

Food and social trends

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Food and society have been interwoven in many ways and in both directions. Food is an indispensable part of the social culture, which in turn exerts salient influence on food evolution and trends throughout the years. This chapter is divided into four sections. First, the social function of food will be discussed. Second, the two main forms of dining styles will be illustrated, followed by how food is served and consumed in different social occasions. The chapter will further illustrate how and why different food items are prepared to commemorate various festivals in the old and modern times of China with reference to the unique solar terms. The chapter is concluded by recognizing the important relationship between food and society.

15.1 Food as an important social function

The relationship of food and social activities goes back a long way in history. There is a famous quote from an eminent politician of China during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC)—“To a ruler, the people are foremost; to the people, food is foremost” 王以民為天，民以食為天. The famous Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC) also postulated that food and gender were the two most important human desires 飲食男女，人之大欲存焉. Food is therefore an important element among people and society as long as human history goes. It is not only limited to the Chinese culture but also to all others.

According to the Intangible Cultural Heritage listing of UNESCO (United Nation Education Scientific and Cultural Organization), one can easily discover that there is quite a number of food and cuisine-related items being enlisted, for example, French gastronomy, traditional Mexican cuisine, the Mediterranean diet of Cyprus, South Korea’s kimchi, cuisines from Croatia and Turkey, and the traditional Japanese cuisine “washoku.” Among all these, South Korean kimchi expresses this important social function food as well as that of the French, just in a different way. French gastronomy serves as an important social custom with an emphasis on the enjoyment of the meal consumption, while the tradition of Kimchi making illustrates the importance of social function through the preparation process. The production process of kimchi is known as “kimjang” in Korean. It is a process starting from selecting, collecting, marinating, and preserving the vegetables. Every Korean family makes kimchi and the scale of production goes even to a village or a community. The entire process boosts cooperation among families, villages, and communities, contributing to social cohesion and harmony (UNESCO website). Friends and relatives share know-how of kimchi making. It is because of this process of making kimchi which enhances social bonding and interpersonal relationship. French gastronomy is described as “a social custom to celebrate the most important moments in the life of an individual or a group, such as weddings, birthdays, and so on.” Occasions for celebration include child birth, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, achievements, and reunions. The structure of a standard French gastronomic meal contains four courses. They are a starter, fish and/or meat with vegetables, cheese, and dessert. The meal always starts with an aperitif and ends with liqueurs. The essences of the meal are togetherness, drawing circles of friends and family closer together and strengthening social ties. It definitely is one of the best representations of such an important function of food—social.

15.2 Food and dining styles

In general, dining styles are categorized into two different ones: individual and communal (Gong; Mars and Mars, 1993). For communal dining style, diners normally sit together in a round or long table setting. Food is served in serving bowls and placed in the middle of the dining table. Every diner takes food from the serving bowls to their own plates or bowls for consumption. For individual dining style, diners are as well sitting together in a round or long table setting; however, each diner has his/her own plate of food to consume. Floral centerpiece is possible for individual dining, while centerpiece is displayed before meal starts and is taken away when meal starts for communal dining. Those cultures which normally

practice communal dining styles include Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Thai, just to name a few, while British, Canadian, American, German, French, Italian, and other western cultures typically practice individual dining styles more frequently than the others.

Communal dining style can be dated back to the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) (Gong). Communal dining has always been practiced whether at daily meals, family and friends' gatherings, village feasts, festival celebrations, or official banquets. Serving spoons and cutlery is always used for communal dining. In addition, a rotating "Lazy Susan" was developed to facilitate communal Chinese dining, in which dishes are placed by the edge of the Lazy Susan for rotating to serve everyone sitting around the table. Lazy Susan is particularly efficient and practical when more than six diners are eating together. Condiments are also put on the Lazy Susan for diners' consumption. Furthermore, potluck is also a kind of communal dining style that each diner is expected to prepare and bring a dish to the party for sharing. By hosting pot luck party, the burden of food preparation and food cost is shared among diners. It is a common dining style among religious group, students, village, and community gatherings. Regardless of the dining styles, when people eat, people tend to stay together and share conversation and stories. Food thus has a very crucial role to draw people together to socialize.

15.3 Food and social occasions

15.3.1 Official occasions

During the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC), Zhou Li (Rites of the Zhou), Yi Li (Protocol and Rites), and Li Ji (The Book of Rites) were developed. These three ancient classics offer many details of protocol and rites, such as food protocol to hosting guest, holding official banquets, having daily meals, and serving food to the goddesses. For example, status of a diner is reflected by his/her seating order. Normally, the eldest and the most honored guest is seated at the head of the table. If the guests sit facing each other along the north and south sides of the table, the west side is considered as the head of the table. If the guests are seated along the east and west sides of the table, the north side is considered to be the head. During a State Banquet in the ancient time, food service had clear divisions between ranks, from the emperor on down to the dukes, lords, and various officials. Ranks and status were reflected not only in food but also in the tableware used. For example, dings (tripod vessels) inlaid with solid gold were used only by the emperor, while dukes used bronze dings inlaid with silver, lords used bronze dings, and officials used iron dings. Similar practice was also applied in England during Tudor times (1485–1603); everything from the number of dishes eaten to the ways in which food was served, was dictated by status (Mason, 2014). For example, pottage was normally consumed by both laborers and the rich. However, the rich ate pottage containing almonds, ginger, and saffron, as well as wine, whereas the laborers consumed pottage with some barley or oats. The statuses reflected in England during Tudor times were among the different social classes, while the statuses reflected in the ancient China time were among emperor and different ranks of officials.

One of the most formal official occasions is probably the "State Banquet." According to Oxford Dictionary, State Banquet is a formal, ceremonial dinner hosted by a head of state,

now especially one to which a visiting head of state is invited for the purpose of renewing or celebrating diplomatic ties. Today, State Banquet is one of the most solemn and significant occasions to host countries' leaders. State Banquet is another illustration to depict the social function of food in the highest order of a country and undoubtedly important in diplomacy of any regime. Countries usually present their best and most representative cuisine in a State Banquet, with the aim to showcase a country's unique culinary culture and folklore. In the following, State Banquets of two countries are discussed, one representing the west and the other representing the orient. They are the Great Britain and the People's Republic of China.

15.3.1.1 The People's Republic of China

The first State Banquet hosted in Yuhuatai Restaurant included eight cold dishes, six hot dishes, and four snacks. Cold dishes were cucumber with salt and sesame oil, jelly fish with sesame oil, duck's feet with mustard, among others. Hot dishes were abalone soup, Dongpo pork, steamed pork meat balls, steamed crab meat balls, sliced bean curd in chicken broth, sautéed shrimps with broccoli and hotchpotch. Four snacks were fried rice cake, Huangqiao sesame cake, steamed rice cake with sweet stuffing, and Huaiyang soup dumplings. "Lion's Head" was one of the favorite State Banquet dishes of Chinese first Premier—Zhou Enlai. It is made of the finest pork which is minced and shaped as a ball and served in a soup which is boiled hours from Chinese cabbage. The dish is named as Lion's Head because the meat ball is shaped as the head of the lion and vegetable is shaped as the lion's mane. Beijing roast duck is another popular State Banquet dish. It was among one of the favorite dishes of American former president Bush when he visited China. The duck is roasted with wood fire, in which fruit tree branches, such as pear, peach, or date branches are used to set the fire. Compressed air is injected into the duck during roasting to make the skin shiny and sleek. The crispy duck skin is peeled off skillfully by the chef typically on table side (gueridon) as a type of showmanship and is consumed with green onion, fresh cucumber, shallot, and soybean paste wrapping together in a thin Chinese pancake.

15.3.1.2 Great Britain

The first State Banquet hosted by Queen Elizabeth II was to welcome King Gustaf VI of Sweden during his visit to the United Kingdom of Britain on June 28, 1954 (Salter, 2015). The state visit of King Gustaf VI lasted for 4 days and marked the first of Queen Elizabeth II's reign. A State Banquet was held in the Ballroom of the Buckingham Palace. According to Anna Reynolds, the curator of Buckingham Palace summer exhibition, "The state visit is one of the most formal occasions of the Queen's year; it is the one most steeped in tradition." Nevertheless, a State Banquet was not a formal occasion during the period of Queen Victoria's reign. Queen Victoria wrote in her diary about entertaining Napoleon III of France in 1855 "in the usual dining room." The Ballroom of the Buckingham Palace was added during a massive renovation, and State Banquets have been held in the Ballroom of the Buckingham Palace since 1914.

The long history of British State Banquet makes its planning process much more complicated than the Chinese one. It takes normally 1 year to plan a State Banquet. Once visit confirmation of a head of a state is confirmed, the Master of the Household in the Buckingham Palace will start a seating plan. The Master of the Household has to go through a very detailed and careful thinking on seat assignment. Who is sitting next to whom, if the neighbor

has met with each other before, and the languages each guest command are all under consideration.

The British State Banquet normally serves a four-course meal and speeches to commence the banquet. The first and second courses are usually fish followed by meat, pudding (dessert) prepared by the Royal Pastry Chef, and fruit courses are served on a porcelain. Each guest is served five different wines, starting with champagne, red and white wine, sweet wine, and port wine at last. The menu follows French gastronomic planning. Besides the menu, the table setting is also very comprehensive and specified. The Master of Household describes that advanced preparation is required in a few months' time to polish thousands of silver-gilt cutlery and glass items. The table setting for each guest's seat is checked with a measuring stick to ensure that there is at least 18 inches of space between guest's knife and fork. Queen Elizabeth II comes to check out the Ballroom before banquet starts. The banquet service is orchestrated—one footman serving nine guests. There are hidden lights in the ceiling of the banquet hall to signal the footmen for putting down dishes and cutlery. The serving process is described as a symphony. High level of attention to details, for example, the measurement of a chair to the dinner table is seamless for the hundred chairs lining up in the banquet hall. Cutlery and glasses are all in line with each other on the dining table, too. Each person gets 10 cutleries and 6 glasses to be used for the banquet. The butter is served individually to each guest and the butter is stamped with a royal crown.

The details and standard of a State Banquet, no matter that it is from the West or from the East, are present with rigorous specification and requirement. Food served in official occasions plays an important role to express a country's hospitality and respect to a visit of head of state.

15.3.1.3 *Private occasions*

Besides official circumstances, people gather for various private occasions too, from socialization, celebrating festive seasons, wedding, birthday party, and the like. Forms of gathering are plentiful, from dining in a restaurant to self-gathering activities. The following paragraph illustrates three kinds of popular ways of gatherings for food. They are hot pot from China, barbeque, and picnic from the western countries.

15.3.1.3.1 **Hot pot**

Hot pot 火鍋 is a very popular way of private gathering nowadays in different parts of China. Hot pot seems to have originated long time ago, dated back in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) in China. The traditional way of having hot pot is burning coal or wood fire to heat up a steam bowl. By burning coal or wood to simmer the bowl, different food ingredients are put to cook inside the bowl. Food is to be cooked one by one. Diners normally sit in a round table and the hot pot is placed in the middle for cooking. Diners have their own cutlery to cook and eat. A hot pot dinner can easily last for hours because of its slow cooking and slow way of food consumption. Diners normally share personal updates and stories during hot pot time. Typical hot pot food ingredients include thin-sliced meat such as beef, pork, and fish, shellfishes, leaf vegetables, dumplings, and noodles. Today, in many modern Chinese homes, coal or wood fire steam bowl was replaced by electric stove or gas cooker. Hot pot with two compartments for two kinds of broth is widely used as shown in photo below (Fig. 15.1).



FIGURE 15.1 An electric hot pot. Source: <https://asianinspirations.com.au/recipes/white-pork-bone-soup-for-yin-yang-hot-pot/>.

15.3.1.3.2 Barbeque

Cooking on open fires is probably the most ancient and earliest cooking method in human history. Barbeque (outdoor grill) is an open-air cooking method. It usually uses charcoal or wood to set up fire and slowly grill or spit-roasting poultry or seafood. According to food historian Davidson (1999), the word barbeque comes from the word of “barbacoa” in Spanish, denoting a structure on which meat could be dried or roasted. The word had first entered in the English language during 17th century, meaning a wooden framework could be used for storage or sleeping on, without a culinary context. The word barbeque has taken its present meanings only by the 18th century. By 1733, the word barbeque had taken on the implications of a social gathering (Mariani, 2014). It became commonplace during late 20th century (Davidson, 1999).

Barbeque nowadays is undoubtedly a form of social gathering. People gather outdoor and spend time together to enjoy this slow cooking method for not only poultry and seafood but also vegetables and even marshmallow and bread. Many countries and cities provide barbeque stoves or facilities in parks and public leisure area for people usage. In Australia, barbeque is even considered as a national social activity, in which Australians do barbeque frequently to celebrate various social occasions, such as national day, Christmas, and family reunion. Aussie barbie, the colloquial way to call Australian barbeque, is commonly referred. Aussie barbie has been a long tradition practiced by the indigenous people. New expressions emerged as part of the barbeque culture, such as “throw a shrimp on the barbie” (Wells, 2015). Barbeque stove styles vary from a simple wooden one, a gas type, to outdoor oven styles, all of which are popular items in most of the Australian households. Barbeque has become an Australian lifestyle that Australians meet, greet, and party with friends and family for food cooked alfresco and on a slow fire.

15.3.1.3.3 Picnic

Picnic also has a long tradition. According to food historians, picnic has been practiced since the mid of 16th century (Olver, 2000; Butler, 2013). The English word “picnic” comes

from the French word “pique-nique.” The French word was used to describe gourmands who brought their own food and wine when dining out. Picnic was a glamorous outdoor affair during the Victorian era in Britain. Picnic was depicted in many English classic books and even illustrated among paintings of great painters. It has been a social and fashionable entertainment in the old times until today. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “picnic” denotes a social event at which each guest contributes a share of the food. Picnic usually takes place in countryside, outdoor, or at leisure locations where people can enjoy the environment and scenery.

Picnic is a popular activity in America too, as a celebration of human spirit, culinary diversity, and adventure. Picnics are very much personal. People choose their own foods, dining partners, and venues. Picnics can be planned or impromptu; they are very different from public outdoor dining events or festivals, for example, community feasts (New England clam-bakes, Texas barbeques, New Orleans shrimp boils) or alfresco dining (trendy waterfront bistros, central city cafes). In America, picnic can be in any form of the following (Olver, 2000):

- “traditional American foods” prepared at home and served on a blanket in a local park
- ethnic cuisine celebrated by an extended family in an urban riverfront location
- an artfully presented basket of gourmet delights served on fine linen and china
- box lunch obtained from a convenience store consumed at the beach
- bread, cheese, and grapes shared by best friends in a canoe
- a family passing peanut butter crackers and bottled water at a highway rest stop
- a child serving imaginary cakes to stuffed animals beneath the protective branches of the family’s backyard tree.

Most of time, food comes second in a picnic but its spirit of social gathering and being together with families and friends is paramount.

15.4 Food, solar terms, and festivals in China

The role of food is most prominent when it comes to celebration of festivals all over the world. Among the many different cultures, Chinese can be considered as one that places particularly high emphasis on the use of various food items; their symbolic meanings in festivals and celebrations; and their relationship with the seasons. Chinese philosophy stresses heavily on eating “seasonal food.” Among the many rules of Confucius about his food as stated in the Confucian Analects 論語, one of which was “he did not eat what was not in season” 不時不食 and this has become an important saying in the Chinese food culture. In addition to the four universal seasons, the Chinese also look at 24 “solar terms” 廿四節氣, which is a gross name of the system that comprises 12 major solar terms and 12 minor solar terms interlaced with each other in the calendar. There is one major and one minor solar term in each calendar month. Developed through observation of changes of seasons and the movement of the sun, the solar terms are used by farmers and the community to guide agricultural production and daily routines of people. Moreover, some rituals and festivities in China are closely associated with the solar terms. The categorization of solar terms is so unique that the United

Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed it on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on November 30, 2016.

Each of these solar terms carries special meaning(s), characteristics, and seasonal food items. The combination of festivals, symbolic meanings of food, and seasonality results in a whole calendar punctuated with opportunities to eat and celebrate. [Table 15.1](#) provides a summary of these 24 solar terms:

In each season and corresponding to the 24 solar terms of Chinese, there are different culture festivals. These festivals are important occasions for families and friends getting together to reunion and socialize in China. The types of foods used and cultural meanings behind those foods are discussed below under each iconic festival. They are Chinese New Year, Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Chongyang Festival, Qingming Festival, and Winter Solstice Festival. In fact, there are many more festivals in Chinese culture. The following are selected for discussion because they are the most representative ones in a particular season or 24 solar terms.

15.4.1 Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year is no doubt one of the most important festivals in the Chinese culture. It indicates the beginning of one prosperous year ahead and having a good start is essential for all Chinese. This is usually a 16-day festival beginning with the Chinese New Year Eve 除夕, which is believed to bring good luck for the entire upcoming year and ending on the Lantern Festival 元宵節, which is the 15th day of the Chinese New Year month (first full moon of the New Year). Chinese families around the world return to their homes during these 2 weeks for family reunion and bonding. In the parts of China where migrant working culture is prevalent, this festival is often the only time of a year when people get to see their friends and relatives in their hometowns. As with many other cultures, food is the cornerstone of the celebrations and special food/dishes will be served during the entire festive period.

Families will gather together over a reunion dinner 團年飯 on the Chinese New Year Eve with a full table of sumptuous and auspicious dishes, usually of the even numbers “6,” “8,” or “10” to indicate continuity (6), fortune (8), and completeness (10). The selection of dishes is not haphazard either as Chinese believe a lot in auspicious symbolic meanings of food/dishes which are often based on pronunciations/homonyms (words that share the same pronunciation but have different meanings) or appearance. In fact, certain food items or dishes that carry lucky symbolic meanings will be served during the entire 2-week festival either at the meal tables or altars when people make offerings and prayers to their ancestors and gods. Below is an extracted list of food with auspicious symbolic meanings, which you often see during Chinese New Year period.

Fish: In Chinese “fish” 魚 has a similar pronunciation as “surplus” 餘 and is a symbol of prosperity. Chinese often will not finish all food items on their tables, especially during Chinese New Year period, as they always like to have a surplus at the end of the year which is an indication of wealth and prosperity.

Chinese dumplings: The shape of the Chinese dumplings resembles that of a gold or silver “ingot” 元寶 (boat-shaped, oval, and turned up at the two ends [Fig. 15.2](#)) in the Chinese culture and thus Chinese dumplings carry the symbol of wealth.

TABLE 15.1 Solar terms.

Date ^a	Solar terms	Seasons (key Festivals)	Representative in-season food (Vegetable/Fruit/Seafood)
February 4	Spring commences 立春	Spring (Chinese New Year)	Spring onion/strawberry/mackerel
February 19	Spring showers 雨水		Burdock/orange/pomfret
March 5	Insects waken 驚蟄		Chive/loquat/oyster
March 21	Vernal equinox 春分		Asparagus/star fruit/skipjack
April 5	Bright and clear (Qingming) 清明		Pea/plum/sakura shrimp
April 20	Corn rain 穀雨		Crown daisy/banana/flying fish
May 5	Summer commences 立夏	Summer (Dragon Boat Festival)	Okra/lychee/beltfish
May 21	Corn forms 小滿		Water bamboo/peach/stonefish
June 6	Corn on ear 芒種		Soya bean/pineapple/dolphinfish
June 21	Summer solstice 夏至		Eggplant/watermelon/squid
July 21	Moderate heat 小暑		Corn/avocado/mussel
July 23	Great heat 大暑		Peanut/grape/squid
August 7	Autumn commences 立秋	Autumn (Mid-Autumn Festival)	Lotus root/longan/swordfish
August 23	End of heat 處暑		Celery/yellow pear/cuttlefish
September 8	White dew 白露		Taro/pomelo/shrimp
September 23	Autumnal equinox 秋分		Green bamboo shoot/chestnut/anchovy
October 8	Cold dew 寒露		Cabbage/lotus seed/clam
October 23	Frost 霜降		Bell pepper/persimmon/snapper
November 7	Winter commences 立冬	Winter (Winter Solstice)	Broccoli/custard apple/amberjack
November 22	Light snow 小雪		Mushroom/tomato/red bigeye fish
December 7	Heavy snow 大雪		Carrot/wax apple/mullet
December 22	Winter solstice 冬至		Leaf mustard/honeydew melon/red seabream
January 5	Moderate cold 小寒		Roselle flower/date/pomfret
January 20	Severe cold 大寒		Onion/kumquat/swordfish

^aThe exact dates of the 24 solar terms vary within a narrow range from year to year depending on the solar movements. The dates provided here are based on the 2018 calendar announced by the Hong Kong Observatory official website ([Hong Kong Observatory, 2017](http://www.hko.gov.hk)).

Glutinous rice cake (Nian gao): The Chinese pronunciation of “nian” 年 means “year” and “gao” 高 means “higher/increasing.” It is considered good luck to eat nian gao because it has the symbolism of increasing prosperity every year. The New Year greeting “Nian Nian Gao Sheng” (年年高升) is to wish people “advance toward higher positions and prosperity step by



FIGURE 15.2 Picture of a golden ingot. Source: <https://lovepik.com/sousuo-413413-0-2-0-0-0.html#>.

step” It is mainly sweet and steam-wrapped in leaves. The main ingredient is glutinous (sticky) rice, which is a symbol of family togetherness too. Because “gao” (cake) (Fig. 15.3) carries such a strong symbolic meaning, one can always come across various types of “gao” such as the gao in the picture as well as turnip cake and taro cake.

Dried black moss (fat choy): “Kung Hei Fat Choy” is the standard greeting phrase during Chinese New Year and it is for the same reason why dried black moss is often a must-see on the dining table as it indicates wealth and prosperity. Fat choy gets its name from its resemblance to hair, literally translating in Chinese as “hair vegetable.” “Fat” means both hair and fortune, while “choy” (vegetable) also means “fortune,” so Kung Hei Fat Choy means wishing your good fortune and wealth. In fact, all types of vegetables are welcome during this festival because they all carry the meaning of “fortune” (choy) (Fig. 15.4).



FIGURE 15.3 Nian gao. Source: <http://www.echoskitchen.com/2016/02/traditional-chinese-new-year-cakenian.html>.



FIGURE 15.4 Fat choy. Source: <https://www.elementseafood.com/recipe-hoe-see-fat-choy-dried-oysters-with-hair-seaweed/>.

Dried oyster (Ho Si): In the southern part of China where Cantonese is the prevailing language, Fat Choy is often served with dried oysters (ho si, which sounds like “good matters” in Cantonese) and the dish is called Fat Choy Ho Si (fortune and good matters). What better wish you can make to anyone during the Chinese New Year than this?

Sweet rice dumpling (tangyuan): Tangyuan is the main food for China’s [Lantern Festival](#); however, in southern part of China, people eat them throughout the Chinese New Year Festival. The pronunciation and round shape of tangyuan are associated with family reunion and togetherness, which are two main features of this important festival.

Noodles: Long noodles represent longevity and it is important that they are served uncut if they were to carry this auspicious meaning. Chinese people usually eat rice more often than noodle as their main daily source of carbohydrate, but long noodles are often served during Chinese New Year and birthday celebration because of its meaning of “longevity.”

Chicken and tangerine: Chicken 雞 sounds similar to tangerine 橘 in the Chinese language, which in turn is similar to luck 吉. Whole chicken (including head, limbs, and organs) and big whole tangerines (usually in pairs) will be served to symbolize good luck for the whole year.

Certainly, the list is longer than this but this serves as a useful and (hopefully) interesting summary of the food tradition in this uniquely important Chinese festival.

15.4.2 Dragon boat festival

The Dragon Boat Festival, also called Duanwu Festival 端午節, is a traditional holiday observed annually over 2000 years in China to commemorate the famous patriotic Chinese poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (340–278 BC) who gave his life for his country by drowning himself in the Miluo River located in the Hunan province. Because of this origin, Dragon Boat Festival enjoys higher popularity in southern areas, such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Fujian provinces than the north. On October 30, 2009, it was added to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Besides the famous tradition of dragon boat race, the festival is also celebrated with food.



FIGURE 15.5 Zongzi. Source: <https://archive.shine.cn/city-specials/hangzhou/Sampling-Zhejiang-local-zongzi-varieties/shdaily.shtml>.

Leaf-wrapped rice dumpling (zongzi): Zongzi is a kind of sticky rice dumpling wrapped in bamboo leaves. It is made from sticky rice with various fillings that can be savory or sweet. The tradition of eating zongzi is said to begin with people throwing rice/food wrapped with bamboo leaves into the Miluo River to protect Qu Yuan's body from being eaten by fish. Gradually, it has become a tradition to eat zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival in honor of his patriotism. Nowadays, zongzi (Fig. 15.5) already becomes a common food, which can be easily found in supermarkets or restaurants.

Rice field eel: Eel in the rice field is most tender and nutritive at the time of Dragon Boat Festival and is treated as important a festive food as zongzi for people in southern China. Eel is usually stewed with tofu (bean curd) and mushrooms. Braising with garlic is also another popular way to cook eel.

Deep-fried rice dumpling (Jian dui): Jian dui is round deep-fried ball made with sticky rice flour and covered with sesame. The legend goes that the rainy season before the Dragon Boat Festival was actually caused by a hole in the sky. Therefore, people eat glutinous rice balls to mend the hole and stop the rain. In Fujian Province in southeast China, the celebration of eating jian dui is widely followed.

15.4.3 Mid-Autumn festival (Moon festival)

The Mid-Autumn Festival (Moon Festival) falls on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month. It takes its name the date falls in the middle of the autumn season. Although the moon is full on the 15th day of every lunar month, it is generally believed that the moon is the roundest and brightest during this time of the year. Chinese people celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival with many meaningful activities, such as having reunion dinner with family, hanging



FIGURE 15.6 Moon cakes: Fat choy. Source: <https://www.timeout.com/hong-kong/restaurants/11-best-mooncakes-to-try-this-mid-autumn-festival>.

lanterns, guessing lantern riddles, and worshipping the moon. This festival is celebrated with significance because the ancient Chinese observed that, on top of solar movement, the movement of the moon also had a close relationship with changes of the seasons and agricultural production. Hence, to express their gratitude to the moon and celebrate the harvest, they offered a food sacrifice to the moon in this festival.

Moon cake: The tradition of eating moon cake is so representative that sometimes this festival is even called the “Mooncake Festival.” Moon cake is usually round to take after the shape of the full moon and to symbolize reunion, with fillings inside (egg yolk, lotus seed paste, red bean paste, ham, nuts, etc.). Moon cakes are made differently from region to region. Besides self-consumption, people also send moon cake as gift when they visit friends and relatives around that time of the year (Fig. 15.6).

Harvest fruit and vegetables: Together with moon cakes usually come various types of fruit and vegetables which are in harvest during that time of year, for example, pomelo, pumpkin, yellow pear, and grape (fruit); lotus root and taro (vegetables), which are in their freshest and most nutritious condition.

Outdoor picnic/barbeque: One essential feature of the festival is the full moon which symbolizes family union. Therefore, many people opt for an outdoor picnic dinner or family barbeque under the moon so that they can appreciate the full moon while enjoying family bond. Autumn is also said to be the best season for outdoor picnic or barbeque.

15.4.4 Chongyang festival/Qingming festival (tomb sweeping festivals)

These two are the two festivals in the Chinese calendar, which are dedicated to the remembrance of ancestors spread across two seasons (autumn and spring, respectively).

Chongyang is also known as “Double Ninth Festival” because it falls on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. In Chinese, “nine” is regarded as a “Yang” number (which means masculine as opposed to Yin, which is feminine). The ninth day of the ninth month is the day that has two Yang numbers, and “chong” in Chinese means double, which is how the name Chongyang was created. People usually climb mountain (or a modern reinterpretation

is to climb anything of a certain elevation such as a tall building), pay homage to chrysanthemums, and sweep tombs. This time of the year is when the chrysanthemums are in full bloom so people also drink wine made with chrysanthemums. People will also eat Chongyang cake, which is a kind of steamed layered cake with nuts and jujube (date) paste as filling in between. As previously mentioned, cake in Chinese is pronounced as “gao,” which means “high/increase”; people consider climbing a high mountain to be the same as eating cake, symbolizing that one wishes to make improvements by advancing to a higher level.

15.4.4.1 *Qingming*

Qingming (bright and clear), being a traditional Chinese festival, is also one of the 24 solar terms described in the section above. Qingming Festival is a time of many different activities, among which the main ones are tomb sweeping, taking a spring outing, and flying kites. People eat differently during Qingming in different regions, but the main foods are Qingming cake, peach blossom porridge, and snails. Qingming cake (*sazi*) is crispy fried food made of wheat flour or glutinous rice flour, eggs, sesame, onion, salt, and other ingredients. Spring is the blooming/harvest season for peach blossom and snails, so they are also popular Qingming food consumed by the people.

A rooted culture for respecting and remembering their family ancestors is in the heart of the Chinese filial piety. Therefore, it is an important ritual for Chinese to pay respect to their ancestor by tomb sweeping during Chongyang and Qingming festivals. As part of the ceremony they will offer food sacrifice, which mainly include suckling pig, tea/rice wine, fruit, poultry, and any other food items that their ancestors liked.

15.4.5 Winter Solstice festival (Winter festival)

Winter Solstice is one of the 24 solar terms and falls on the day in the 11th lunar month when the day is shortest and night is longest. At the same time, it is one of the most important Chinese festivals, second only to the Chinese New Year. In fact, for many Chinese families, the Winter Solstice Festival is even “more important than the Chinese New Year” as represented by the Chinese saying 冬大過年. This is because the Winter Solstice Festival was traditionally the time by which farmers and fishermen had to prepare for the coming colder months. This is also the time for another family reunion just before the winter as Chinese typically regard the winter months as a harsh and difficult period and thus a family reunion before it is important to wish for smooth sailing through this hardship. It also symbolizes that the warm months will come soon after winter. Since after this day, the daytime will become longer and night will become shorter, representing gradual improvement of weather.

Traditions and customs for the Winter Solstice Festival vary in different areas of China. In the northern parts of China, dumplings, wonton, and mutton are standard items used for celebration which are considered to be able to keep one warm in this extremely cold weather. Moreover, the dumpling is the main food for people in northern China. It is believed that after the Winter Solstice, the weather will become colder and colder; and by eating dumplings which take the shape of people’s ear (on top of the shape of ingot as previously mentioned), people believe that their ears can be protected from frostbite. In the southern parts, sweet rice dumplings (*tangyuan*) and noodles are the popular festival food, carrying the same auspicious meanings as mentioned in the Chinese New Year section.

15.5 Conclusion

The chapter has illustrated food as a social tool in different kinds of occasions. Through understanding of its social functions, dining styles, and food roles to play during official and private social occasions, one can see that food is a powerful tool for not only socialization but also communication and even diplomatic relationship development. Furthermore, the extent to which food playing a key role in cultural representation is well depicted in the celebration of festivals in China. The most important Chinese cultural festivals were selected to display how one culture utilizes food in the society and how people socialize and connect with each other over food gatherings and sharing. Recently, public health and policy experts across the world also see the importance of food being a social tool, particularly for young children bonding with their families. Family dinner is considered as “a vital tool to address social, emotional, physical, and mental health for kids and their parents,” stated by Dr. Grace Freedman, the founder of eatdinner.org. To this end, we would like to suggest families to treat mealtime a sacred ritual to develop bonding; meanwhile we all should have food gathering with families and friends more often.

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