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Pepper to sea cucumbers: Chinese gustatory revolution in global history, 900-1840

Xu, G.

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Introduction

In 1820, John Crawfurd, a key figure in the building of the British empire in Southeast Asia, published an influential work, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, in which he reviewed the trade between the archipelagic region of Southeast Asia and China, pointing out that *tripang* (sea cucumbers) “constitutes, in quantity and value, the most considerable article of the exports of the Indian islands to China, unless, perhaps, we except pepper”.¹ To Southeast Asian specialists, the importance of these two commodities in the trade with China is no secret. China’s strong demand for pepper was a crucial factor in the emergence of the Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia (ca. 1400-1650) in the fifteenth century and the rise of the Dutch intra-Asian trading network in the seventeenth century.² Sea cucumbers, being a new Southeast Asian export to China from around the end of the seventeenth century, had a prominent role to play in the economic reorientation of this region after the Age of Commerce, including the post-Spice Wars transformation of the eastern Indonesian Archipelago (late 17th c.), the rise of the Sulu Zone (late 18th c.), and the British expansion in Southeast Asia and northern Australia (late 18th-early 19th c.).³

However, to most Chinese cultural historians, these topics might sound otherworldly. Due to the disciplinary gap between East and Southeast Asian studies, engaged dialogues between Chinese cultural historians and Southeast Asian economic and social historians are rare. As a result, in the

¹ Crawfurd, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, vol. 3, 441. In this context, “Indian islands” refer to the Indonesian Archipelago, as well as its adjacent Malay Peninsula. For Crawfurd and the British expansion in Southeast Asia, see Knapman, *Race and British Colonialism in Southeast Asia*.

² Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680, Volume Two*, 10-16; Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence*. Wills, *Pepper, Guns, and Parleys*; Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade*, 73-90; Blussé, *Strange Company*.

³ Sutherland, “Trepang and Wangkang”; Tagliacozzo, “A Necklace of Fins”; Warren, *The Sulu Zone*; Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege*.

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scholarship about Chinese food and medicine, pepper and sea cucumbers are hard to find.⁴ The existing research on pepper mostly focuses on its introduction from India to China around the Tang dynasty (618-907) and its unique position in the tribute trade of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).⁵ However, these studies have little impact on Chinese food history, as most Chinese food historians still tend to believe that pepper has played only a minor role in Chinese cuisine, as there is native Sichuan pepper and, after the sixteenth century, chili pepper prevails.⁶ In comparison to pepper, sea cucumbers, together with two other closely related rarities: edible bird's nests and shark fins, receive relatively more attention from specialists of Asian maritime trade.⁷ Yet, the current research falls short of discovering the medicinal and culinary shift behind their rise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a result, although there is a rich corpus of Chinese recipes and medical texts concerning the widespread use of these exotics, a monograph that closely reads these sources and cross-examines them with evidence from Southeast Asia is wanting.

Because of this research gap, we are left with a basic question unanswered: Why did pepper and sea cucumbers feature so prominently in China's maritime trade with Southeast Asia? Both being edibles, pepper and sea cucumbers belong to two distinct culinary cultures: The former is a globally important spice, which emerged as a popular condiment in China from around the early thirteenth century when Chinese cuisine began to become increasingly hot-spicy; the latter only gained a

⁴ Among few exceptions, Françoise Sabban has pointed out the widespread use of pepper in the court cuisine of the Mongol Yuan period. Sabban, "Court Cuisine in Fourteenth-Century Imperial China."

⁵ Laufer, *Sino-Iranica*, 374-375; Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 149-152; T'ien, "Chêng Ho's Voyages and the Distribution of Pepper in China"; Ts'ao, "Pepper Trade in East Asia"; Chen, *Silu yiming*, 43-66; Wu, "Cong 'xiangyao' dao 'xiangliao'."

⁶ The history of chili pepper in China has recently been investigated by two important monographs. Dott, *The Chile Pepper in China*; Cao, *Zhongguo shila shi*.

⁷ Arai, *Kinsei kaisanbutsu bōekishi no kenkyū*; Blussé, "In Praise of Commodities"; Tsurumi, *Namako no me*; Sutherland, "Trepang and Wangkang"; Dai Yifeng, "Yinshi wenhua yu haiwai shichang"; Tagliacozzo, "A Necklace of Fins"; Salmon, "Le goût chinois pour les nids de salanganes"; Feng, "Renzhi, shichang yu maoyi"; Feng, "Luelun Ming Qing shiqi Zhongguo yu Dongnanya de yanwo maoyi"; Feng, "Qingdai Zhongguo yu Dongnanya de yuchi maoyi."

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prominent position in Chinese cuisine from the end of the sixteenth century, when a new food culture that highly valued preserved marine products was rising.

This dissertation will investigate how these two food cultures emerged, whether there was a link between them, and how they mattered to the global connections of China, Southeast Asia, and the broader world. For better understanding these processes, the research will engage with three fields, namely: Chinese medical and food history, Asian maritime history, and global cultural history. It will scrutinise some hotly-debated issues in Chinese medical history that concerned the nature of spices and marine products, as well as their efficacies to the body. It will read some long-ignored recipes to understand how these exotic spices and marine products stood in Chinese cuisine. It will further explore how their changing consumption in China interacted with the reconfigurations of Asian maritime trading networks. It, at the same time, situates this study in global cultural history, in order to critically revisit a Euro-centric global history of spices, which tends to conceptualise spices as “Out of the East” without seriously considering the history of spices “in the East” being equally global and dynamic.⁸ In the rest of this introduction, I will first elaborate on how this research connects understudied topics in these seemingly disparate fields and then articulate the methodology and structure.

Edible Exotics

While proposing pepper and sea cucumbers, I have to first address a basic question: Do they share any commonalities? To most Chinese diners, the most obvious common features they share are being exotic and edible. In global food history, these features can be widely identified with a group of well-studied edible exotics, including spices, sugar, coffee, tea, etc. Thanks to rich literature about their

⁸ Freedman, *Out of the East*.

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consumption in Europe, it has become well-known that these edible exotics were crucial for the emergence of the European capitalist world economy, as they energised European colonial expansion in the intertropical world and contributed to European economic ascendancy at the expense of many disenfranchised indigenous people.⁹

Tracing the origin of this food-driven globalisation, spices had a definitive role to play in its initial stage. In European food history, the concept of spices emerged in the medieval trade of Indian Ocean goods via the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean World.¹⁰ Among these Indian Ocean goods, edibles with a strong flavour or aroma, such as pepper, ginger, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg, were particularly prominent, so much so that the term, spices (*species* in Latin), shifted from its original meaning referring to all sorts of goods, to narrowly denoting pungent and aromatic condiments.¹¹ By the end of the medieval period, the trade of these exotic condiments had become enormously lucrative, stimulating the Portuguese to search for direct trading routes to their original places in South India (pepper), Sri Lanka (cinnamon), and the eastern Indonesian Archipelago (cloves and nutmeg), leading towards the first European global empire.¹²

Meanwhile, not only European consumers demanded these pungent and aromatic condiments. An interesting observation is that a large part of these spices was also in demand in China. Although China had native supplies of ginger and cassia (a substitute for cinnamon), it produced neither pepper, nor cloves, nor nutmeg. For them, the Chinese consumer market, as much as the European, relied on supplies from South India and Southeast Asia. Connected by the Indian Ocean World in-between,

⁹ Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th - 18 Century, Volume 1*, 183-265; Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System II*; idem, *The Modern World-System III*; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*; Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise*; Halikowski-Smith, "Portugal and the European Spice Trade"; Nierstrasz, *Rivalry of Trade in Tea and Textiles*.

¹⁰ Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Late Middle Ages*; Freedman, *Out of the East*.

¹¹ Halikowski-Smith, "Portugal and the European Spice Trade," 1-15; Morton, *The Poetics of Spice*, 18-28; Freedman, *Out of the East*.

¹² Halikowski-Smith, "Portugal and the European Spice Trade"; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 193-205; Cagle, *Assembling the Tropics*.

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China and Europe were in fact two important consumer markets in a globally connected spice network.¹³

Yet, it is hard to identify a Chinese term precisely corresponding to spices. The modern Chinese term for spices, *xiangliao* (香料), literally meaning “aromatic materials”, was not commonly used until the twentieth century. What occurred more often was *xiangyao* (香藥), literally meaning “aromatic drugs”.¹⁴ Both terms indicate a strong link with an olfactory property of being aromatic and fragrant. That link stemmed from the integration of these exotics into Chinese smell culture. Different from the European spice culture, the Chinese, like the Indians, were more inclined to use fine spices such as cloves and nutmeg as aromatics instead of condiments.¹⁵ These fine spices were joined by a large group of fragrant wood and resin, such as agarwood, sandalwood, frankincense, camphor, and benzoin, collectively constituting the so-called aromatic drugs in China, which were widely used for making incense, perfume, medicine, and beverages.¹⁶

Lacking a remarkable aroma, pepper was unique. Unlike other aromatic drugs, it had no function in Chinese incense and perfume culture, but, as we will see in chapter one, in its integration into Chinese medicine from the seventh through the tenth centuries, pepper acquired similar medical functions as many other aromatic drugs. They were all used as warming agents for treating indigestion, and hence became intimately connected to food. Moreover, from the early thirteenth century, for its strong hot spiciness, pepper would further emerge as an important condiment in Chinese everyday

¹³ For studying spices from an Indian Ocean perspective, see Pearson, ed., *Spices in the Indian Ocean World*; Hoogervorst, “Southeast Asia in the Ancient Indian Ocean World,” 172-197.

¹⁴ There is a rich Chinese and Japanese literature on *xiangyao*. Yamada, *Tōa kōryō shi kenkyū*; Lin, *Songdai xiangyao maoyi shi*; Wen, *Tangdai wailai xiangyao yanjiu*; Xia, *Songdai xiangyaoye jingji yanjiu*; Wen, *Zhongguo Zhongguo wailai xiangyao yanjiu*; Tu, *Xiangyao maoyi yu Ming Qing Zhongguo shehui*.

¹⁵ Zumbroich, “From Mouth Fresheners to Erotic Perfumes”; Sabban, “Court Cuisine in Fourteenth-Century Imperial China,” 179; Xu, “Junks to Mare Clausum,” 198-199.

¹⁶ Liu, *Songdai xiangpu zhi yanjiu*; Yang, *Xiangshi*; idem, “L’encens sous les Song (960–1279) et les Yuan”; Lin, *Songdai xiangyao maoyi shi*.

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cuisine. This change, as we will discuss in chapter two, made pepper the only important daily-used condiment exclusively imported from overseas. This unique culinary function eventually made pepper distinct from other aromatic drugs, which were rarely used for cooking.

Whereas pepper was a typical spice widely consumed by different food cultures across the Indian Ocean World, Chinese way of consuming preserved sea cucumbers was rarely shared by others. The rise of sea cucumbers in Chinese cuisine should be understood in the context of Chinese changing perceptions of seafood. Unlike pepper and other aromatic drugs that had been highly regarded by Chinese elite consumers since the Tang dynasty,¹⁷ seafood was at first disparaged by them. The Tang elites were overwhelmingly generated from aristocratic families in the metropolises in inland North China. They tended to consider seafood as a culture of the South, which, from their perspective, was alien and despicable. Critical change took place amid the Tang-Song Transition (ca. 8th-12th c.), through which a new category of political elites, known as literati, emerged. They climbed the social ladder through the more institutionalised civil-service examinations, instead of relying on hereditary privileges. That change opened a door for southerners to become literati.¹⁸ They, in turn, redefined the elite culture by incorporating things from the South, including seafood.¹⁹

This change was, however, only the first step. Far less well-known is that after seafood was accepted by the Chinese elite culture around the eleventh century, there would be a further shift towards preserved seafood. Most evidence concerning this “preserved turn” comes from the Ming (1368-1644) and Manchu Qing (1644-1912) periods, when preserved seafood, known as “sea taste” (*haiwei* 海味), became widely traded in many “sea taste” shops across China. Besides that, preserved

¹⁷ Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*.

¹⁸ Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen*; Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*”; Bossler, *Powerful Relations*; Gerritsen, *Ji'an Literati*; Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*; De Weerd, “Review of: Nicolas Tackett *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*.”

¹⁹ For seafood in the Tang-Song transition, see Yi, “Xianwei yu quanli”; Chang, “Bei Song wenren yinshi shuxie de nanfang jingyan”; Cao, “Zhong Tang zhi Song dai shige zhong de nanshi.”

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seafood was also sold together with spices, sugar, cured meat, candied fruits, and preserved vegetables in a widespread trade of “southern goods” (*nanhuo* 南貨) or “southern and northern goods” (*nanbeihu* 南北貨).²⁰ These two terms became a category for a miscellany of preservable food ingredients that were not produced locally but imported from distanced domestic or overseas places, partly comparable to the trade of colonial or tropical goods in early modern Europe. Moreover, from the commercially traded preserved seafood, a small group, including edible bird’s nests (supposedly from the sea), sea cucumbers, shark fins, and abalones would further rise to the top delicacies in Chinese high cuisine during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The intricate cultural transformations behind their rise will be the focus of chapter three.

Through this brief survey, we can find that pepper and sea cucumbers in China were, like their counterparts in Europe, such as spices, sugar, and tea, serving an evolving consumer market that developed a changing taste for edible exotics. To decipher how that change took place, the following two sections, “Two Worlds” and “Into the Body”, will examine the two essential features of pepper and sea cucumbers, namely, being exotic and edible. The former, “Two Worlds”, focuses on their global origins and explores when and how they became widely available to Chinese consumers. The latter, “Into the Body”, focuses on their places in Chinese food and medicine, particularly on why the Chinese were so willing to take these two exotics as food.

Two Worlds

²⁰ There has yet to be a comprehensive study of “southern goods”, largely due to the scarcity of sources. Fortunately, a pathbreaking document has recently emerged. It is a handbook by a Huizhou merchant specialising in the trade of “southern goods” in the Lower Yangzi region during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We will return to it in chapter three. *Huizhou minjian zhenxi wenxian*, vol. 15, 263-430.

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Speaking of when and how these two exotics became widely available in China, we need to revisit Crawford's observation that in the early nineteenth century, pepper and sea cucumbers were the two principal exports from archipelagic Southeast Asia to China. China's maritime trade with Southeast Asia, as Leonard Blussé has argued in his study of edible bird's nest trade, was not "an almost one-millennium-old peddling trade in expensive goods (the so-called Jacobus van Leur thesis)".²¹ What Crawford observed was a result of centuries of changes. Before these changes took place, the Chinese consumer market was supplied with pepper and sea cucumbers from elsewhere. Pepper's native habitat was the mountainous hinterland of the Malabar Coast in South India.²² Sea cucumbers were first supplied to the Chinese consumer market from the temperate waters of Northeast Asia, including the North China Sea and the Japan Sea.

The rise of Southeast Asia as their new place of origin was a result of local initiatives to transplant pepper from South India and to transform tropical sea cucumbers into competitive products. These initiatives were so successful that by the time of Crawford, Southeast Asia had replaced or rivalled the first original places of these two commodities, emerging as an exclusive supplier of pepper for the Chinese consumer market and a principal source of commercially traded sea cucumbers.

The success of Southeast Asian local society in exploiting the Chinese consumer market has received much scholarly attention, particularly in association with a rich literature about two important themes, namely: the aforementioned ages of commerce and Sulu Zone. As a paradigmatic shift in Southeast Asian studies, the Age of Commerce (ca. 1400-1650) was first proposed by Anthony Reid in the late 1980s for redressing the Euro-centric interpretation of the economic cycles of early modern

²¹ Blussé, "In Praise of Commodities."

²² Here, we refer to black pepper (pepper), instead of its Southeast Asian substitute, cubeb pepper. For their entangled itineraries in China trade, see chapter one.

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Southeast Asia.²³ On the one hand, it emphasises the significance of the Chinese consumer market by proposing that the surging demand for pepper in China during and after Zheng He's maritime expeditions (1405-1433) triggered "a trade take-off" in early fifteenth century Southeast Asia, which gave rise to the Age of Commerce.²⁴ On the other hand, it suggests that the colonial expansion of the Dutch United East India Company (the VOC) in the seventeenth century not only failed to bring prosperity to the Southeast Asian economy, but instead ended the Age of Commerce, because of its violent monopoly of the spice trade and its suppression of Southeast Asian native maritime commerce.

This paradigm is followed by a series of debates. It faces criticisms from Victor Lieberman, who articulates that this model cannot work with mainland states in Southeast Asia, where agriculture had a larger role to play than maritime commerce.²⁵ It is meanwhile well-received by researchers of archipelagic Southeast Asia, and inspired conceptualisation of an Early Age of Commerce (ca. 900-1300), when China under the prosperous Song dynasties (960-1279), developed a strong demand for aromatics and spices. Southeast Asian trading ports benefited from it by offering native and transplanted produce, including pepper, which had been naturalised in Java by the eleventh century.²⁶

Whereas spices, particularly pepper, featured prominently in the debates concerning these two ages of commerce, marine products, represented by sea cucumbers, only became important in a later stage. They were key in James Warren's construction of the Sulu Zone. Warren proposed that in the late eighteenth century, along with the expansion of the European capitalist world economy, sea cucumbers became an important substitute for silver in European country merchants' trade with Canton, for balancing a growing trade deficit induced by insatiable demand for Chinese tea in Britain.

²³ Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680, Volume One*; idem, "An 'Age of Commerce' in Southeast Asian History"; idem, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680, Volume Two*.

²⁴ Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680, Volume Two*, 10.

²⁵ Lieberman, "An Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia?"; idem, "Maritime Influences in Southeast Asia."

²⁶ Wisseman Christie, "Javanese Markets and the Asian Sea Trade Boom"; Wade, "An Early Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia."

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Exploiting this opportunity, the Sulu Sultanate, situated in the present southern Philippines, sponsored pirates to build a far-flung raiding network covering the entire archipelagic region of Southeast Asia, spreading from Luzon to Sumatra, for enslaving coastal populations and relocating them to the Sulu Islands. Back in Sulu, according to Warren, a slave-based sea cucumber catching industry emerged, offering its products to visiting European country merchants and Chinese junk traders.²⁷ Around the same time, the British East India Company (EIC) also expanded to the Straits of Melaka and northeast Borneo, establishing trading ports to benefit from the prosperous trade of marine products with China.²⁸

Between these three booming periods, there were two intermediate stages. One was between the Early Age of Commerce and the Age of Commerce, roughly from 1300-1400. The other was between the Age of Commerce and the advent of the Sulu Zone, roughly running from 1650 until the late eighteenth century. They are usually perceived as two periods of crisis. The former was supposedly caused by the Mongol Conquest of South China in the 1270s and the ensuing Mongol invasions of Southeast Asia in the 1280s and 1290s. The latter is associated with the VOC's monopoly of the spice trade, which stifled many local trading regimes.²⁹

However, there is an “elephant in the room”. This periodisation, while being well-studied in Southeast Asian studies, has yet to be critically examined with updated evidence about Chinese consumption of pepper and sea cucumbers. If we scrutinise Chinese sources concerning their consumption, we may find that there is instead strong evidence indicating that demands for pepper

²⁷ Warren, *The Sulu Zone*; idem, *Iranun and Balangingi*; idem, “Saltwater Slavers and Captives in the Sulu Zone”; idem, “The Balangingi Samal.”

²⁸ Tagliacozzo, “A Necklace of Fins.” Recently, Atsushi Ota proposed that China's strong demand for marine and forest products led to an “Age of China-oriented trade (c. 1750-1870)” in Southeast Asia. Ota, “Role of State and Non-state Networks.”

²⁹ For an insightful review of this periodisation, see Henley, “Ages of Commerce in Southeast Asian History.”

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and sea cucumbers were burgeoning during these two supposedly crisis-ridden intermediate periods, respectively (Table 0.1).

Southeast Asian commerce		Chinese foodway
Early Age of Commerce	900-1300	
A Mongol hiatus?	1300-1400	Expansion of pepper consumption
Age of Commerce	1400-1650	
A VOC hiatus?	1650 - late 18th c.	Rise of tropical sea cucumbers
Sulu Zone and British expansion	Late 18th - early 19th c.	

Table 0.1 Southeast Asian commerce and Chinese foodways.

In terms of pepper, chapter two shows that the Mongol period was in fact a critical stage through which pepper became a commonly used spice in China. This observation is based on a rarely acknowledged study by Kentaro Yamada in the 1970s, which proposed that “China’s age of pepper” (*Chūgoku no koshō jidai* 中国の胡椒時代) began from the early thirteenth century and witnessed a major expansion through the Mongol period.³⁰ Unfortunately, Yamada’s argument, which is written in Japanese, was unheeded by two important English articles about the Chinese pepper trade in the 1980s, of which the one by T’ien Ju-kang claimed that pepper did not become a daily used spice until the early Ming’s overseas expeditions.³¹ This leads to a chain of misunderstanding in global spice history and in the conceptualisation of the ages of commerce.

A similar problem exists for sea cucumbers. The rise of Southeast Asian tropical sea cucumbers in Chinese foodways, as we will discuss in chapter four, took place exactly during the intermediate period between the end of the Age of Commerce and the rise of the Sulu Zone. During this period, tropical sea cucumbers, which were previously disdained by Chinese elite consumers, became

³⁰ Yamada, *Tōa kōryō shi kenkyū*, 235-246.

³¹ T’ien, “Chêng Ho’s Voyages and the Distribution of Pepper in China”; Ts’ao, “Pepper Trade in East Asia.”

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increasingly diversified. Out of them, a number of high-value varieties emerged and challenged the dominance of sea cucumbers from temperate waters. As a result, Southeast Asian sea cucumbers gradually shed off the stigma that previously made them undervalued and marginal.

Why was there such a mismatch between Southeast Asian commerce and Chinese foodways? This research suggests rethinking the world(s) in which pepper and sea cucumbers were situated. Chapter two proposes that pepper belonged to a trans-Indian Ocean World that encompassed South India and Southeast Asia. The emergence of a trans-Indian Ocean empire of the Mongols in the late thirteenth century induced an expansion of the Chinese spice frontier from Southeast Asia to South India. In this expansion, China-based traders, under the patronage of the Mongol ruling elites, sailed directly to the Malabar Coast of South India for pepper and to the eastern Indonesian Archipelago for fine spices. With Chinese goods and Southeast Asian fine spices, they also made Malabar the rendezvous location to meet merchants from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf routes, eventually leading towards the rise of Calicut as the centre of this trans-Indian Ocean World by the mid-fourteenth century.³² These changes diverted a large part of commerce from Southeast Asian trading regimes to a trans-Indian Ocean network.

For sea cucumbers, chapter four, following innovative research by Japanese anthropologists,³³ argues that Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and the north coast of Australia were all integral parts of a Cross-China Seas World of sea cucumbers. In this world, knowledge and market information was circulated by Chinese junk traders who informed Southeast Asian collectors of Chinese consumers' gustatory preference. In return, Southeast Asian collectors exploited the rich diversity of tropical species and creatively transformed some of them into high-value products that could rival or even

³² Gao, "Gulifo/Gulin," 62-65. We will elaborate on it in chapter two.

³³ Tsurumi, *Namako no me*; Akamine, *Namako o aruku*. Although their reading and interpretation of historical evidence are sometimes questionable, their perspective to integrate Japan, Korea, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia inspires this research.

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surpass temperate sea cucumbers. This kind of cross-China Seas interactions gained momentum from the late seventeenth century when the Manchu Empire was opening to the sea and the Chinese consumer market was searching for tropical substitutes for the temperate variety. These changes timely provided new trading opportunities for the littoral society in the eastern Indonesian Archipelago, which was looking for a way out in the shadow of the VOC's monopoly of the fine spices. Deprived of the previously profitable spice trade, they gradually shifted to the trade of sea cucumbers with China, leading to a fundamental reorientation of this region from being part of an Indian Ocean spice network to the Cross-China Seas World of sea cucumbers.

Therefore, in revisiting the above-mentioned paradigms in Southeast Asian studies, I propose to look beyond the conventional geographic scope set by area studies and consider an amorphous space that linked Southeast Asia and China to two broader worlds of pepper and sea cucumbers, which spanned, respectively, from Malabar to Java and from the Japan Sea to northern Australia. These two worlds experienced two waves of expansions during the two intermediate periods as identified in the Southeast Asian historiography. These two expansions reshaped the maps of pepper and sea cucumbers respectively and facilitated their massive circulations to the Chinese consumer market. Behind these two expansions, there were also two non-Chinese empires in China, the Mongol and the Manchu, which had supportive maritime policies encouraging Chinese overseas trade.³⁴

Into the Body

Whereas the global origins of pepper and sea cucumbers lead us to reconceptualise the worlds in which they were situated, for their dietary functions, we need to think about the body into which they

³⁴ For the expansion of junk trade during the Mongol Yuan period, see the introduction of chapter two. For the far-reaching influence of the “open sea” (開海 *kaihai*) policy of the Manchu Empire from the 1680s, see Zhao, *The Qing Opening to the Ocean*; Blussé, “Chinese Century”; Po, *The Blue Frontier*.

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were ingested. The Chinese body, like the Chinese trade of pepper and sea cucumbers, is not timeless. Although there exist some basic conceptions of the body in the Chinese medical canons,³⁵ there is no such a thing as an idealised unchanging Chinese body. Charlotte Furth in her study of gender in Chinese medical history powerfully contends, “All of these idealizations of an Oriental body have been based on the self-fulfilling oppositions of colonialist cultural discourse.”³⁶ Following the more recent understandings of the Chinese body, this research aims to take a step further to challenge European exceptionalism by showing that the Chinese body was not only changing but these changes also had global implications. It proposes that behind the rise of these two edible exotics, there were medical debates about how the body reacted to ingested food. They influenced Chinese choice of food and propelled the shift from pepper to sea cucumbers.

A comprehensive survey of such a shift from the perspective of Chinese medical history is crucial for redressing a Euro-centric interpretation of food and globalisation in association with the world system theory behind the Sulu Zone. Unaware of the cultural background of sea cucumber consumption in China, the model of the Sulu Zone implies that the growing export of Southeast Asian sea cucumbers to China in the eighteenth century was energised by the expansion of the European world economy, which demanded a substitute for silver to pay for British consumption of Chinese tea.³⁷ This model entails a problematic assumption that marginalises non-European demand for edible exotics as derivative of the expansion of a world economy driven by the European consumer market. It may even contribute to a misleading perception, as if only evolving European taste for exotics

³⁵ Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body*; Unschuld, *Huang Di nei jing su wen*.

³⁶ Furth, *A Flourishing Yin*, 11.

³⁷ For an insightful criticism of the world system theory in the Sulu Zone, see Sutherland, “The Sulu Zone Revisited,” 136.

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mattered to globalisation, such as the surging demand for spices in the late medieval period, for sugar in the early modern period, and for tea around the Industrial Revolution.³⁸

For explaining more fundamental issues behind the rise of sea cucumbers, the model of the Sulu Zone is chronologically and geographically too limited. As mentioned in the previous section, the emergence of the Southeast Asian sea cucumber trade with China predated the advent of the Sulu Zone for over half a century. Following important works by Heather Sutherland, chapter four will explore how that trade emerged in the first place by focusing on Makassar, whose sea cucumber trade is richly documented in the archives of the VOC.³⁹ These archives show that Makassar had been exporting sea cucumbers to China since the 1690s. Into the eighteenth century, this port became the sea cucumber trade centre of the entire eastern Indonesian Archipelago and the north coast of Australia.⁴⁰ Through this port, Southeast Asian collectors sold their products to visiting Chinese junks.⁴¹ These junks would carry sea cucumbers back to Amoy, which was connected to a Chinese coastal trading network, linked to the prosperous domestic consumer market in the Lower Yangzi region.⁴² The entire collecting and trading system lay largely outside the European world economy, and was instead a constituent part of the cross-China Seas world of sea cucumbers, whose consumer market was in China.

Instead of searching for answers from the expansion of the European capitalist world economy, this research focuses on how Chinese consumption of edible exotics changed. It proposes that there was a chain of gustatory changes linking the world of sea cucumbers to the world of pepper.

³⁸ Another well-known case is opium, which is also often cast in this way, as if only popular in China because the European world economy pushed it. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III*, 167-168. For a thorough study of opium consumption in China, see Zheng, *The Social Life of Opium in China*.

³⁹ For Makassar's sea cucumber trade with China, see Sutherland, "Trepang and Wangkang". Chapter four will supplement new evidence about the origin of Makassar's sea cucumber trade.

⁴⁰ For the Makassar's role in the trepang fishery in northern Australia, see Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege*.

⁴¹ For Makassar's maritime trade in the eighteenth century, see Knaap and Sutherland, *Monsoon Traders*.

⁴² Ng, *Trade and Society*.

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Retrospectively, the rise of tropical sea cucumbers from the late seventeenth century should be understood as a further development of a food culture, which had already cultivated the consumption of temperate sea cucumbers in China since the late sixteenth century. That food culture was in turn associated with key medical debates which had been critical of the popularity of pepper as a hot spice since the fourteenth century. These debates further targeted an even earlier medical culture, which enthusiastically conceived of pepper, together with a group of exotic aromatics and spices, as warming agents.

Behind these changes, there were strong concerns over the consequences of food upon the body. These concerns stemmed from the Chinese understanding of the visceral system in the body. In Chinese medicine, viscera can be categorised as five depots and six palaces (*wuzang liufu* 五藏六府 or 五臟六腑), which, according to a fundamentally important medical canon, *Basic Questions of the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (*Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素問, ca. 1st century BCE, hereafter the *Inner Canon*), consist of:

- Five depots: The lung (*fei* 肺), the heart (*xin* 心), the spleen (*pi* 脾), the liver (*gan* 肝), and the kidneys (*shen* 腎).
- Six palaces: The large intestine (*dachang* 大腸), the small intestine (*xiaochang* 小腸), the stomach (*wei* 胃), the gall bladder (*dan* 膽), the urinary bladder (*pangguang* 膀胱), and the triple burner (*sanjiao* 三焦).⁴³

The exact meaning of depots and palaces in this visceral system is hard to define. Following Paul U. Unschuld's study of the *Inner Canon*, we can consider that the depot organs are for storing items and the palace organs are "seen as places where important things are received only temporarily to be

⁴³ Unschuld, *Huang Di nei jing su wen*, 136-141.

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handled, assigned, and transmitted”.⁴⁴ There are associations between depots and palaces. Besides the theoretically constructed triple burner, the remaining five palace organs can be individually paired with the five depots, and the five depots further correspond to the five phases (*wuxing* 五行) (Table 0.2).

Lung (metal)	Heart (fire)	Spleen (earth)	Liver (wood)	Kidneys (water)
Large intestine	Small intestine	Stomach	Gall bladder	Urinary bladder

Table 0.2 Correspondence between depots and palaces based on the *Inner Canon*.

Among them, the tie between the spleen and the stomach is exceptionally strong. They are physically very close to each other at the centre of the body trunk, supposedly only separated by a membrane. In Chinese medicine, their function is highly synthesised, jointly accountable for digestion. The stomach as a palace organ receives ingested food, absorbs the vital force from it, and transmits the vital force to the spleen, nourishing the entire body. Given the central place of the spleen and the stomach in the Chinese conception of digestion, it comes as no surprise that the well-being of these two paired organs is a focus in Chinese dietary practices. They are supposedly vulnerable to irregular food and drink intake. Particularly, as we will discuss in chapter one, there was a strong concern over cold food, including food whose thermo-nature is cold. The cold food would supposedly cause damage to the spleen and the stomach, leading to indigestion and cold-related internal damage.

This kind of concern was crucial for the rise of pepper. First recorded by Chinese *materia medica* in the seventh century, pepper was defined as a warming medicine with an important medical efficacy for “warming the centre” (*wenzhong* 溫中), namely, warming the centre of the body trunk, where the spleen and the stomach are located. Chapter one will discuss how from the seventh through the tenth centuries, pepper, together with a group of exotic aromatics and spices, such as cloves, nutmeg, and cubeb pepper, was increasingly used as warming agents for treating cold-related digestive problems.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 130-131.

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It also shows how this group of warming exotics were further popularised from the eleventh century, amid a subtle shift of a mainstream medical theory, namely, cold damage (*shanghan* 傷寒).⁴⁵ Focusing on febrile diseases caused by contracting a pathogenic cold from the external environment, the cold damage theory became one of the most developed fields in Chinese medicine in the Northern Song period (960-1127).⁴⁶ Originally, its principal treatments, as defined by the *Inner Canon*, consisted only of sweating and purging. However, throughout the eleventh century, this theory was reinterpreted by some prominent physicians who favoured the therapy of warming the centre. They redefined the pathology of cold damage and made warming-the-centre a new principal treatment for cold damage.⁴⁷ This shift, as I will discuss in detail in chapter one, took place amid a changing perception of the body by the new social and political elites of the Northern Song dynasty, namely, the literati, who identified themselves as civil and literate, instead of military and war-like, and hence favoured the relatively mild therapy of warming the centre over the aggressive methods of sweating and purging.

As warming the centre rose to prominence in the mainstream medical theory of the Northern Song, the warming exotics, including pepper, which had already acquired efficacies for treating the spleen and the stomach at the centre of the body trunk, became popular medicines for broadly defined cold-related illness. They were now used not only for damage to the spleen and the stomach that was contracted internally by cold food but also for nourishing the body against diseases contracted externally from cold environments. It led to a medicinal culture in which people without any illness also regularly took decoctions made of warming exotics as health drinks, which were sold in beverage

⁴⁵ For cold damage in Chinese medicine, see Boyanton, “The *Treatise on Cold Damage* and the Formation of Literati Medicine”; Goldschmidt, *The Evolution of Chinese Medicine*, 69-102.

⁴⁶ For the conception of externally contracted diseases (外感病 *waigan bing*) in Chinese medicine, see Hinrichs, “The Catchy Epidemic”; Hanson, *Speaking of Epidemics in Chinese Medicine*.

⁴⁷ As we will elaborate in chapter one, this shift is first identified by Japanese researchers of the textual history of *Treatise on Cold Damage* (傷寒論 *Shanghan lun*). Okada, Makizumi, and Kotaka, *Sōizen shōkan ron kō*.

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stalls in cities, offered by well-off families to guests as a necessity like tea, and touted by the Imperial Pharmacy of the Northern and Southern Song (960-1279).⁴⁸

Moreover, among these warming exotics, pepper as mentioned earlier has a unique feature. It lacks any remarkable aroma but possesses strong hot spiciness, which would help pepper distinguish itself from other warming exotics to become a popular condiment. Chapter two shows that from around the early thirteenth century, some isolated evidence shows that pepper began to be combined with Sichuan pepper in a cooking technique that was popularised at that time known as Sichuan stir-frying (川|炒 *chuanchao*). Thereafter, into the Mongol period, along with the rise of the trans-Indian Ocean world of pepper, more sources concerning pepper in Chinese foodways emerged. It becomes evident that by the Mongol period, pepper was no longer rare. It was either on its own used for seasoning or as an ingredient in ready-made spice mixtures.⁴⁹ Among a wide range of commonly used condiments, pepper was unique in two aspects. It was the only daily-used condiment that was exclusively imported from overseas, and it was particularly valued because its hot spiciness (*la* 辣) was stronger than most native condiments, making it assume a gustatory function comparable to chili pepper in modern Chinese cuisine. As a result, pepper, already being an important warming agent for energising digestion, further evolved into the only warming exotic that became widely used in Chinese cuisine as a hot spice.

These features exposed pepper to critics from a new medical culture. Section five of chapter two focuses on the three most influential of them, namely: Liu Wansu (fl. late 12th c.), Zhang

⁴⁸ For this beverage culture, see Yi, “Beisong de jiandian tangchayao”; Zheng, *Yaolin waishi*, 135-136; Liu Shufen, “Kezhi ze shecha, yuqu ze shetang”; idem, “*Chanyuan qinggui zhong suojian de chali yu tangli*”; Benn, *Tea in China*, 130-137; Chen, “Fa chu bosì,” 9-12.

⁴⁹ For the spice mixtures (*liaowu* 料物) in the Mongol period, see Sabban, “Court Cuisine in Fourteenth-Century Imperial China,” 177-181.

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Congzheng (fl. late 12th - early 13th c.), and Zhu Zhenheng (1281-1358).⁵⁰ They all belonged to the so-called “four great masters of the Jin and Yuan” (金元四大家) whose theories challenged the established medical culture of the Northern Song.⁵¹ Among them, the teachings of Liu Wansu were pathbreaking. He identified fire, instead of cold, as a major pathogenic factor of cold damage and hence opposed the popular therapy of warming the centre and advocated the use of cooling agents. As a follower of Liu, Zhang Congzheng was renowned for his preference for the aggressive methods of sweating, purging, and vomiting, which often employed cooling medicines. He specifically criticised the practice of using pepper for warming and replenishing the stomach in the treatment of indigestion.

Zhu Zhenheng, being the last great master from this period, was relatively eclectic. He reconciled rivalling theories from other medical masters, integrated them with Neo-Confucian philosophy, and created a synthesised system known as Danxi medicine. In Zhu’s theory, the body was perceived as relatively delicate and feminised (yin), appealing to the self-identity of the southern literati.⁵² Therefore, Zhu opposed Zhang’s aggressive methods, but at the same time, he welcomed Liu’s fire-centric pathology. With these backgrounds, Zhu developed a new cooling theory that reconceptualised fire from an external environmental factor into internal forces existing in the visceral system. He identified two types of internal fires, namely, the sovereign fire, whose abode was the heart, and the minister fire, whose abode was the kidneys and the liver. Among them, the minister fire in the kidneys was his major concern, because the kidneys corresponded to water, which was yin and crucial for balancing fire. Therefore, the gist of his teachings was known as “nourishing yin” (zhiyin 滋陰),

⁵⁰ See section five of chapter two.

⁵¹ Leung, “Medical Learning from the Song to the Ming,” 377-382; Fan, *Zhongguo yixue shilie*, 227-265; Hanson, *Speaking of Epidemics in Chinese Medicine*, 39-43; Boyanton, “The *Treatise on Cold Damage* and the Formation of Literati Medicine,” 196-216. There are different versions of the “four great masters”. Here, I follow a widely acknowledged version, including Liu Wansu, Zhang Congzheng, Li Gao, and Zhu Zhenheng. They are all discussed in this introduction.

⁵² Wu, “A Medical Line of Many Masters”; Furth, “The Physician as Philosopher of the Way”; Simonis, “Illness, Texts, and “Schools” in Danxi Medicine.”

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particularly for nourishing the water and yin of the kidneys, and “bringing fire down” (*jianghuo* 降火), particularly for bringing down the minister fire of the kidneys. Pepper, identified by Zhu Zhenheng as belonging to fire and with a desiccating nature, contradicted both principles.⁵³

Yet, while pepper was losing ground, the culture of using warming medicines did not die out. Instead, it survived with a major adaptation by Li Gao (1180-1251). Li was also a “great master of the Jin and Yuan”, but his teachings were different from the above-mentioned three masters. Li opposed Liu Wansu and Zhang Congzheng’s cooling and aggressive methods. He re-emphasised the importance of warming the spleen and the stomach. Yet, instead of using acrid and warm medicines like pepper and aromatic drugs, Li preferred relatively mild medicines that were sweet and warm, such as ginseng. Li’s works had been published and become widely circulated in China since the mid-thirteenth century.⁵⁴ They profoundly influenced Zhu’s synthetic medical thoughts. For a long period, they offered an important supplementary therapy to balance the popular cooling medicine. However, in the early sixteenth century, new debates arose after a polemic work was published by a scholar-official-turned physician, Wang Lun (1453-1510). Wang’s work simplified Zhu’s comprehensive teachings to an overwhelmingly cooling therapy and overshot his target by one-sidedly criticising the use of warming and replenishing medicines, including ginseng.⁵⁵ It soon aroused strong responses from physicians who followed the warming culture. They defended the use of ginseng and criticised Wang’s preference for using cooling agents to nourish yin. Amid these debates, a “warming and replenishing” (*wenbu* 溫補) medical culture rose and became popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵⁶

⁵³ See section five of chapter two.

⁵⁴ Liu, “Shuji kanke yu yixue chuancheng.”

⁵⁵ Simonis, “Illness, Texts, and ‘Schools’ in Danxi Medicine.”

⁵⁶ De Vries, “The Dangers of ‘Warming and Replenishing’.”

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While these medical debates have become well known among specialists of Chinese medical history, what is understudied is their links to the rise of a new food culture that favoured a group of sea delicacies represented by sea cucumbers and edible bird's nests. In chapter three, I will examine: 1) how edible bird's nests were transformed from a “vegetable” serving a spicy foodway into a “clear and replenishing” food item for a relatively bland culinary culture because of their imagined connection with a popular cooling medicine *hai fen* (海粉, egg masses of sea hares (*Anaspidea*)); and 2) how sea cucumbers were constructed as extraordinary ginseng from the sea with perfect medical properties addressing concerns from both the warming and cooling theories.

Furthermore, along with these medical debates, the cooking techniques of Chinese high cuisine also changed. Section five of chapter two shows that the strongly flavoured foodway that favoured the use of pepper was opposed by Zhu Zhenheng. Thereafter, chapter three demonstrates how in line with the retreat of strong condiments, a new cooking technique rose to introduce a more delicate flavour, *xian* (鮮), with the help of clear broths. This cooking technique became essential in literati-style cuisine that redefined Chinese high cuisine in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Amid this change, the preserved marine products, such as sea cucumbers and edible nests, emerged as perfect carriers of the aestheticised *xian* flavour for their gelatinous or fibrous texture could richly absorb clear broths.

Methodology and Structure

From pepper to sea cucumbers, changing Chinese taste for exotics points to an important topic in global cultural history, namely, how taste changes in a global context. Being part of the history of sensual culture, change in taste has been interesting cultural historians since at least the age of Johan Huizinga. There is rich literature about how European taste- and smell-scape evolved from the

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medieval through the early modern periods.⁵⁷ Researchers have identified a comparable gustatory transition in western Europe, through which strong spices gave way to a more delicate food culture, particularly in association with the rise of modern French cuisine.⁵⁸ The shift from a hot-spicy food culture that favoured pepper to a delicate foodway that favoured sea cucumbers in China from the Mongol Yuan to the Manchu Qing periods seems to also give a strong sense of déjà vu to a key argument by Huizinga in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (*Herfsttij der middeleeuwen*, 1919):

When the World was half a thousand years younger all events had much sharper outlines than now.⁵⁹

This strange parallel between Chinese and European culture, however, shall not encourage an extension from European exceptionalism to Chinese exceptionalism, or from Euro-centric to China-centric. Instead of proposing a gustatory modernity shared exclusively by European and Chinese material culture, this research chooses to problematise the Chinese-ness in this gustatory shift from the perspectives of cultural diversity and external influence.

To begin with, I have to acknowledge that for the change of taste in China, this research relies heavily on texts authored by literati or literati-style physicians. They collectively offered rich documentation about when, how, and why taste changed in China. Without closely reading these accounts, the hidden cultural shift connecting pepper and sea cucumbers may never be uncovered. Yet, we shall also be aware that these sources do not reflect a monolithic Chinese culture but show negotiations between rivalling food and medicinal cultures in China. For instance, in terms of the medical texts, their authors were, in many cases, keener to undermine each other than to form a

⁵⁷ To name just a few, Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*; Revel, *Culture and Cuisine*; Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*; Korsmeyer, ed., *The Taste Culture Reader*; Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses*.

⁵⁸ Halikowski-Smith, “Demystifying a Change in Taste”; Peterson, *Acquired Taste*.

⁵⁹ Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 1.

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commonwealth. From these rivalling voices, we can historicise how and why new medical theories emerged and influenced foodways.

For the more piecemeal information about cooking, the influence of the literati was also debatable. Up to the early sixteenth century, Chinese high cuisine was not fully dominated by the taste of the literati. For instance, an important food recipe collection, which witnessed both the epitome of pepper consumption in China and the advent of edible bird's nests, was compiled in 1504 by a son of a female cook, who travelled across the Ming Empire with her office-holding father and husband and memorised many popular recipes which are often unmentioned in literati-style cookery books coming from a later period.⁶⁰ Even after the rise of literati cuisine from the end of the sixteenth century, for many non-elite Chinese families, their everyday food in fact became more hot-spicy, because of the introduction of chili pepper to China.⁶¹ It is even arguable that there were two diverging gustatory revolutions in China. For the high cuisine that began to be defined by literati's taste from the late sixteenth century, the hot-spicy culture represented by pepper gradually gave way to a delicate foodway that favoured sea delicacies. In contrast, for most ordinary families living in economically backward inland China, locally cultivated chili pepper saved them from gustatory poverty and hot spiciness began to define their regional cuisines. The interactions between these two diverging foodways will be discussed in section five of chapter two.

Through examining these interactions among different medical and food cultures in China, we can find that there were strong anxieties among the literati to distinguish themselves from other Chinese or even from other literati through constructing a more delicate body and following a more exquisite foodway.⁶² Whereas Chinese cultural and art historians are no stranger to this kind of social

⁶⁰ See section one of chapter two and section four of chapter three.

⁶¹ Dott, *The Chile Pepper in China*; Cao, *Zhongguo shila shi*.

⁶² For how literati developed their distinctive material culture, see Clunas, *Superfluous Things*. For taste and social distinction, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

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distinction by the literati through consumption, what makes this research different is that it points to edible things of foreign origins.⁶³

These two edible exotics both originated from non-Chinese cultures. Behind their rise in Chinese cuisine, there were cross-cultural exchanges between China and the world. In terms of pepper, chapter one will critically read some early Chinese medical accounts, showing that pepper's integration into Chinese medicine had close interactions with other pepperlike exotics and they all received influence from Ayurveda. Chapter two further engages with Chinese geographic records about pepper's origins in Java and the Malabar Coast. These sources help understand how and why pepper changed from a rarity to a commonly used spice amid the reconfiguration of the Indian Ocean World through the Mongol Conquest.

For sea cucumbers, fortunately, we have a wealth of sources from multiple angles, including a number of literati's writings, a merchant handbook, and a large bulk of non-Chinese documents from Southeast Asia, Japan, and Korea. Chapters three and four use these sources to trace the change of Chinese taste in a broad world of sea cucumbers. Particularly, with Dutch sources from Makassar, we can critically examine how tropical sea cucumbers emerged in the shadow of their temperate counterparts and eventually challenged the dominance of the latter. Through the tension and interactions between them, we can explore initiatives out of the margins.⁶⁴ We may find that instead of being passively incorporated by an expanding Chinese commodity network and forced to follow

⁶³ Not many works have been done on exotics in Chinese material culture. Besides the early works by Schafer and the above-mentioned works on aromatic drugs and marine products, there are also remarkable works by Yangwen Zheng on opium and *yang huo* (foreign stuff/goods, mainly from Europe), by Lai Hui-min on *yang huo* and *Dongyang huo* (Japanese goods), by Anna Grasskamp on coral, by Jonathan Schlesinger on pearls, mushroom, and fur, and by He Bian on exotic medicines. Zheng, *The Social Life of Opium in China*; idem, "Qingdai yanghuo de liutong yu chengshi yang pinqian de chuxian"; idem, *China on the Sea*, 207-243; Lai, "Qianjia shidai Beijing de yanghuo yu qiren richang shenghuo"; idem, "Suzhou de Dongyang huo yu shimin shenghuo"; Grasskamp, "Branch and Bones"; idem, *Objects in Frames*, 127-162; Schlesinger, *A World Trimmed with Fur*; Bian, "An Ever-Expanding Pharmacy"; idem, *Know Your Remedies*, 153-178.

⁶⁴ For an overview of Chinese commodity networks in Southeast Asia, see Tagliacozzo and Chang, eds, *Chinese Circulations*.

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the gustatory hierarchy established by Chinese consumers, Southeast Asian indigenous collectors had a proactive role to play in this world of sea cucumbers. They actively joined that network and challenged that hierarchy.

This example encourages us to explore how Chinese taste for edible exotics was influenced by the global lives of these things.⁶⁵ Through cross-examining sources from China and Makassar, chapter four reveals that taste was not determined by Chinese literati consumer's aesthetic values alone but negotiated between Chinese consumers and Southeast Asian producers. It shows that Southeast Asian sea cucumbers fishers were in fact well informed of the gustatory preference of Chinese elite diners because that mattered directly to the price of their products. With that information, they had multiple strategies to interact with Chinese consumers' taste. They could either follow the established gustatory hierarchy in China by looking for some tropical species that resembled the temperate sea cucumbers, or challenge that hierarchy by diving deeper to the bottom of the sea to search for some large tropical species whose shape and texture superseded the temperate variety, or even redefine it by industrially transforming some less-valued shallow-water tropical species into new products that stood by their own gustatory merits.

Taking these different angles into consideration, I think there is no single genre of texts that can independently inform us of how this gustatory revolution took place and mattered to global history. Without the existing scholarship from Southeast Asian studies, we may never realise that China had such strong demand for pepper and sea cucumbers. Without the Chinese medical and culinary texts, we may never understand why that demand was so strong. Without the Dutch reports about sea cucumber fishery around Makassar, we may completely ignore influences out of the margins. With these diverse and cross-cultural sources, the challenge for this dissertation is how to integrate them

⁶⁵ For global lives of things, see Gerritsen and Riello, eds., *The Global Lives of Things*; Gerritsen, "From Long-Distance Trade to the Global Lives of Things"; Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things*.

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and make them communicate with each other. That challenge, meanwhile, is also inspiring, as it encourages me to explore these two food-defined worlds and the culturally evolving Chinese body, and to discover many hidden links between these seemingly unrelated fields.

With such a challenge and vision, I am now going to demonstrate this untold Chinese gustatory taste in global history. The dissertation consists of four long chapters. The first two are about pepper and other aromatics and spices. The last two are about sea cucumbers and other marine products. Whereas the dissertation as a whole is arranged in chronological order, each chapter has a specific theme. Chapter one, “Warming the Centre”, and chapter three, “Sea Changes”, are about how these two groups of edible exotics emerged in Chinese medicine and foodways. Chapter two, “Peppering the World”, and chapter four, “A World of Sea Cucumbers”, are respectively about the two worlds of pepper and sea cucumbers. There are several transitional sections in chapters two and three for linking the retreat of pepper to the rise of a new group of top delicacies supposedly from the sea, namely: sea cucumbers, edible bird’s nests, shark fins, and abalones. Of them, I will elaborate on medical debates concerning sea cucumbers and edible nests, and a change of cooking techniques concerning shark fins. Besides that, chapter one will also discuss cloves, cubeb pepper, and other popular aromatic drugs in Chinese medicine during the Tang and Song periods, but throughout the dissertation, the main focus remains on pepper and sea cucumbers.