

## Introduction: Thinking about Food in Chinese History

**AS CHINA EMBARKED** on the period of “opening and reform” after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the country’s diverse regional food cultures, decimated by decades of food shortages, communal canteens, and restaurant mismanagement, quickly sprang back to life. In Shanghai, new restaurants serving regional specialties were among the most numerous and successful early private enterprises, and monotonous state-run restaurants resumed the regional character for which they had been celebrated before the “proletarianization” of restaurants and food culture during the political frenzy of China’s Cultural Revolution decade (1966–76). The city’s venerable Yangzhou Restaurant took the extra step of creating a special “Dream of the Red Chamber” banquet menu, featuring well-known Yangzhou dishes that appear in the famous eighteenth-century novel of the same name. Within a few short years, restaurants became important meeting grounds for communities of fellow-provincials to gather and reminisce about old times over a meal of hometown cooking, as well as places in which city residents could connect with China’s many regional food cultures and the country’s culinary heritage.

This resurgence of regional food culture in China was more than just a recuperation of earlier food traditions or a response to the tedium and deprivation of material life under socialism. What I call “culinary nostalgia”—the recollection or purposive evocation of another time and place through food—is a time-honored Chinese tradition. Even in Shanghai, China’s most “modern” city, culinary nostalgia took many forms and was an integral component of urban culture at each stage of the city’s development. In the late nineteenth century, city residents mourned the loss of Shanghai’s most famous specialty foodstuff,

the Shanghai honey nectar peach, and thereby the fading of the city's historical garden culture to urbanization and Westernization. During the Republican period (1912–49), when civil war tore apart the Chinese body politic, Shanghai residents turned to food once again, this time to the city's many regional Chinese restaurants, to connect with their country's rich heritage, and to imagine for themselves how such a culturally diverse country might be held together. The tradition of culinary nostalgia continues today, in “Old Shanghai” theme restaurants that link city residents to an image of Shanghai's former glory, while the city itself is transformed into a global destination of the future.

This book argues that regional food culture was intrinsic to how Chinese connected to the past, lived in the present, and imagined a future. It focuses on Shanghai—a food lover's paradise—and identifies the importance of regional food culture at pivotal moments in the city's history, and in Chinese history more generally. Looking at how the Chinese in Shanghai thought about food reveals how they viewed their relationships with other places, whether other regions of China or the Western world, and how they experienced the many changes the city underwent through several centuries. By identifying nostalgia as an enduring theme of late imperial and modern Shanghai food history, this book builds on recent studies of the city that have challenged the idea of Shanghai's essentially “modern” or “Westernized” character. Indeed, when seen through the lens of its food history, the city emerges as a deeply nostalgic place and one much more beholden to—indeed committed to—“traditional” ways of life than previously imagined. Food was not the only object of nostalgia in Shanghai's history, but food's importance for Chinese articulations of nostalgia more generally make Shanghai's food culture an especially rich window onto the nostalgic side of city life.

Thinking about the Shanghai experience as part of a wider history of food in China further draws into relief one of the most remarkable, yet rarely remarked upon, features of Chinese history during the past two centuries: the enduring appeal of “traditional” foodways and their regional manifestations during periods of often rapid and drastic social and cultural change. The significance that Chinese have attached to foodways and diet has of course changed many times, and in many important ways. But regional foodways remain a core component of cultural identity in China. This book seeks to explain why, by examining both the tenacity of regional taste preferences and the almost limitless flexibility that food provides as a vehicle for constructing a sense of home and imagining an ideal society.

## Culinary Nostalgia

*Nostalgia*, a term that characterizes a wide range of mnemonic and evocative practices, is a tricky word. At the very least, it connotes a problem, rather than a solution, a pathology, rather than a critical frame of analysis for looking at the world. Coined in 1688 by the Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer (1669–1752), *nostalgia* referred to a new medical condition that first made its presence among displaced peoples, especially soldiers, of seventeenth-century Europe. Nostalgia became epidemic in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution, which transformed the foundations of thought and society and, as Svetlana Boym notes, “appeared to unchain a yearned-for future,” driving a wedge between experience, what people knew to be true about the world around them, and expectation, what they anticipated the world becoming.<sup>1</sup> Advocates of Enlightenment concepts of progress sought to guide this anticipation in ways that pushed people and society “forward,” and only the Romantics provided a widely recognized way of valorizing the past as a source of hope. The Romantics elevated folk art and local customs to the level of the heroic and, in so doing, made nostalgia into a virtue. But they also gave birth to the trappings of modern nationalism.<sup>2</sup> Today, *nostalgia* most commonly suggests a form of self-deception, a false sense of an idealized place that never was.<sup>3</sup>

In China, where there are several rough equivalents for the English *nostalgia*, such as *huaigu* and *huaijiu*, the idea has generated far fewer detractors and a long record of well-respected practitioners.<sup>4</sup> These practitioners may be effectively divided into “restorative” and “reflective” types.<sup>5</sup> Among the former, who are distinguished by their efforts to effect a “transhistorical reconstruction” of a lost world, must be counted Confucians, who based their notions of the ideal state on a series of representations of the early sage kings, Yao, Shun, and Yu, and the early Western Zhou (1045–771 B.C.). Reflective nostalgics, by contrast, “thrive in . . . the longing itself, and [delay] the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately.” Among the most revered of China’s reflective nostalgics is the poet Tao Qian (A.D. 365–427), whose “Record of the Peach Blossom Spring” (Taohua yuan ji) yielded the trope of a perfect lost world, Wulingyuan. Nobody ever seriously doubted that Wulingyuan existed—that was beside the point. Instead, debate centered on where it was, and how to get there.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, few Chinese considered nostalgia itself to be a problem, at least not until the late nineteenth century, when Chinese elites, grappling with shifts in the balance of world power, concurred with their European counterparts that the “Chinese attachment to the past” was a source of weakness,

rather than strength. European somatology threatened to remake the Chinese world in its own image.

In Europe, or at least in the Protestant West, history's moralists have looked no more favorably upon epicures than they have upon nostalgics, on the grounds that an undue interest in the pleasures of eating and drinking reflects a moral failing. In this regard, the British diplomats and traders who led the charge to "open China" shared something with Confucians, for whom food mattered deeply, but as ritual and a source of social stability, not as pleasure. The Confucian classics and early texts of Chinese political philosophy are replete with discourse on food. These include depictions of Zhou food rituals in the *Book of Rites*, as well as observations about the interrelationship among food, human nature, and social order. Thus, as the *Guanzi* observes, "If the state has an abundance of wealth, people will come from afar; if the land has been opened for cultivation, they will settle down. When the granaries are full, they will know propriety and moderation; when their clothing and food is adequate, they will know [the distinction between] honor and shame."<sup>7</sup> Still, most Chinese, Confucianism notwithstanding, are epicures, for whom no food tastes better than that of their hometowns. In this regard, Chinese have firmly held their ground against the universalizing discourse of modernity. Of all the forms of nostalgia that Chinese reformers and modernizers have condemned during the past century and a half, only culinary nostalgia has emerged almost entirely unscathed.

The idea that food can evoke another time and place has been a modernist truism ever since Marcel Proust, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, transported his readers to the Combray of his narrator's childhood by the alchemical effect of mixing, on the tip of the narrator's tongue, a few crumbs of madeleine with a sip of warm lime-flower tea.<sup>8</sup> In China, Confucians and epicures alike engaged in such reverie, well before the development of a discourse on the modern. For them, food evoked images of an ideal society and, in its absence, a model either for establishing one, or for understanding the sources of its want. China's restorative nostalgics dreamt of a world in which, "the grain will be more than can be eaten," and "the fishes and turtles will be more than can be consumed," so that "people may nourish their living and mourn for their dead, without any feeling against any." Accomplishing this, according to Mencius, was "the first step of royal government."<sup>9</sup> More reflective types were drawn to Tao Qian's Wulingyuan, whose path was lined with peach blossoms, or to the mythical kingdom of Penglai, where immortals were said to travel to banquet, and where

the Queen Mother of the West cultivated the fruits of immortality. Few Chinese dreamers ever expected that they would find their way to Penglai, but the many scholars, officials, exiles, sojourning merchants, and migrant workers who made late imperial China into one of the most mobile societies of early modern times were especially prone to culinary nostalgia. On their long journeys away from home, as Bryna Goodman has poignantly remarked, they left behind “the special way of speaking and the unique forms of dried tofu or sweet cakes of their village; passing through neighboring counties with still comprehensible dialects and recognizable dishes; and finally arriving in strange places where words were unfamiliar and palatable food hard to find.”<sup>10</sup> They fed their nostalgia in somewhat more mundane ways than, say, the Tang (618–907) poet Wang Wei (701–61), who sought to “create within himself the contentment and equilibrium imputed to the folk of the land of the Peach Blossom Spring.”<sup>11</sup> But the regional restaurants, specialty food shops, and networks of fellow-provincials that followed in their wake and catered to their needs provided sojourners with a sense of home in a foreign land. In the process, as this book illustrates, they shaped the course of history in late imperial and twentieth-century China.

In the twentieth century, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) made food into a trope of the failings of the past or present, and of the promise, instead, of the future. “Speaking bitterness” (*suku*) campaigns, during which the party instructed disenfranchised peasants to speak out freely about the abuses they suffered at the hands of landlords, dug up many painful memories of hunger. During the Cultural Revolution, sent-down youth even participated in “eating bitterness meals,” at which peasants recalled their bitter past over unappetizing meals to facilitate the youths’ reeducation.<sup>12</sup> These memories served as a useful foil for the more just world that the party promised to provide for China’s poor, a socialist utopia replete with bountiful harvests and plump healthy babies, suggesting that, as far as food was concerned, the Communists were only trying to deliver what Confucians, or so they argued, failed to provide.<sup>13</sup> Yet with food a powerful sense of time and place may be wrought from even the most wretched circumstances. Take, for instance, the recent popularity of Cultural Revolution theme restaurants, where former sent-down urban youth gather over plates of rustic fare and reminisce about hard times engaging in manual labor in the countryside.<sup>14</sup> In China, culinary nostalgia has been a valuable framework for articulating both ideology and utopia, and for learning how to live with the consequences of the one or the absence of the other.

The significance that Chinese have attributed to food, and in particular to

cherished specialty foodstuffs and regional cuisine restaurants, is the focus of this book. To understand how these themes played out in Shanghai, and to identify the conjuncture and disjuncture between Shanghai's food history and that of China more generally, this introduction first assesses the state of scholarship on regional food culture in China.<sup>15</sup> I then chart a new framework for identifying the historical significance of food as a symbol of place, and as an object through which people understand and make sense of the world around them. As will be seen, the history of food as a symbol of place has a long history in China, where regional food culture has been an important component of personal and group identity, and of both dominant accounts of the past and counter-narratives written from the "margins." This introduction then closes with a preliminary overview of the ways in which Shanghai city residents and commentators on Shanghai society have engaged with food culture to identify and remake the image of Shanghai itself.

### National and Regional Food Culture in China

Chinese attach great importance and meaning to their hometown food culture. Visitors to China throughout history have been struck not only by the preferences that Chinese from one part of the country express for the foods of their native region, but also by their reluctance, and even professions of inability, to eat the food of another region. As one Republican-era Chinese interpreter of food culture in China explained to Shanghai's English-reading public: "The cuisine of a locality is a reflection of the surrounding topography, and the mode of living of the inhabitants. . . . Chinese from the far mountains of Sichuan do not have their food prepared in the same way as natives of Shanghai. . . . There is variation from north to south . . . and again from east to west . . . . The main products of the place must of necessity form the basis of the people's food, and their cooking is built around the ingredients produced in their own district."<sup>16</sup> Of course, all food has some local characteristics. In the context of French cuisine, this is explained by the concept of *terroir*, a term that denotes the special properties that the soil of a particular place imbues in local products, especially wine.<sup>17</sup> Seeking to identify the "importance of food itself in Chinese culture," K. C. Chang once observed, "That Chinese cuisine is the greatest in the world is highly debatable and is essentially irrelevant. But few can take exception to the statement that few other cultures are as food oriented as the Chinese."<sup>18</sup> One could add to Chang's point that in few places have conversations about regional food culture been as historically significant as in China. It is not that

such conversations do not take place in other parts of the world. But just as Philip Kafalas notes about the prevalence of tropes of nostalgia in the history of Chinese letters, so with the question of discourse on regional food: “There seems to be a difference of degree.”<sup>19</sup>

The importance of regional foodways to the process of self- and place-formation in China is a recognized area of Chinese culture. Yet the historical significance of differences in regional food culture, and of the ideas that Chinese have formulated about these differences, has not yet been integrated into the study of Chinese history. This significance has been recognized but also partially obscured by some pioneering scholarship on the history and anthropology of food in China, including the landmark 1977 essay collection, *Food in Chinese Culture*. The essays in this collection are rich and nuanced and reward multiple re-readings, but as Charles Hayford pointed out in a review of the collection, there is a fundamental tension in the volume between those contributions that emphasize continuity in food culture in China and those that emphasize change over time.<sup>20</sup> The editor, Chang, tries to strike a balance, noting, “First, continuity vastly outweighs change . . . . Second, there are enough changes to warrant some preliminary efforts to give the periodization of Chinese history a new perspective.” Chang initially cedes ground on the second point, “to let [the] authors speak for themselves in regard to the major events in each of the periods.” But he then posits three thresholds of major change: the “beginning of farming”; the “beginning of a highly stratified society, possibly in the Hsia [Xia] dynastic period [ca. 21st–18th c. B.C.] and certainly by the Shang period of the eighteenth century B.C.”; and a third, some three thousand years later, “happening right in our own time,” in the “truly national distribution of . . . food resources,” during the People’s Republic.<sup>21</sup> Chang recognizes that, in between the second and third stages, “Most changes involved the geographic movement of peoples with their particular food habits,” but adds that “truly important changes having to do with total alignment of society are very rare.”<sup>22</sup>

The overall effect of Chang’s assessment is contradictory. On the one hand, there is a set of enduring core elements of “Chinese” food culture, such as Chang’s notion of the “*fan-cai* principle”—according to which Chinese diets are understood to consist of a base of grains and other starch foods complemented with vegetable or meat dishes. On the other hand, there are many remarkable developments, at both empire-wide and regional levels, of indeterminate significance. With regard to “Chinese food culture” in the aggregate, Edward Schafer’s contribution to the collection identifies a Tang “revolution” in

attitudes toward “foreign manners and customs,” which “ultimately led to the richness and variety of modern Chinese cookery.” Michael Freeman, moreover, suggests that Song (960–1279) capital cities witnessed the creation of a self-conscious “cuisine” as something understood to be distinct from mere cookery. But when Schafer’s and Freeman’s suggestions regarding change are followed by a chapter on Yuan (1279–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) food that identifies the overall pattern of food culture in China as one of “limited change within stable patterns,” the overall effect of the earlier contributions is effectively neutralized.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, we are left with a recasting, through the history of food, of the once-conventional, but now largely discredited, image of China’s abortive “medieval” modernity. It also remains unclear just what significance to attach to the “geographic movement of peoples with their particular food habits.”

Some greater clarity may emerge by adapting the insights of recent scholarship on China that denaturalizes the category and space of the nation, and by further applying these insights to our study of the idea of the region.<sup>24</sup> First, a nonnationalist perspective will make it possible to identify geographical and chronological frameworks that help explain broad patterns of change during the three to four thousand years spanning Chang’s second and third threshold. After all, Shang territories included neither Sichuan nor the Guangdong region, two territories that provide, for many, definitive components of Chinese cuisine. And as Chen Mengyin, a Hong Kong food writer who published under the pseudonym Tejjiaodui, pointed out more than four decades ago, what we know today as Sichuan cuisine did not begin to take shape until the late seventeenth century, and Cantonese cuisine did not acquire the high status it is accorded today until the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, what came to pass for “Northern” and Huaiyang cuisine—which along with Sichuan and Cantonese cuisine constitute the so-called “four great culinary traditions” (*sida caixi*) of China—certainly did not exist in even the Zhou, Han, or Tang, let alone the Shang. Indeed, leaving aside questions of temporal origin and comparative assessments of quality and taste, the wider prestige of “Northern” cooking, commonly identified as being synonymous with Shandong (Lu) cooking, is attributable largely to the patronage of Shandong (and to a lesser extent Henan) chefs by the Manchu emperors, especially the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–96), of the Qing (1644–1911).<sup>26</sup> How then might we characterize some of the changes in the intervening periods between the eras marking Chang’s second and third thresholds?

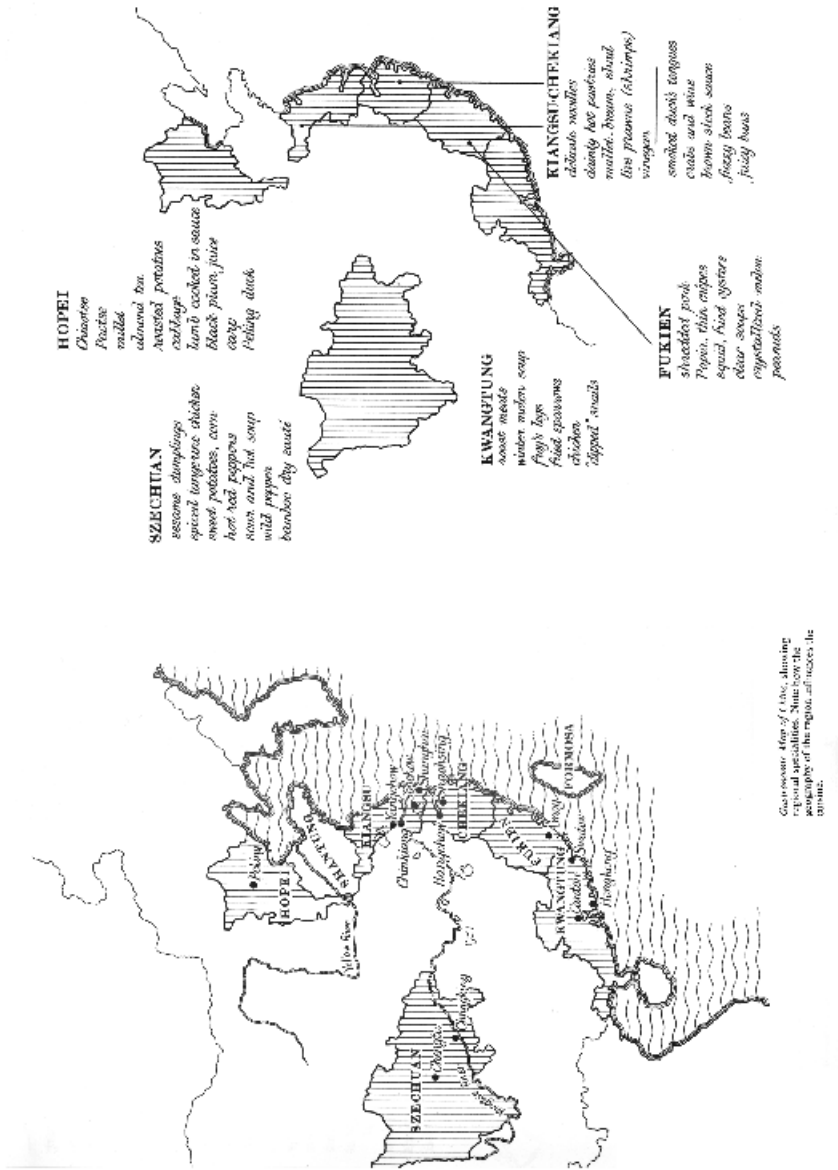
Viewing Chinese food culture from the level of imperial capital cities, we



might adapt the approach of Valerie Hansen's *Open Empire*, which identifies broad shifts in the geographical orientation of imperial formations in China. Seen in this light, the cosmopolitan food culture in Tang Chang'an may be best seen as the culmination of a "Western facing" food culture, whereas that of Song Kaifeng and especially Southern Song Hangzhou mark a transition to an "Eastward facing" food culture that is itself discontinuous in significant ways with the northern steppe, Southeast Asian, and American orientations and influences that become so important to food culture in the Yuan, early Ming, and late Ming, respectively.<sup>27</sup>

Second, it will also be helpful to rethink what is commonly meant by "regional food culture" in discussions of food in China. Regional diversity in Chinese food culture is most commonly characterized in axioms that postulate the existence of either "four great culinary traditions" (*sida caixi*)—generally taken to be Cantonese, Sichuan, Huaiyang (or Jiangsu), and Northern (or Shandong)—or "eight great culinary traditions" (*bada caixi*), adding Anhui, Fujian, Hunan, and Zhejiang cooking to the first four. Complementing these are notions of "minor" cuisines, such as that of the "eight minor culinary traditions" (*baxiao caixi*). Yet, as a number of scholars have pointed out, these categories obscure as much as they clarify because one such term might encompass cooking styles that are as different from one another as they are from a style represented by another term.<sup>28</sup> E. N. and Marja Anderson have noted that yet another classification system posits five great regional cuisines—although the five change depending on the classifier—and suggest that this reflects "little more" than "an interesting demonstration of the Chinese obsession with grouping everything by fives." For the purposes of their own analysis, they "added at least three more schools of cooking," on the ground that they "have appreciated [them] as worthy of equal rank."<sup>29</sup> Such gestures, however, only reinforce the relative arbitrariness of such classification systems. Moreover, Chinese have themselves historically been well aware of the inadequacies of these terms. Thus, when Republican-era restaurant critics wrote in general of Shanghai's "Cantonese cuisine" (*Yuecai*) restaurants, they acknowledged that doing so was to engage in a kind of shorthand for different cooking styles within Guangdong Province, where one would more rigorously distinguish Chaozhou and Guangzhou varieties of Cantonese cuisine.<sup>30</sup>

The effort to classify "great" and "minor" culinary traditions is further complicated by shifts in collective assessments of regional cooking. Anhui cooking is generally considered one of China's "eight great culinary traditions," but



**Figure 1.1** "Gastronomic Map of China," Representing Selective Regions: Hebei (Hopei), Jiangsu (Kiangsu), Zhejiang (Chekiang), Fujian (Fukien), Guangdong (Kwangtung), and Sichuan (Szechuan).  
 source: *Chinese Gastronomy*, by Hsiang Ju Lin and Taufeng Lin, by permission of the K S Giniger Company, New York.

in Republican Shanghai, Anhui cooking was best known for inexpensive and large portions, and its status has fallen even further in present-day Shanghai. Dafugui, an Anhui restaurant that first opened in Shanghai during the late nineteenth century, is one of the oldest extant restaurants in the city. Yet today its menu offers few traditional Anhui dishes and includes many dishes from the repertoire of Shanghai cuisine, a cooking style that some now consider to be, at the very least, one of China's "eight minor culinary traditions," and possibly even the new flagship cuisine of the broader Huaiyang region. This decline in the status of Anhui cuisine may account for its omission, for example, from the very learned and thoughtful 1969 *Chinese Gastronomy*, by Hsiang Ju Lin and Tsuifeng Lin. This text included a "Gastronomic Map of China" that illustrated regional specialties of Chinese cuisine (see Figure I.1). But the map is itself remarkable for the many blanks it contains and for the way it obscures not only Anhui cooking but all regional styles west of major coastal regions, except for that of Sichuan.

Such shifts in status, and the lack of fit between categories of cuisine and culinary practice, beg the question of how these categories came about in the first place and when, where, and why they are put to use. As Taiwan historian Lu Yaodong points out, regional cuisines often do not acquire a clear self-conscious definition as something distinct, different, or "authentic" (*zhengzong*) until the purveyors of different cuisines come into contact with one another and seek to differentiate the qualities and flavors of their variety of cooking from others.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, if local food culture is such an important component of a sense of self and place, how has it come about that Chinese have also concluded that these various regional cuisines constitute a broader "Chinese" culinary tradition? Indeed, as some of the best cookbooks point out, some culinary traditions that are today considered a part of the repertoire of Chinese cooking as a whole, such as that of Yunnan Province, have more in common with Southeast Asian cooking than with any other variety of regional cuisine in China.<sup>32</sup> As the present book shows, even Cantonese cuisine seemed foreign to mid-nineteenth-century men of Jiangnan who first encountered it in Shanghai. What conclusions, finally, have Chinese drawn from recognition of this diversity? To answer these questions, this study considers the terms used to designate regional cuisines as discursive constructs rather than as simply analytical categories, and I examine where, when, and why claims for gustatory difference or distinction are made.