Mayne Mei, Peiduo Liu, Ruida Chen
Professor Brown
Asian 258
Food Puzzle 2
15/09/24

Food Puzzle 2

Imagine you're the head cook at a rich Buddhist temple near Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China in 1350. Your boss gives you a crazy job: make a huge dinner for the Mongol Emperor and thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns. How do you make food that makes everyone happy when they eat such different things? Let's look at how this cook might have solved this big problem!

The Guest List: People from All Over Asia

The cook knows that where you have the party matters. The Lingyin Temple, with its big Buddha statues and misty mountains, is a perfect place. But the guests? They're from all over:

- The Mongol Emperor and his friends who love meat
- Thousands of local Buddhist monks and nuns who don't eat meat
- Important people from Tibet, Japan, and even far-away India
- Some curious Confucian scholars too

Each group has its own cultural matrix - that means they have different rules about food, different ideas about what's good to eat, and different ways of eating (Brown, L4, slide 5).

The Food: Mixing Steppe and Temple Cooking

How can you make food that makes meat-eating Mongols and vegetarian monks both happy? Our smart cook uses cultural adaptation! This means he changes familiar foods to make them fit what different people can eat. He also uses some loan words - these are words borrowed from other languages to describe new foods or ideas (Brown, L5, slide 12).

For the Emperor:
- "Conqueror's Jiaozi": Jiaozi is a loan word from Chinese, meaning dumplings. These are filled with deer meat and spicy oil. They show how nomad food changed when it came to China (Brown, L5, slide 12).
- "Khan's Favorite": A whole cooked lamb with spices like cumin and saffron. Saffron is another loan word, coming from Arabic, showing how the Mongols brought new things from far away (Brown, L6, slide 37).

For the Monks:

- "Fake Meat Surprise": Cooked wheat gluten that looks like meat. This is a good example of cultural adaptation - making something new that fits with Buddhist rules (Brown, L4, slide 23).
- "Garden on a Plate": Vegetables and tofu cut to look like a little garden. This looks pretty and follows Buddhist ideas.

Food for Everyone:
- "Silk Road Rice": Rice cooked with dried fruits and nuts. This is like Persian pilaf but changed to taste good to people from Central and East Asia (Brown, L6, slide 16).
- "Lucky Dumplings": Vegetable dumplings so good even the Emperor likes them.

Foods Not Allowed:
- Garlic and onions (Buddhists think these are too exciting) (Brown, L4, slide 39)
- Beef (to be nice to guests from India who don't eat cows)
- No alcohol for the monks (but maybe some for the Emperor)

The Big Dinner

Think about how it looked: Steam with a yellow color from saffron coming from big cooking pots. Monks in orange clothes talking with rich people in silk. The air smells like spices from far away - cumin, coriander, and star anise.

Our cook, who's really good at cultural adaptation, has more tricks: He has tsampa (a Tibetan food made from barley) hidden for the Tibetan guests. The Japanese visitors can find pickled vegetables they know. He even made special fermented mare's milk (kumiss) for the Mongol leaders - but the monks can't have any!

Food Brings People Together

As people eat, something cool happens. People try foods they never had before. A Tibetan religious leader eats a Chinese jiaozi for the first time. A Mongol soldier admits the fake meat isn't bad. They even learn new words for these foods, creating more loan words as cultures mix.

By the time they eat dessert (sweet almond milk pudding and candied fruits), everyone is talking and making friends. Our cook watches happily. His food, which he made by understanding different cultural matrices and using cultural adaptation, is helping people from different places become friends.

This dinner wasn't just about eating. It was like food diplomacy, bringing together all the different parts of the Mongol empire with one meal. We don't have the recipes anymore, but we can still see how this dinner changed Asian food today.

Next time you eat a vegetarian "chicken" nugget or smell rice cooked with saffron, think about our clever temple cook. He might be a forgotten hero who used food to bring different cultures together.

Key Words:

Cultural matrix – Taxonomies, values, and social contexts of eating. This includes religious food taboos, social contexts of eating (such as whether one eats with implements or hands, or if men eat with women or people of lower social status), and distinctions like the Roman preference for dry heat cooking methods (Brown, Lecture 4, slide 5).

Cultural adaptation – The process of transforming the raw matter of nature to enhance its usefulness to humans. This applies to raw ingredients like fresh vegetables, dairy products, unprocessed grains, and raw cuts of meat. It's often associated with fermentation, food processing, and food preservation. A classic example is the "culturing" of yogurt to avoid milk digestion problems (Brown, Lecture 4, slide 23).

Loan word – A word borrowed from one language into another, often signaling the introduction of a new product, food, or concept to a culture. For example, "jiaozi" is a loan word used in the article, borrowed from Chinese to refer to dumplings (Brown, Lecture 5, slide 12).

Sources:

Brown, Miranda. Lecture 4: Buddha Food. ASIAN 258, Fall 2024, University of Michigan.

Brown, Miranda. Lecture 5: Dumplings. ASIAN 258, Fall 2024, University of Michigan.

Brown, Miranda. Lecture 6: Pilafs. ASIAN 258, Fall 2024, University of Michigan.