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An Exploration of Food in East Asia

The region of East Asia is home to many influential countries, each with a rich history and culture. China is one the oldest and most populated civilizations in the world and is host to many different ethnic groups. Meanwhile, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, all sharing heavy historical ties with China, present their own distinct regional spins on a shared culture. Japan and Korea, both wealthy nations, have found their media and popular culture to be well received across cultural barriers. Mongolia, despite its relative quietness today, was home to some of the fiercest conquerors in history. Regardless of their similarities and differences, their past conflicts and disagreements, food plays a key role in the lives of all East Asians. As such, this essay will explore the cultural meanings of food, the health impacts of food, and how the environment has influenced food across the nations of East Asia.

Before exploring these aspects of food it is important to know what foods have flourished in these different nations. As the region of East Asia encompasses a large geographical area, there are many different environments for food to come from. China is one of the most diverse countries in East Asia when it comes to climate. The northwestern province of Xinjiang is covered by deserts, mountains, and dry grasslands. In the northeastern province of Heilongjiang the city of Harbin, often called “Ice City”, is home to displays of grandiose ice sculptures in the

winter (“Urban Overview”). Meanwhile, much of Southern China, the special administrative districts of Macau and Hong Kong, and the oft-disputed nation of Taiwan lean more warm and humid for most of the year.

Given the varied environments in China, it is not surprising that there is more than one staple crop. Rice, of course, is the most well known of these. However, rice does not grow well in the drier, colder regions of China. As such, wheat, maize, and millets have also been popular, as well as the soybean, a source of protein often used to create other foods (Anderson 62). This reality is reflected in the crop outputs of different regions. The more northern areas are responsible for most maize, millet, and soybean crops while southern and eastern regions work more with rice (“Crop Production Maps”). Outside of crops, China is one of the world’s largest producers and consumers of pork (Anderson 63). Lamb is also a common meat product, especially in the western provinces (Anderson 63). The environments of the western provinces lend themselves more towards herding animals like sheep. Even today there are communities of herders in areas such as the Gansu province that rely on sheep products (“Mutton”).

Of course, the different regions of China also grow and consume different types of fruits and vegetables. For instance, napa cabbage is a common vegetable for more northern areas while mustard greens are more popular in Southern China (Anderson 63). In terms of fruits, southern areas grow quite a variety. Lychee, longan, mangosteen, and rambutan are just some of the species that thrive in southern regions of China. Some fruit species, such as jujube and certain varieties of pear, are more cold resistant and thus can be grown further north than some of the aforementioned fruits. Hawthorn fruit is a component of several popular Chinese sweets, with candied hawthorne being a popular snack in northern cities.

For the island nation of Japan, the climate also varies based on the latitude of the area. The northernmost prefecture of Hokkaido has a cold temperate climate and experiences regular snowfall. Meanwhile, the southernmost islands of Kyushu and Okinawa experience subtropical and even tropical climates (Ashkenazi 113). However, despite the differing climates, Japan's food landscape is defined by the ocean that surrounds it and the mountains that take up most of its land. The abundant mountainous areas and less arable land have made farming more difficult in Japan (Nam). Enough so that Japan has become the "4th largest importer of agricultural products" in the world and has a shrinking agricultural sector (United States, Dept. of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service). Even then, there are crops grown across the islands that have been an important source of food for the people of Japan.

Rice is chief among the grains. It is widely consumed across Japan and is grown in the nation along with soybeans, barley, and wheat ("Crop Production Maps", Ashkenazi 114). Buckwheat is also a common ingredient in the production of certain kinds of Japanese noodles (Ashkenazi 114). Given the proximity to the ocean, different kinds of fish and seafood are abundant in Japan and are often harvested based on the season (Ashkenazi 113). Meats, while available in Japan, were historically less well established than in other regions due to the influence of Buddhism and generally low livestock populations (Nam). Radishes, cabbages, and turnips are very common in terms of Japanese vegetables. Carrots, onions, leeks, bean sprouts, and squashes are also a common sight. Tubers such as yams and taro are often eaten, as well (Ashkenazi 116).

North and South Korea largely share a similar climate. There are four distinct seasons across the Korean Peninsula, with hot, humid summers and cold, dry winters (S. Park 136). In

order to protect food from rotting quickly in the summer, and to preserve food to make it through winter, Koreans relied heavily on various forms of pickling. The different types of kimchi are a reflection of this need (S. Park 136). Despite the overall climate not differing too greatly, North and South Korea still see a divide in the types of crops produced. North Korea grows corn, soybeans, and rice while their southern counterparts produce barley and rice more heavily ("Crop Production Maps"). Being a peninsula, it is unsurprising that the region has heavily utilized the sea as a source of food (S. Park 139). Meats have become popular in Korea, but were not always so readily available (Nam; S. Park 138). Instead, the traditional Korean diet was heavily dependent on rice and vegetables, with soybeans and seafood being the most common protein source (S. Park 138).

Mongolia finds itself, as whole, with a much different food situation than the other countries in the East Asia region. Only about one percent of the land in Mongolia is arable, with about 80 percent of the region being covered steppe pasterlands (Clampitt 175). Summers are hot and winters are very cold (Clampitt 175). The only major crop produced in the nation is wheat ("Crop Production Maps"). However, while the steppes of Mongolia do not provide prime conditions to grow human-friendly food, they are a great source of food for other animals. As such, Mongolians have historically practiced pastoralism, with groups herding sheep, goats, horses, yaks, and camels (Clampit 176). One ethnic group, known as the Dhuka or Tsaatan, even herd reindeer (Clampit 176; "Preserving Mongolian Culture"). To this day, a good portion of Mongolians still engage in pastoralism, even as city life becomes increasingly common (Clampit 175). Since Mongolians relied on their herd animals for food, meats and milk were the most

common foodstuffs (Clampit 178). Milk would often be processed into items such as butter, cheese, and yogurt while meats would commonly be dried into jerky (Clampit 178).

Knowing the food landscape of each of the nations in the East Asia region, the evolution of popular food items and food culture may make more sense. For instance, the northern regions of China tend to consume more wheat-based dishes such as *mantou* (steamed buns), *jiaozi* (dumplings) and noodles (Anderson 65). The northern province of Shanxi is renowned for its vast selection of noodle dishes, for example. Meanwhile, the southern regions rely heavily on rice-derived foods. Of course, with modern transportation methods, rice and wheat have largely transcended the north-south divide and are readily available across the nation. Congee, a kind of rice porridge, has been a common breakfast item in Northern China for decades now, despite wheat's dominance in the area. Similarly, *youtiao* (Chinese donut) dipped in soymilk – a breakfast consisting of northern grown wheat and soybeans - is also a common sight in Southern China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.

Given the large swathe of land that China covers, it is unsurprising that highly differentiated regional cuisines have developed. Four of the regional cuisines can be broadly split among the different regions of China. Northern China sees heavier, richer flavors with a more abundant use of vinegars. (Anderson 66). Eastern China, bordering the sea, utilizes more seafood and tends to exhibit more oily and sweet flavors (Anderson 66). The west is rich with spices and chiles; home to the Sichuan province which is famous for its spicy dishes (Anderson 66). Finally, the southern regions are characterized by the dominance of rice and relatively lighter dishes (Anderson 67). Of course, these are just broad trends, with many subtypes and minority cuisines existing as well. To give an example, while Taiwan is largely influenced by Han Chinese cuisine

these days, aboriginal Taiwanese cooking is still practiced and makes use of the island's native game animals and millets (Crook). Aboriginal cooking is not all that popular in the Taiwanese mainstream, and different tribes have different cooking styles, as well (Crook). Given the size of Taiwan compared to Mainland China, it is safe to say that the subdivisions of regional and ethnic cuisines are too great to list here.

During holidays and festivals, banquets are a common occurrence across Chinese speaking areas. Oftentimes, there are specific foods that are traditionally eaten for the occasion. During the Dragon Boat Festival, a dish of steamed sticky rice wrapped in bamboo leaves called *zongzi*, is commonly eaten (Anderson 69). For the Lantern Festival, many will eat *yuanxiao* or *tangyuan*, which are glutinous rice dough wrapped around some kind of filling. It is said that these round dumplings symbolize the moon and invoke the Chinese symbolism of circles relating to harmony and reunion (Song 58). Another round food item that is almost ubiquitous with a festival is *yuebing*, or mooncake. Mooncakes are usually given as gifts and eaten during the Mid-Autumn festival (Bedford 18). Mooncakes often have well-wishes imprinted on them, such as “good fortune” or “harmony” (Bedford 25). Yet another interesting holiday related food is *nian gao*. These are sticky rice cakes, usually consumed for Chinese New Year celebrations. While the name can be directly translated to “year cake”, in Chinese it is a homonym for “year high”, as in an increasingly good year. Birthdays also see a thematic food. Chinese birthday noodles are prepared in different ways, but the concept is always similar. Long noodles represent a long life. On the opposite side, food is sometimes left at graves to worship or honor dead ancestors and family members (Wu).

Like in China, wheat and rice dishes are very common in Japan. Traditionally, rice was included in nearly every meal, though among the youth, rice has become somewhat less present (Ashkenazi 114; Nam). Japanese noodles tend to be made of either buckwheat or wheat, with wheat being the base for one of Japan's most famous foods – ramen (Ashkenazi 114). Fish has also been an important source of protein for the Japanese, alongside soybeans are often processed into tofu or miso. Methods for preparing fish vary, though perhaps the most distinct method is slicing and serving raw, such as the case with dishes such as sushi or sashimi. However, fish is commonly grilled, poached, and stewed as well (Ashkenazi 117). As established previously, meats are a relatively new player in the Japanese diet, though they have exploded in popularity and can be seen in well-known dishes such as *katsudon* (cutlet bowl), *gyoza* (dumplings), and *karaage* – Japanese-style fried chicken (Nam). Heavy Bhuddist influence has left Japan with a rich selection of vegetable dishes which are usually pickled, simmered, or poached (Ashkenazi 116; Nam).

Many Japanese meals reflect these ingredients well. The traditional breakfast, for instance, is composed of plain steamed rice with *nori* (seaweed) slices, a pickled vegetable or *umeboshi* (sour pickled plum), miso soup, grilled fish, and possibly a raw egg cracked into and mixed with rice (Ashkenazi 117; Nam). In Eastern Japan a dish of fermented soybeans, called *natto,* is popular (Ashkenazi 118). It is normally served atop rice, possibly with soy sauce or raw egg mixed in (Ashkenazi 118). The Japanese boxed lunch, known as *bento*, is another great example of a traditional Japanese meal. Bento boxes contain several subcompartments, which hold rice, pickled vegetables, and fish or meat, among other foodstuffs like a Japanese omelet called *tamagoyaki* (Nam; Poon and Lorin). Drinks like tea and sake, an alcohol derived from

rice, are also an important aspect of certain Japanese meals. Sake is usually only drunk in the evenings and normally not with rice-heavy meals, but rather with side dishes (Ishige 176, 177). Green tea is consumed as a casual drink, during tea ceremonies, and is even used as an ingredient in certain dishes like *chazuke*, in which green tea is poured over a bed of rice and topped with pickles and other garnishes (Ishige 177). Historically, deserts were not commonly eaten outside of banquets, though today both Japanese and Western sweets are more often seen (Ishige 177).

Similar to China, there are many festivals celebrated in Japan, each bringing different food and eating traditions. During New Year's celebrations, for instance, it is common to see trays of complex foods set out, often painstakingly cut and arranged (Ashkenazi 122). Another New Year's food is *toshikoshi soba*, or "year-crossing noodles", which is normally eaten on the eve (Watanabe). On Doll Day, foods such as *amazake* (sweet fermented rice drink) and rice cakes are popular (Ashkenazi 122). A month later is the Boy's Festival, where foods such as *chimaki dango* – skewered rice dumplings glazed in a sweet soy sauce – and *kashiwa mochi* (oak-leaf wrapped sticky rice dumplings) are eaten (Ashkenazi 123). During spring, it's common to spot family picnics and cherry blossom themed foods (Ashkenazi 123). As with the Chinese, food in Japan is also used to pay respect to the dead, with food being left at shrines and graves.

The typical traditional Korean meal involves rice, soup, and kimchi (S. Park 140, Nam). Like in Japan, increased amounts of Western-style food options have seen younger generations consuming more breads, meats, and sugar, though the traditional staples are still most common (S. Park 140). Noodles are often added to soup broth and are served with meat or vegetables (Nam). Not unlike China, Korean meals tend to be communal and all dishes are shared amongst the participants (S. Park 141). With food stalls present on many streets, it is very common for

Koreans to go out to grab lunch (S. Park 141). Meanwhile, dinners are normally eaten with family and tend to be the largest meal of the day, often with more protein-heavy foods present (S. Park 141, Nam). Soybeans are a common component of meals as well, eaten both whole and processed in forms like tofu. They are also used to create three important sauces for Korean cooking – *ganjang* (soy sauce), *doenjang*, and *gochujang* (S. Park 138). Kimchi, which comes in many different forms, is important enough that there is a term to describe the traditional process of making it – *kimjang* (S. Park 138). This process usually involved several family members making kimchi, though its importance has died down with industrialization and refrigeration (S. Park 138).

Korean holidays see their own special foods, just like the other countries covered thus far. On New Year's, Koreans favor dumpling and rice cake soup (S. Park 144). Another widely celebrated holiday, the Harvest Moon Festival, sees crescent shaped rice cakes served – representing the moon, of course (S. Park 144). There are also celebrations held by specific religious groups. South Korea has a strong Christian population, many of whom celebrate Christmas with foods such as ribs, savory crepes, and fried vegetables (S. Park 144). Meanwhile, Buddhists celebrate the Bhudda's birthday with tea and a dish called *sanchae bibimbap,* which consists of rice and wild greens (S. Park 144). Food has also been used in Korean rituals surrounding death, with certain eating rituals being conducted to venerate dead ancestors, for instance (J. Park 38, 39).

As discussed before, the foods available to Mongolians are quite different from the other East Asian countries. As such, Mongolian food culture is the most distinct among its peers in East Asia. Relying on animal products for much of their nourishment, nomadic Mongolians tend

to eat certain foods depending on the season (Clampitt 181). In the summer, dairy products like fresh milk, sour clotted milk, yogurts, cheeses, and airag (dairy-based alcoholic beverage) see their heaviest consumption (Clampitt 181). For the other seasons, meat takes the throne (Clampitt 18). Meat is often dried rather than cooked, though in dishes like *khorkhog* (barbecued sheep) and *boodog* (barbecued marmot) hot stones are used to do the cooking (Clampitt 179, 180) . Mongolians traditionally divide foods into red foods (meat-based foods) and white foods, which are dairy products ("Essays", xxxii). Animals have been so important to the Mongolian diet that a whole host of rules developed around them, such as severe punishment for animal theft in the past, and taboos on animal consumption (Kim 297). In the cities, Mongolians have more access to wheat based foods such as noodles and bread, along with root vegetables (Clampitt 181).

Like the other nations covered, Mongols celebrate the Lunar New Year. During the holiday, families usually gather to eat lamb saddle and *buuz*, a Mongolian meat dumpling (Clampitt 183). Another big Mongolian holiday is the Nadaam Festival, in which people gather to celebrate the traditional sports of archery, wrestling, and horse racing (Clampitt 182). Attracting many vendors from across the nation, this festival is "the one opportunity many nomadic or rural Mongolians have to eat fruit or buy new clothes" (Clampitt 182). Along with fruit, meat skewers and even ice cream is served (Clampitt 182). On many special occasions, white foods are served before red foods, as it is believed that white foods are pure (Clampitt 183).

Of course, the different dietary practices in these nations have had different effects on their populations' health. The traditional Chinese diet of grains, vegetables, and bean curd was

quite healthy, affording the population low rates of heart disease and diabetes (Anderson 69). However, with more food availability and the popularization of Western-style diets, China has seen a sharp increase in obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and similar diseases ("China Facing Epidemic"). The different regional cuisines in China also vary in terms of healthiness. For instance, Sichuan cuisine is rich in vitamins, minerals, and fiber, but also sees high levels of sodium and oil (Zhang). Jiangsu and Zhejiang cuisine, on the other hand, is quite low in oils – instead favoring water-based cooking methods, with lower cooking temperatures better preserving nutrients (Zhang). Diet may be part of the reason that ailments such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, and ischemic heart disease are "lower in southeast coastal area (including Jiangsu and Zhejiang) than those in other regions" (Zhang).

With lots of vegetables, small portions, fresh foods, and low fat consumption, the Japanese diet is relatively healthy (Ashkenazi 123, 124). High sodium level and a rapid increase in the popularity of sugar, however, are cause for concern (Ashkenazi 124). The traditional Korean diet is also high in vegetables and is often considered quite healthy, although increased Western influence may be causing a rise in cardiometabolic disorders (Choi). Mongolians, though lacking in vegetables, seem to be well adapted to their high protein diet and have fewer nutritional deficiencies than one might expect from such a diet (Clampitt 183). Mare's milk, containing good amounts of vitamin C, is able to take the place of fruits and vegetables (Clampitt 183). Meanwhile, the urban diet has a higher prevalence of processed foods and sugars, along with the health issues that accompany them (Clampitt 183). Overall, traditional diets in the East Asian regions have worked fairly well for the health of its people. Modern food processing

techniques and Western influences, however, appear to have had a negative impact on the diets in this region – at least health-wise.

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