Europe, where it enjoyed an early popularity. Soy sauce turns up thereafter in unexpected places. In the 1960s, we should not be surprised when we find soy sauce reappearing in the first edition of the late Julia Child's famous The Art of French Cooking, in which she instructs readers how to make a 'classic' French roast lamb with mustard dressing. Classic it may be; but the main ingredients of the dressing, in addition to the mustard, are powdered ginger and soy sauce. I have not done the historical research that might help me explain how ginger and soy sauce came to be part of a 'classic' French recipe. I leave that task to someone more energetic than I.

But ginger deserves at least another word. Ginger is, of course, also Asian in origin. Galanga or galangal, known as 'galingale' in medieval England (Alpinia galanga, A. officinarum or Kaempferia galanga), often split into lesser and greater galingale, flavorings found in Southeast Asia and in China, differ from true ginger (Zingiber officinale Roscoe), but are of the same botanical family. They turn up in England, together with true ginger, at an early time. Indeed, The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary gives as its first written reference to both ginger and the galingales a work in the Saxon language, dated to about the year 1000 A.D. But like many other eastern spices, ginger almost drops out of sight in British cuisine after 1650. It has been suggested that during the Commonwealth, under Oliver Cromwell, spice use in Britain may have declined sharply. I know of no genuine evidence that the humorless austerity of the time reached even into the spice pantry. But except for such special holiday treats as fruit cake, cured gammon or ham, and cookies, in which the traditional cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon and ginger still commonly appear, British spice use did seem to contract in the seventeenth century.

A wholly different, non-traditional and curious Asian food-related import to the West is monosodium glutamate, the substance first isolated from seaweed by the Japanese chemist Ikeda Kikunae, in his work on the elusive taste now known as umami or, in Chinese, as xiān wéi. MSG was sold widely, though in tiny quantities, in the U.S. after 1908, turning up in showy green-and-gold tin boxes, decorated with dragons and other Asian art, and labeled 'epicurean powder'. My hunch is that it had been laboriously extracted from natural sources, such as seaweed. Before World War II, however, its principal users in the U.S. were probably Chinese cooks. The first MSG factory in the U.S. opened in 1934; the appearance of aji-no-moto, and its rebirth after World War II as the trade product Accent, are relatively late events.

These odd bits and pieces of Asian food exportation to the West serve to remind us that the diffusion of a plant or spice to a different continent or country may predate by many years its significant use in the larger local food system. The uses made of garlic and the capsicums in the U.S. before 1945 were largely limited to ethnic communities. Indeed, some food plants may diffuse first because of their medicinal or ornamental uses. Second, we need to be reminded that restaurants, while not the only, or necessarily even the main, channels for the transmission of new foods, may bring in items otherwise not known in the host society.

Gentleman farmers such as Thomas Jefferson envisioned the cultivation, processing and use of new agricultural products as part of the farmer's profession. People like him, by their energy and curiosity, ensured that many unfamiliar food ingredients would reach foreign shores and new enthusiasts. Only in the course of the last century have foreign cooks and ethnic restaurants become major sources of new dishes and ingredients in the West, New foods are disseminated today not so much by imaginative farmers as by aggressive restauranteurs and corporate organizations.

I want to turn now to diffusions that dwarf these early borrowings. Rice is surely one of Asia's greatest gifts to the West. It was probably first introduced to Europe after 711 A.D., when the Moors invaded Spain. Not until the mid-fifteenth century did Spanish farmers plant the variety called Arborio on the Po Plain in northern Italy. That short-grained rice then became the basis for the famous Italian risotto. European rice is Asian in origin, the species Oryza sativa. Arborio, and numerous other European varieties used in local cuisine, are all of these species.

Rice reached the United States in the seventeenth century, but was not planted commercially until nearly 1700, in South Carolina. This rice, too, is Oryza sativa, just like the rice that reached Europe. Rice became well known in the Americas by the nineteenth century, though it had early become a commodity in international trade, thanks to the labor and skills of enslaved Africans in South Carolina (Carney 2002), centuries earlier. During the more recent spread from its center of cultivation in the U.S. South during the last century, it has been transformed from a somewhat localized food or dessert ingredient into a daily near-necessity for countless millions, Asian and non-Asian alike, across the Americas.

Rice field, Japan

One of the most important general trends in world food choices concerns rice, I believe. There has been a widespread, long-term increase in cereal consumption, worldwide, which has involved a shift from coarser cereals such as sorghum and millet to rice. In Latin America, Africa and Asia, traditional food patterns based upon such tuber foods as sweet potatoes, yams and taro have been maintained, but particularly by the poorer sectors; and sweet potatoes are used more and more as animal feed in Asia. Though the aggregate world production of tubers has kept pace with increases in population in most of the world, I think that in the last half century, tubers have been losing ground to maize, to wheat products, and especially to rice. There are multiple factors involved in this secular change, and I cannot go into them here. But among the cereal grains, rice has repeatedly supplanted other complex carbohydrates, particularly in the diets of members of the rising middle classes in developing countries. In past centuries, rice had become the complex carbohydrate of choice throughout the Caribbean region of the New World, where it remains the favorite, in countries such as Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad. I have already referred to its importance in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) South of the United States, where it is still produced and much favored.

Another important Asian crop that early changed Western food habits is of course tea. Its story deserves a book, not a few lines (for example, see Macfarlane 2003). It was taken up in Great Britain in the middle of the seventeenth century, because of the influence of the Portuguese queen of Charles II, Catherine of Braganza, who introduced tea at the court. In a mere century, British consumption rose from a few thousand to many millions of pounds. As this writer suggested when writing about the history of sugar, sugar and tea were among the first true commodities, and the first overseas food products in history to become items of mass consumption in Europe (Mintz 1985). Exploding British tea consumption in the nineteenth century, and the Chinese insistence on being paid for tea with specie, played a critical part in the British decision forcibly to impose the sale of opium upon China; but to document those events fully would sidetrack us here.

Green tea field, Korea

As a third and final example of diffusion, one that happened in totally unexpected ways, I refer to the spread of the soybean and its byproducts. Soybeans, as I noted, were known in the West at an early time. But not until World War I did that interest become commercially relevant, as wartime demand for oil, particularly for industrial uses, shot up. In the U.S., soybean production rose, but principally for its oil, while the plants were ploughed under to enrich the soil. Between world wars, American soybean production remained minor. But with World War II, soybeans became economically important once more. Once again, though, soybeans were not important as a primary food. This is the most dramatic aspect of the diffusion of soybean cultivation and use to the West: a transformation of the uses to which soybeans were put. The stress upon exportation, the manufacture of cooking oil, and the provision of animal feed became the fate of what had been Asia's greatest contribution to global vegetable protein consumption. When we note that the annual soybean crop in the U.S., the world's leading producer of soybeans, provides enough protein for the needs of the U.S. population for three years, it is startling to realize that hardly any humans get direct benefit of that protein. In the U.S., much of the protein is fed in meal to chickens, which are then fried in soybean oil in fast-food restaurants. It is the birds – or pigs, or cows -- not the human beings, who get the protein directly. And so soybeans have made an enormous contribution to Western diet, but mostly so far in the form of an oil cooking medium and a protein-rich animal food. The Western lust for animal protein, now rapidly spreading to other regions, has been fed by the conversion of the soybean into a primary food for food animals (Dubois and Mintz 2003).

That is by no means the whole story, of course. Soy milk consumption is flourishing in the U.S.; so-called nutraceuticals made with soy enjoy a growing market; soy-based infant formula is doing well; and of course soy protein is being used for famine relief, by the military, and in many other ways. Something like 70% of packaged food products in the U.S. now contain some soy-derived ingredient, such as lecithin, or soybean oil or soy protein. But this does not alter the fact that the principal use of soy in the U.S. turns out to enable people to eat less healthily at the top of the food chain, rather than more healthily near the bottom. There is another important side to the diffusion of the soybean to the West. In the U.S., and now increasingly in Latin America, especially Brazil and Argentina, soybean farming has become of prime economic importance. Brazil is a major exporter of soybeans to China, where soy meal is now a first-rank animal feed. On the one hand, this has meant big increases in animal protein consumption in Asia. On the other, the environmental impact upon Amazonia has been disastrous, and is still growing. This odd transformation by the West of what was Asia's greatest legume cannot detain us here; but its implications are better documented elsewhere (Du Bois, Tan and Mintz 2008).

Rice, tea, soybeans – though these Asian foods have become enormously important outside Asia, they merely scratch the surface of the transfers of Asian food substances and techniques to the rest of the globe. The spread of methods for cooking ingredients -- old and new -- in different ways likewise deserves a word, for in this regard as well, Asia has been very influential. Two Asian cooking techniques in particular have spread rapidly, and with outstanding success in the West: stir-frying and steaming. Both have been publicized in Europe and in the U.S., as more healthful than many Western cooking techniques. In the case of stir-frying, there has been stress upon reduction in the amounts of fats used, and upon the nutritive benefits of less thorough cooking. Some attention has also been paid to the way in which a quality of 'meatiness' can be imparted to the food, using only minimum quantities of animal protein and fats. In the case of steaming, the stress has been on the virtual absence of cooking fat and, again, on the nutritive gains possible from neither baking nor boiling the food for a long period. Though it is not easy to judge just how deeply these two Asian techniques have penetrated into the daily eating customs of Europeans and Americans, the sales of rice cookers, woks and steamers have been of considerable importance for several decades; and demonstrations of both steaming and stir-frying have become very frequent, in supermarkets, gourmet food stores, and on TV. The phrase 'stir-fry' – though I admit that it sometimes seems to describe barely recognizable cooking methods – has entered into culinary rhetoric in magazines, and on packages of prepared foods of all kinds. It is worth observing that the successful introduction of a different cooking method can sometimes play a part in further innovation. Americans, for example, have learned to stir fry such items as maize kernels, chayote (Sechium edule), jícama or yam-bean (Pachyrrhizus spp.), sunchokes (Helianthus tuberosus) and squash blossoms, which they either had not eaten before in any form, or had otherwise eaten only in very different ways. What is worth remarking in such cases is that the plants I have listed are all Native American in origin – but the mode of preparation is Asian.

To my knowledge, no one has seriously attempted to work up a history of the diffusion of these cooking methods, or of their transformation in the hands of western cooks. Such a study would serve to make clear how the appropriation of cultural materials 'indigenizes' them, rather the way that sushi has, to all intents and purposes, become as American as bagels, pizza, pasta and pita. That we now have in the U.S. a score of such delicacies as the California roll, Rock-and-roll and similar inventions, attests to the appropriation of cultural traditions by alien societies and their subsequent hybridization – just as had happened with chop suey and chow mein, a century ago. When this happens, the borrowed element is no longer what it once was -- even if it is or seems to be identical. More commonly, modification, simplification and reintegration typify food history, as they do in so much cultural borrowing, and tell us about culture's absorptive power. It is for this reason that I want to call attention to the distinction between an innovation sent, and an innovation received. Whether we have in mind an ingredient, a plant, an animal, a cooking method, or some other concrete culinary borrowing, when such things spread and they come into the hands of the receiving farmers, processors or cooks, they have been detached from some particular cultural system; and when they are taken up, they become reintegrated into another, usually quite different one.

Of course the spread of Asian food ingredients, dishes and cooking methods has been matched, at the very least, by the diffusion of non-Asian foods and food materials within Asia. This began at least as early as the Columbian exchange -- which is to say five centuries ago – even if we omit such items as sweet potatoes. But in recent centuries, Europeans in Asia and returning Asians have had at least a modest impact upon traditional indigenous cuisine. Cwiertka (1999: 44) points out that it was Europeans who introduced such vegetables as potatoes, cabbage and onions to Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, and some of these were rapidly assimilated to Japanese cuisine. The far earlier introductions of maize, the capsicums (peppers) and peanuts, all New World cultivars, to China are not credited to anyone in particular; but these, too, were soon "indigenized" within Chinese cuisine. Anderson (1988) discusses the much more recent spread of refined Western wheat flour and wheaten products to China, and surmises that their nutritional effects have been mostly negative.

But the interpenetration of cuisines in this manner has led, on the part of some, to concern about the standardization or 'uniformization' of food worldwide. Of this concern, two things may be said. First, I know of no effort so far to work up a thorough history of the diffusion of cooking methods, or of their transformation in the hands of "national" cooks – that is, of the ways that Chinese or Korean cooks, for example, have creatively incorporated culinary elements from elsewhere into Chinese or Korean cuisines. But we know perfectly well that these processes occur – the place of peanuts or hot peppers or maize or tomatoes today in Asian cooking, for example, is eloquent evidence. That there is a continuous, creative culinary process by which the new or unusual is embedded effectively in the everyday, usually by the replacement or intensification of a customary or familiar item with a new and different one, seems absolutely true. I do not think that this kind of change has abetted standardization, at least not yet.

But second, this qualification does not address what may be far more effective in modifying radically some local cuisine: large-scale economic changes that move masses of people around, shift the rural-urban balance, or create big migrant labor forces. These changes may not have to do with food itself, but with the conditions for its production, the circumstances under which people eat, and the place of domestic groups in reproducing the eating habits of the previous generation. It should be clear that what I am enumerating does describe much of what has been happening in China, for example, in the last two decades. If by "cuisine" one means the haute cuisine (or grande cuisine) of the ruling stratum, that will probably survive nearly all of these large changes. But if one means the way that most people eat (or "most ordinary" people eat, in the American paraphrase), then the possibility of radical change and eventual standardization of some food habits on a global basis certainly exists.

I have suggested elsewhere (Mintz 1996: 25-6) that nothing changes food habits more effectively than war. This is not meant as a sarcastic assertion. Perhaps nothing comes closer to war in effecting such change than famine. But next in line as a change-making force, I believe, is radical economic and demographic change. Even without war or famine, basic economic changes are occurring in much of Asia, as people migrate to cities or overseas in search of work, state-sponsored engineering remakes transport systems and increases total societal energy by dam building, and state and private capital create factories, mines and new ports. Such development is considered the pathway to raising productivity and standards of living. But it can also take a heavy toll upon cultural locality and distinctiveness. The belief that such change (in analogy to the tide) 'raises all boats' is naive, I think. How much of their income people can assign to food -- and indeed, how much time they can give to preparing and even eating it -- is a vital factor in the persistence of tradition and the

shaping of change. When such change has the effect of revolutionizing both food production and the circumstances of its preparation and consumption, that means its lived impact falls squarely upon existing patterns of eating. In China's case, for example, recent sharp increases in the consumption of animal protein, sugars and fats, occurring as incomes rise and people become both physically and spatially more mobile, appears to have medical consequences parallel to those in the West at an earlier time, and the implications for individual health are extremely worrisome.

Let me conclude with an example, a tribute to Asian culinary genius, but one completely transfigured by borrowing. It is embodied within a recipe, distributed in a box that contains what is probably the most famous trademarked American relish, Tabasco Sauce. This condiment contains the juice of pickled capsicum – 'hot' red peppers – vinegar, and salt. The recipe I cite, recommended by the makers of Tabasco Sauce, is called 'Cajun Fried Rice'. And since the word 'Cajun' (from the term 'Acadian', referring to the francophone Canadians, mostly driven elsewhere by the British, many settling in the Louisiana Territory) is associated with Louisiana, the inference is that this will be a Louisianan recipe of some kind. Hence it is entertaining to discover that its principal ingredients include soy sauce, sesame oil, bean sprouts, ginger, rice and peanut oil.

Cajun fried rice

To call it 'Cajun' is a convenient example, as I have said, of the way foods can be painlessly borrowed and assimilated. But imitation is supposed to be the sincerest sort of flattery. The spread of Asian foods, flavorings, cooks and restaurants to the West, however mangled they become in the process, may be the best measure we have of the greatness of the cuisines they claim to represent. But a more thorough discussion of Asian contributions would fill volumes, and this paper is meant at best as a mere appetizer.

This is a slightly revised version of a chapter that appeared in Sidney C.H Cheung and Tan Chee-beng, eds., Food and Foodways in Asia: Resource, Tradition and Cooking. The author recognizes the preliminary character of the analysis and requests suggestions for improvements.

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