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

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Citation

Xu, G. (2021, November 10). *Pepper to sea cucumbers: Chinese gustatory revolution in global history, 900-1840*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3239180>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Three

Sea Changes

In 1792, Yuan Mei (1716-1798), a celebrated gastronome and retired scholar-official living in the prosperous Lower Yangzi region, published a cookery book, *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment* (*Suiyuan shidan* 隨園食單).¹ Catering to the taste of Chinese literati in the Manchu Qing Empire, this work became highly popular in China. It bears witness to the florescence of a new food culture, in which exotic spices had become hard to find and a new group of rarities supposedly from the sea emerged as top delicacies.

Under the rubric of “sea delicacy recipes” (*baixian dan* 海鮮單, literally “sea-fresh recipes”), Yuan enumerated nine of them, including edible bird’s nests (*yanwo* 燕窩), sea cucumbers (*baishen* 海參), shark fins (*yuchi* 魚翅), abalones (*fiyu* 鮑魚), mussels (*dancai* 淡菜), whitebait (*baiyan* 海蠔), cuttlefish’s “eggs” (*wuyu dan* 烏魚蛋)², scallops (*jiang yaozhu* 江瑤柱)³, and oyster meat (*libuang* 蠔黃).⁴ This rubric was arranged by Yuan ahead of all other recipes, followed in sequence by river delicacies, pork, assorted livestock (beef, mutton, venison, and civet), poultry, scaled aquatic animals, scaleless aquatic animals, vegetables (including many tofu recipes), side dishes, pastry, rice and porridge, and tea and wine.

To justify this order, Yuan Mei acknowledged that “there is no mention of seafood in the ancient Eight Precious Delicacies. As the customs of the present day have a preference for these, I have to

¹ For an updated biography of Yuan Mei, see Schmidt, *Harmony Garden*, 1-150. For his literati-style cookery book, see Hu, “Wenrenhua de *Suiyuan shidan*”; Wu, “Ming Qing yinshi wenhua zhong de ganguan yanhua yu pinwei suzao”; Wang, “Meishi zhong de youqing”; Liang, “A Recipe Book for Culture Consumers.”

² It is the nidamental gland of cuttlefish.

³ It is made of the scallop of *Atrina pectinata* (comb pen shells).

⁴ Yuan, *Suiyuan shidan*, 40-44.

conform and create the rubric of seafood recipes” (古八珍，並無海鮮之說。今世俗尚之，不得不吾從眾，作海鮮單。).⁵ Yuan Mei was not the first to make such an observation. A century earlier, Nie Huang (fl. late 17th century), a painter and amateur of marine creatures, in his richly illustrated fish album (1698), had already pointed out that there were four aquatic things highly appreciated by his contemporaries, namely: sea cucumbers, edible bird’s nests, shark fins, and abalones, but, besides abalones, none were mentioned in any classical text.⁶

When and how did this food culture emerge? What was its relationship with the preceding hot-spicy food culture? Why did this group of rarities become so important to the new culture? These questions urge us to examine a series of changes behind the rise of sea delicacies in Chinese cuisine, particularly in reference to changing Chinese perceptions of edible things supposedly from the sea.

1. Knowing Seafood

Edible things from the sea are rarely mentioned in the Chinese classics. Stemming from the Chinese ritual canons, the so-called “Eight Precious Delicacies” consisted overwhelmingly of land animals, such as piglet, ewe, beef, and deer.⁷ Even by the Tang period, when exotic spices and aromatics had been making their way into Chinese food and medicine, seafood was perceived as a taste of others.

⁵ Ibid, 40.

⁶ Nie, *Haicuo tu*, 186-187. Very little is known about Nie Huang. Only two of his works are extant. Zou, “Jiaoliu yu hujian,” 97-100.

⁷ The “Eight Precious Delicacies”, as a concept, first appears in *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), which mentioned that the chef of the royal family of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046 BCE – 256 BCE) “used eight things as precious delicacies” for the king, the queen, and the heir apparent, but the original text does not name them. Thereafter, an important commentator, Zheng Xue (127– 200), annotated that they consisted of 1) rice seasoned with hot sauce and lard (*chun’ao* 淳熬), 2) glutinous rice seasoned with hot sauce and lard (*chunnu* 淳毋), 3) grilled piglet (*paotun* 炮豚), 4) grilled ewe (*paozang* 炮臄), 5) jointly grilled tenderloin of beef, mutton, *mi* deer (麋), deer, and *jun* deer (麇) (*daozen* 搗珍), 6) seasoned raw beef (*zi* 漬), 7) cured beef (*ao* 熬), and 8) grilled dog liver (*ganliao* 肝膋). Another important ritual canon, *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) records a slightly different version which replaces the grilled ewe with rice cake mixed with beef, mutton, and pork (*san* 糝). Chuang, “*Cong bazhen de yanbian kan Zhongguo yinshi wenhua de yanbian*,” 433-444.

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An important witness to the cultural distance between the Tang political elites and seafood is a poem by Han Yu (768-824), “A Verse to the Chief Musician Yuan Shiba on the First Taste of Southern Food” (初南食貽元十八協律). It demonstrates a strong bias that perceived seafood as alien, unclassifiable, odorous, and inedible.⁸

Horseshoe crabs look like *huiven*⁹ hats; they have ossified eyes and carry each other to walk.

Oysters glue to each other and form a hill; in tens and hundreds they reproduce themselves.

Stingrays have a snake-like tail; their mouth and eyes are not on the same side.

Ha is in fact toads; they are the same in nature but in vain gain distinct names.

For octopuses and scallops, they compete to present their strangeness.

There are moreover tens of other sorts; none is less astounding.

I come here to fend off demons and shall certainly taste the southern dishes.

Season it with salt and sour and boil it with Sichuan peppers and tangerine.

Once the fishy odour begins to diffuse, I chew and swallow with my face sweaty and flushed.

蟹實如惠文，骨眼相負行。

蠔相黏為山，百十各自生。

蒲魚尾如蛇，口眼不相營。

蛤即是蝦蟇，同實浪異名。

章舉馬甲柱，鬪以怪自呈。

其餘數十種，莫不可歎驚。

我來禦魑魅，自宜味南烹。

⁸ For the Tang elites' exoticism of the south, see Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird*.

⁹ The *Huiven* hat 惠文冠 was a type of hat named after King Huiwen (r. 298 BCE – 266 BCE) of the Zhao Kingdom. Its front face was decorated by a piece of gold with the pattern of a cicada and its one side was inserted with a marten tail. Zou and Zeng, “Handai de huguan yu heguan kao.”

調以鹹與酸，芼以椒與橙。

腥臊始發越，咀吞面汗駢。¹⁰

Han composed this poem during his exile to Chaozhou, in present eastern Guangdong, in 819.¹¹ “Exile” in this context does not mean a banished life as a criminal. Instead, Han was one of a handful of prominent scholar-officials who were demoted to local government in the Far South of the Tang Empire as a result of intensified factional struggles during the Yuanhe period (806-820).¹² This tropical region, for its environmental and ethnic otherness, was not an enviable service place for the Tang elites, who until the end of this dynasty were overwhelmingly from aristocratic families in the metropolitan areas surrounding the two imperial capitals, Chang’an and Luoyang, in inland North China.¹³ While temporarily losing the Emperor’s favour, this group of disgraced scholar-officials were in a social and political position far more privileged than the people of the South they ruled. Therefore, they tended to highlight a cultural boundary by denying they shared the southerners’ food and taste. In Han’s poem, tasting the southern seafood was likened to fending off demons, and seasoning the seafood with condiments to make the taste more agreeable should be understood as a metaphor for civilising the South. By the end, merely the fishy odour from the seafood had already shattered this culinary civilising mission and made our famed poet sweaty and red-faced.

The situation dramatically changed after the Tang-Song Transition (ca. 8th-12th c.). A well-studied topic in Chinese food history is that during the Northern Song period seafood was gradually accepted by social elites.¹⁴ The elites’ changing perception of seafood during this period was largely

¹⁰ Han, *Han Changli shi xinian jishi*, vol. 2, *juan* 11, 1132-1136.

¹¹ For Han Yu’s poetry during this exile period, see Owen, *The Poetry of Meng Chiao and Han Yü*, 270-288; Hartman, *Han Yü and the Tang Search for Unity*, 85-100.

¹² Shang, *Bianzhe wenhua yu bianzhe wenxue*.

¹³ Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird*, 37-44; Yang, “The “Zhang” on Chinese Southern Frontiers”; Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*.

¹⁴ Yi, “Xianwei yu quanli”; Chang, “Bei Song wenren yinshi shuxie de nanfang jingyan”; Cao, “Zhong Tang zhi Song dai shige zhong de nanshi shuxie”.

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because of a cultural transformation among themselves.¹⁵ The Song literati who tasted and ruminated about seafood were living in an intellectual and political milieu very different from the Tang.¹⁶ In general, a rift has been identified in the transitional period from the collapse of the Tang to the reintegration of a unified empire by the Northern Song dynasty.¹⁷ After this violent period, the monopoly of power by the northern aristocrats was undermined, and many local gentry families in the South began to generate high-ranking officials for the central government through the reformed civil-service examination system.¹⁸

Along with the rise of the southerners as a new elite class known as literati, things of the South previously considered alienating, including seafood, were increasingly considered as things of “ours”.¹⁹ An important witness to this transformation was an illustrated *materia medica* from a national drug survey directed by a polymath, Su Song (1020-1101). Su was born into a newly risen family in a recently developed coastal region of southern Fujian.²⁰ Well-known in the history of science for his design of a hydro-mechanical astronomical clock-tower around 1090, Su’s other notable career was his service in the Bureau for Revising Medical Texts, where he directed a national drug survey (1058-1061) to collect illustrations, samples, and reports about therapeutic things from their original places.²¹ This survey, following the long-established tradition of compiling illustrated guides (*tujing* 圖經) for

¹⁵ West, “Cilia, Scale and Bristle”; Chen, “Songdai linjie tiyong zhong de ziran guancha yu shuxie”; Chen, “Songshi zhong de haiyang yinshi fengshang”; Chen, “Songdai haichan jiagong jiqi shiyong pingjia”; Yi, “Xianwei yu quanli”; Chang, “Bei Song wenren yinshi shuxie de nanfang jingyan”; Cao Yimei, “Zhong Tang zhi Song dai shige zhong de nanshi.”

¹⁶ Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*”.

¹⁷ Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*, 187-234.

¹⁸ Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen*; Bossler, *Powerful Relations*; Gerritsen, *Ji’an Literati*.

¹⁹ Here, I adapt a concept from Peter Bol’s research about the critical change of Chinese intellectual history during the Tang-Song Transition. Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*”.

²⁰ For the rise of these local elite families, see Aoyama, “The Newly-Risen Bureaucrats in Fukien”; Clark, *Portrait of a Community*, 37-79. For the social and economic transformation of southern Fujian around this period, see Clark, *Community, Trade, and Networks*; idem, *The Sinitic Encounter*.

²¹ *Chongxiu zhengbe jingshi zhenglei beiyong bencao*, juan 1, 26-27; epilogue, 548; Fan, *Beisong jiaozheng yishuju xintan*, 120-43; Goldschmidt, *The Evolution of Chinese Medicine*, 112-115; Needham, *Heavenly Clockwork*.

imperial administration, gave a unique opportunity for the local elites to provide their local knowledge of the natural world to an imperial institute, to be transformed into imperial knowledge.²² A result of this epistemological transformation was Su's *Illustrated Materia Medica* (*Bencao tujing* 本草圖經, 1061). Given Su's background, it comes as no surprise that many things from the South, including a lot of marine creatures, are for the first time clearly illustrated, named, classified, and described in a pharmacopoeia published by the imperial state.

For instance, for oysters, a marine creature that once shocked Han Yu for its reef structure, Su offered an illustration and a long description. The illustration, captioned Quanzhou oysters (*Quanzhou muli* 泉州牡蠣), shows a small cluster of oysters clinging to each other, indicating how a nascent oyster reef grows (Figure 3.1).

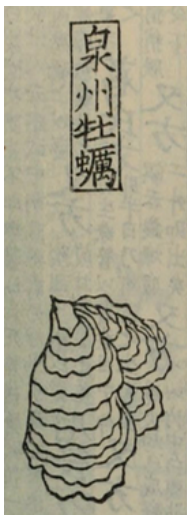


Figure 3.1 Illustration of a nascent oyster reef from *Illustrated Materia Medica*.

Source: *Chongxiu zhengbe jingshi zhenglei beiyong bencao*, juan 20, 412.

The accompanying text goes as:

Oysters grow in pools and marshes along the East Sea. Now the coastal areas all have them, and Nanhai (Canton), Fujian, Tongzhou, and Taizhou especially have a massive amount. They grow

²² Lin, "The Local in the Imperial Vision."

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by clinging to stones, interconnected like accumulated stones. They look like houses, hence called oyster houses. Another name is “oyster hill”. People in Jin’an²³ call them *haopu* (pronounced as *o-po* in Hokkien). When they begin to grow along the coast, they are like a human fist. Growing towards all directions, they can reach one or two *zhang* (ca. 3-6 metres). [Their reef structure is] as steep as that of a hill. Inside each house, there is a piece of oyster meat, whose size depends on the house. A big house is like the hoof of a horse and a small house is like a human nail. When a tide comes, all houses open. If a small worm falls in, the house closes and takes it as food. Sea people collect them by chiselling the houses [off the rockface], forcing them open with strong fire, and picking out the meat. Those whose shells face the left are male; those facing the right are female. Someone says that those with a pointed tip are male. In general, the big ones are more valuable. The left-facing ones that are collected in the eleventh month are for medical uses. Southerners take their meat as food whose taste is especially delicious. It is nutritive, with functions of smoothing skin and beautifying face. They are the most valuable among all marine creatures.

牡蠣生東海池澤，今海傍皆有之，而南海、閩中及通、秦間尤多。此物附石而生，硨磲相連，如房，故名蠣房（讀如阿房之房）。一名蠔山，晉安人呼為蠔莆。初生海邊，才如拳石，四面漸長，有一二丈者，嶄巖如山。每一房內有蠔肉一塊，肉之大小隨房所生。大房如馬蹄，小者如人指面。每潮來則諸房皆開，有小蟲入則合之，以充腹。海人取之皆鑿房，以烈火逼開之，挑取其肉。而其殼左顧者雄，右顧者則牡蠣耳。或曰，以尖頭為左顧。大抵以大者為貴。十一月採左顧者入藥。南人以其肉當食品，其味尤美好，更有益，兼令人細肌膚，美顏色。海族之最可貴者也。²⁴

²³ Jin’an 晉安 was an ancient name for Quanzhou.

²⁴ *Chongxiu zhenghe jingshi zhenglei beiyong bencao*, juan 20, 412.

This text drew on information from multiple sources. It synthesised some earlier accounts about the “gender” of oysters from Taoist medicine, and about their dietary functions from the aforementioned *Dietetic Materia Medica* (ca. early 8th c.).²⁵ It further demonstrates the compiler’s agency as Su selected his own native place, namely, Quanzhou, to caption the illustration, indicating Quanzhou as its most authentic origin (*daodi* 道地),²⁶ and offered its local name in his own dialect. Integrating those textual, visual, and personal accounts, Su presented oysters as a familiar, comestible, and nutritive thing, appealingly ready for everyday consumption.

Although aquatic things, such as oysters, were only a small part of this medical project, it offered an important channel to legitimise and promote the previous disparaged seafood culture of the South. Before the publication of this work, some privately compiled medical and dietary texts, such as the *Supplement to Materia Medica* (739) by Chen Cangqi and the *Dietetic Materia Medica*, had already been spreading medicinal and culinary knowledge about seafood.²⁷ Yet, none of them had achieved such a synthesis like Su Song, who had privileged access to the Imperial Library, to the survey reports, and to local knowledge from his own native place. After the Emperor decreed to publish Su’s work in 1062, its copies would be distributed across China.²⁸ By the end of the eleventh century, the images and texts from the *Illustrated Materia Medica* were further integrated into the influential *Zhenglei Material*

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Su identified Quanzhou or Fujian as the native place for a number of tropical and aquatic things, such as the operculum of marine snails (*jiuxiang* 甲香, a kind of scent fixative), olives, and lychees. *Chongxiu zhenghe jingshi zhenglei beiyong bencao*, *juan* 22, 455; *juan* 23, 470, 478-479.

²⁷ Chen Cangqi (fl. early 8th century) was a southerner born in Mingzhou. His work, *Supplement to Materia Medica* (*Bencao shiyi* 本草拾遺, completed in 739), immensely expanded the previously brief section about aquatic creatures in the Tang official pharmacopeia, *Newly Revised Materia Medica* (659). Ibid, *juan* 1, 39; Chen, *Bencao shiyi jishi*; Huang, “Chen Cangqi *Bencao shiyi* jiqi bowuxue jiazhi.”

²⁸ *Chongxiu zhenghe jingshi zhenglei beiyong bencao*, epilogue, 548. It was a common practice by the Song imperial state to distribute recently compiled medical books and pharmacopeia to local government for transforming local medical practice. Hinrichs, “The Medical Transforming of Governance and Southern Customs in Song Dynasty China.” For the circulation of various editions of *Illustrated Materia Medica* in the Song period, see Su and Zhao, eds., *Bencao tujing de yanjiu*, 8-9. Su’s case was not isolated. Seafood was a popular theme in the Northern Song discourse on things. See Mai, “The Double Life of the Scallop.”

Medica, becoming widely shared knowledge among literati. Thereafter, learned scholars, no matters how hostile they might be towards the practice of eating seafood, could no longer make a comfortable claim like Han Yu to disparage seafood as alien, unknown, and hardly edible, because the knowledge refuting these prejudices had now been integrated into an illustrated work, which was promulgated by the Northern Song imperial state.

2. Smelly Fish to Sea Taste

While seafood had been accepted by Chinese elite culture since the eleventh century, a physical distance remained between the dining tables of hinterland consumers and fresh catches from the sea. Without modern logistics, it was extremely difficult to transport fresh seafood away from the coast. Although frozen transport of fresh seafood with boats carrying ice blocks had already appeared in the twelfth century and would become popular around the Lower Yangzi region from the sixteenth century onwards, its high cost and its seasonal nature prevented it from becoming a wider practice.²⁹ What was more widely available was preserved seafood, capable of being commercially offered to inland consumer markets on a massive scale.

Like fresh seafood, preserved aquatic things, either from the sea or from inland waters, were originally denied by the high taste of ancient China. An important trope is *bayou* (鲍鱼), literally meaning “putrid salted fish”.³⁰ It gained a smelly reputation in Chinese classics and gave rise to many allusions with overwhelmingly derogatory connotations.³¹ A story goes that they were used for covering the putrid smell of the decaying corpse of the despotic first emperor of a unified China (Qin

²⁹ Chiu, “Bingjiao, bingchuan yu bingxian.” Frozen transport was also carried out along the Grand Canal for delivering fresh fish from the Lower Yangzi to Beijing for the imperial court during the Ming and early Qing periods. Kuo, “Quanli de ziwei.”

³⁰ Xu, *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 580; Wang, “Juyan hanjian baoyu kao.”

³¹ Chen, “Su Shi ‘Fuyu xing,’” 21-23.

Shi Huang, 259 BCE – 210 BCE), representing the despicable death of a tyrant.³² Another idiomatic expression is “the market of smelly salted fish” (*baoyu zhi si* 鮑魚之肆), meaning a smelly place where villains gather, as the counter-example of “the room of orchids and angelicas” (*lanzhi zhi shi* 蘭芷之室), meaning a fragrant place where gentlemen meet.³³ There is also evidence that these salted fish, although popular in daily life,³⁴ were denied by the ritual classics. The exemplary case was that Grand Duke Wang (Taigong Wang 太公望, 11th century BCE) tutored the future King Wu (? – 1043 BCE) to forsake his appetite for the putrid salted fish, because it was not considered proper for sacrificial rituals and hence inappropriate for cultivating the righteous behaviours of a ruler.³⁵ This story would be circulated in later pedagogical primers. For instance, a didactic picture book from the late Ming, *Cultivating Rectitude, Illustrated and Explained* (*Yangzheng tujie* 養正圖解, 1594), depicts under the title of “for food, reject salted fish” that a prince (the future King Wu), under the instruction of Grand Duke Wang, was ready to reject a platter of fish offered by a servant (Figure 3.2).³⁶

³² Sima, *Shiji*, *juan* 6, 264.

³³ Wang, *Da Dai Liji jiegou*, *juan* 5, 97.

³⁴ Wang, “Juyan hanjian baoyu kao.”

³⁵ Jia, *Xinshu jiaozhu*, *juan* 6, 214.

³⁶ Murray, *Mirror of Morality*, 101-2; Lin, “Mingdai banhua *Yangzheng tujie* zhi yanjiu.”



Figure 3.2 “For food, reject salted fish”.

Source: Jiao Hong, *Yangzheng tujie*, 3a, woodblock-printed book, ca. 24 x ca. 16 cm.

However, *baoyu* as smelly salted fish, while alive in Chinese poetry and literature, gradually lost its original meaning in Chinese dietary practice. In the South, *baoyu* was replaced by a local term, *xiang*, 養, which represented a far more agreeable sensory experience. *Xiang* likely originated as a word from Wu or Yue culture in the Lower Yangzi region. According to a local tradition, recorded in the gazetteer of Suzhou at least since the ninth century, this character was invented by a king of the Wu Kingdom, Helü (r. 514-496 BCE).³⁷ After tasting dried yellow croakers (*shishou yu* 石首魚), Impressed by its

³⁷ This anecdote is recorded in *Gazetteer of Wu (Suzhou) Prefecture* (1229), which also refers to a no-longer extant book *Record of Wu (Wudi ji 吳地記)* dating from the ninth century CE. Fan et al., comps., *Wujun zhi*, juan 50, 672-673.

delicious taste, Helü decided to combine two Chinese character, *mei* 美 (delicious) and *yu* 魚 (fish) into *xiang* 養, meaning delicious fish, for this kind of dried fish. In practice, dried yellow croakers are only one among many types of *xiang*, which virtually encompasses all dried and salted fish. For instance, in the mid-thirteenth century, Hangzhou, as the capital city of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279 CE), had a *xiang* market (*xiangtuan* 養團) with one to two hundred *xiang* shops (*xiangpu* 養鋪) selling many different sorts of dried fish, all known as *xiang*.³⁸

Besides dried and salted fish, there were many other types of preserved seafood, such as molluscs, shrimp, and crabs, and many other forms of preservations, such as pickling, fermenting, smoking, and candying.³⁹ There is a unique Chinese term for all types of preserved seafood, *haiwei* (sea taste 海味), literally meaning “the taste (*wei*) of the sea (*hai*)”. The meaning of this term experienced subtle changes since the Tang-Song Transition. In the early ninth century, a Tang official Yuan Zhen (779-831) opposed a speed relay of sea taste (*haiwei*) from Mingzhou to Chang’an. In that case, he was most likely referring to fresh seafood, because it would make no sense to arrange an expensive speed delivery for already preserved seafood.⁴⁰ However, in the Southern Song period, sea taste became strongly associated with pickled seafood. For instance, the aforementioned *xiang* shops in thirteenth-century Hangzhou sold, besides *xiang*, also various sorts of wine-pickled seafood, all referred to as sea taste.⁴¹ Another late thirteenth-century source about the city life of Hangzhou also collectively refers to various kinds of pickled seafood as sea taste.⁴²

Into the Mongol period, there is evidence that sea taste was kept as a daily-used food item. The early fourteenth century Mongol court cookery book, *Yinshan zhengyao* (*Proper and Essential Things for*

³⁸ Wu, *Mengliang lu*, *juan* 16, 270-271; Zhou, *Wulin jiushi*, *juan* 6, 440.

³⁹ Chen, “Songdai haichan jiagong jiqi shiyong pingjia”; Kuo, “Xianqing de chi.”

⁴⁰ Yuan, *Yuan Zhen ji*, *juan* 39, 440-441.

⁴¹ Wu, *Mengliang lu*, *juan* 16, 271.

⁴² Zhou, *Wulin jiushi*, *juan* 6, 442.

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Food and Drink 飲膳正要, 1330), advises that “dreg-pickled food such as sea taste” (海味糟藏之屬) would become inedible after being preserved for too long of a period or after being damaged in a humid and hot environment.⁴³ Wu Rui’s *Materia Medica for Everyday Use* (1329) lists four commonly used seasoning ingredients with salty flavour, namely: salt, sauce, dried seaweed, and “sea miscellany” (*baicuo* 海錯), which, according to Wu, included sea taste.⁴⁴

Whereas sea taste primarily referred to pickled, especially wine-pickled, seafood in the Southern Song and Mongol Yuan periods, into the late Ming and Manchu Qing periods, it seems that this term became more widely used for all kinds of preserved seafood and especially for commercially traded preserved seafood. A later Ming panoramic painting of Nanjing shows a shop selling “sea taste from Fujian and Guangdong” (Figure 3.3). Here, the sea taste was apparently preserved, because even the frozen transport could not deliver fresh seafood from a place as far as Fujian and Guangdong to Nanjing.⁴⁵ What was sold there must be a kind of preserved exotic seafood from the Far South not available around the Lower Yangzi region. In eighteenth-century Yangzhou there was a market specialising in the trade of salted and dried seafood, including *xiang* and shark fins, where traders “name their shops as sea taste [shops]” (署其肆曰海味).⁴⁶

Further north along the Grand Canal, a hinterland city Liaocheng also hosted sea taste shops. They were recorded as donors of the Association Hall of Shanxi and Shaanxi (*Shanshaan huiguan* 山陝會館) in 1809, indicating that they were associated with a large trading network of the Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants, which was influential in North China.⁴⁷ As Liaocheng was a commercial hub in

⁴³ Husihui, *Yinshan zhengyao*, *juan* 2, 104.

⁴⁴ Wu, *Riyong bencao*, *juan* 8, 445.

⁴⁵ In the Ming and Qing periods, frozen fresh seafood was mostly supplied to the Lower Yangzi region from the waters around the estuary of the Yangzi River. Chiu, “Bingjiao, bingchuan yu bingxian.”

⁴⁶ Li, *Yangzhou huafang lu*, *juan* 1, 17.

⁴⁷ *Qingdai Henan, Shandong deng sheng shangren huiguan beike*, 297-306.

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North China, these sea-taste traders were most likely redistributing preserved seafood from coastal and south China to a vast consumer market in North China. Based on the amount of their donation, which was in accordance with their annual turnover, the top three sea-taste shops' yearly revenue ranged between 2,000 to 4,200 taels, indicating that they were not small dealers merely focusing on the local market, but professional merchants involved in the long-distance trade of sea taste.⁴⁸



Figure 3.3 A “sea taste” shop in Nanjing.

Source: *Thriving Southern Capital* 南都繁會圖卷, c. 1600, anonymous handscroll, ink and colours on silk, National Museum of China.

⁴⁸ Xu, “Qing Qianlong zhi Daoguang nianjian de Liaocheng shangye,” 119, footnote 9.

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Moreover, into the eighteenth century, the trade of sea taste had become partially amalgamated with the trade of “southern goods” (*nanhuo* 南貨). The so-called southern goods, as explained in the introduction, encompassed a wide range of commodities from distant origin, including remote areas in China or foreign lands, such as Southeast Asia and Japan. Suzhou, as the commercial hub of the Lower Yangzi region, was a centre of the “southern goods” trade. A well-known example is the “southern goods” shop of Sun Chunyang (Sun Chunyang Nanhuo Pu 孫春陽南貨鋪). Founded by a merchant from Ningbo in the late sixteenth century, this shop thrived for over two centuries till the 1830s, witnessing the golden age of Suzhou. What is particularly remarkable is that by the early nineteenth century Sun Chunyang had developed into a department store, with six sections specialising in six types of southern goods, which corresponded to general southern and northern goods (*nanbei hu* 南北貨), marine products (*haibuo* 海貨), cured meat (*yanla* 醃臘), sauces (*jianghuo* 醬貨), candied fruit (*mijian* 蜜餞), and candles (*lazhu* 蠟燭).⁴⁹ There were many of this kind of southern goods shops in and around Suzhou, identifiable from either local inscriptions or city-scape paintings, of which an example can be found in the celebrated cityscape scroll of eighteenth-century Suzhou, *Prospering Suzhou* (*Gusu fanhua tu* 姑蘇繁華圖, 1759) (Figure 3.4).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Qian, *Lünyuan conghua*, juan 24, 640-641.

⁵⁰ Fan, “Qingdai Suzhou chengshi gongshang fanrong de xiezha,” 112-113. For these inscriptions, see *Ming Qing Suzhou gongshangye beikeji*, 240-254.

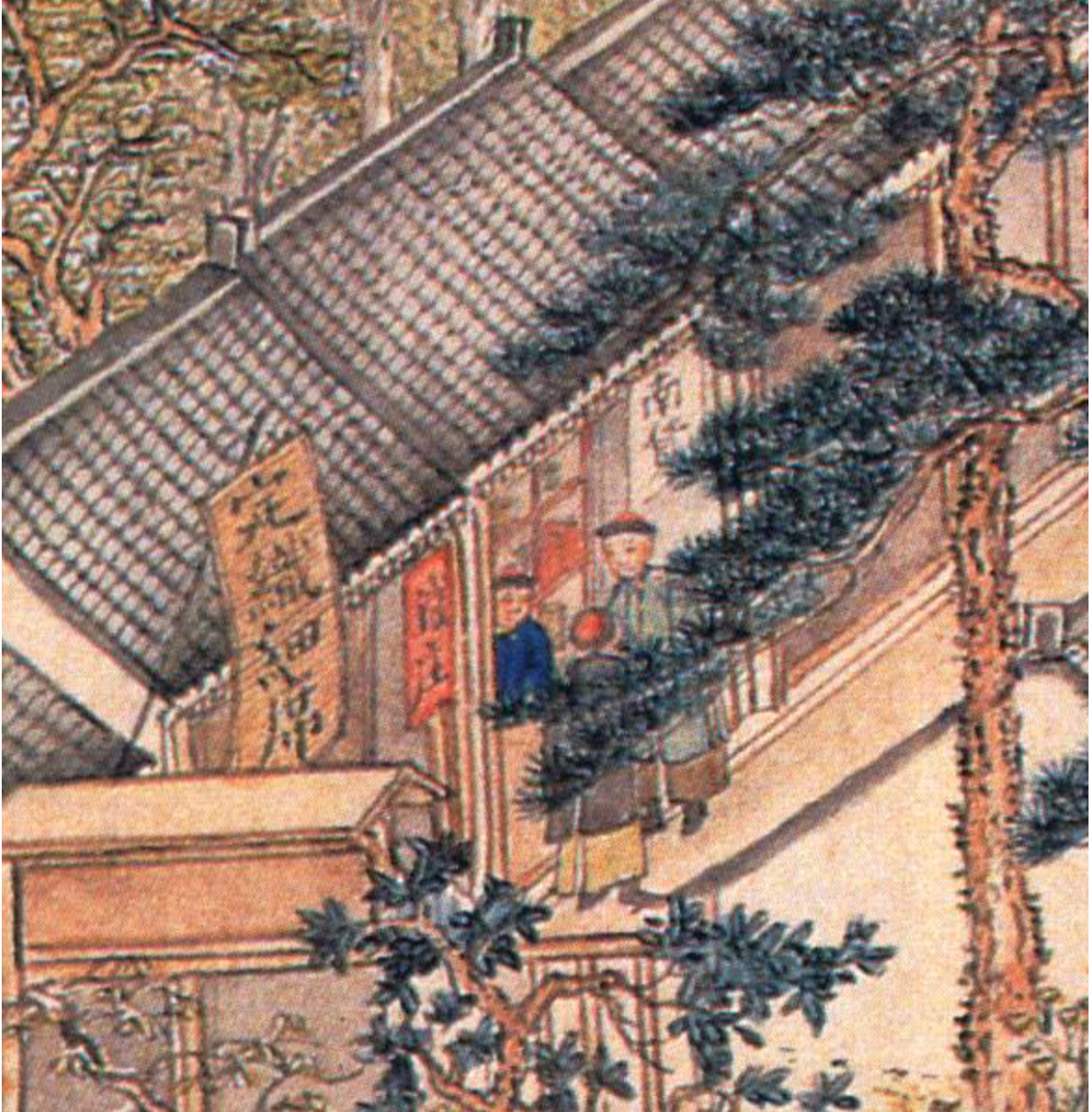


Figure 3.4 A “southern goods” store in a market-town, Mudu, near Suzhou.

Source: Xu, *Prospering Suzhou*, 1759, handscroll, 124.1 × 39 cm, Liaoning Provincial Museum. *Gusu fanhua tu*, section 9.

A deep insight into this trade has become possible because of a recently published merchant handbook specific about the trade of southern goods. The original manuscript is untitled, anonymous, and undated. It is collected by a leading researcher of Huizhou merchant archives, Wang Zhenzhong, and

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published in his compilation of Huizhou archives.⁵¹ Through a close reading of this text, we can identify that it was, with little doubt, compiled between 1784 and the 1820s. It refers to the Quanzhou and Zhangzhou Association Hall in Shanghai, which was established in 1763.⁵² It also mentions that in the “forty-ninth year” there was a change of regulations for soybean oil trade.⁵³ This is most likely the forty-ninth year of the reign of Emperor Qianlong, namely, 1784, because throughout the Manchu Qing period, only two emperors reigned in China for such a long period, namely Kangxi (1661-1722) and Qianlong (1735-1796). The forty-ninth year of Kangxi (1710) is apparently too early for a handbook compiled after 1763. Therefore, the forty-ninth year of Qianlong (1784) makes more sense in this context. Meanwhile, the handbook mentions Johor in many places, but has no single reference to Singapore (established in 1819). Therefore, it reflects the situation after 1784 and before the rise of Singapore in the 1820s.⁵⁴

This handbook was originally part of a private archive of a Huizhou family. Its author collected a wide range of market information about all-important “southern goods”, bringing to light a highly sophisticated trading world. From the information he collected, we can assume that he was a merchant based in the Lower Yangzi region. His handbook described not only what kinds of southern goods were traded in the Lower Yangzi region, but also professional knowledge about each commodity’s different grades, origin places, packages, trademarks, qualities, trading routes, weight units, currency exchange rates, and targeted consumers. Taking the first item in this handbook, edible bird’s nests, as an example, the handbook first introduces their different origins, advising that those from Johor (at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula) were the best, those from Banjarmasin (in southern

⁵¹ *Huizhou minjian zhenxi wenxian*, vol. 15, 263-430. I plan to write a stand-alone article to closely read this handbook.

⁵² *Ibid*, 374. *Shanghai beike*, 236.

⁵³ *Huizhou minjian zhenxi wenxian*, vol. 15, 358.

⁵⁴ For Johor in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Koh, “Moving People and a Prelude to Colonialism.”

Kalimantan) were also good, northern and southern Siam (Thailand) offered different qualities of products, those from Annam (Vietnam) were inferior, and those from Taiwan were not only inferior but black. Besides them, according to this handbook, there were also edible bird's nests from Luzon, Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, Liaodong, Batavia, and Japan, but these nests were all packed by rattan baskets instead of being put together on a rattan string. Thereafter, it notes that these nests would be assorted in Suzhou and divided into four grades with different trademarks (Figure 3.5).⁵⁵

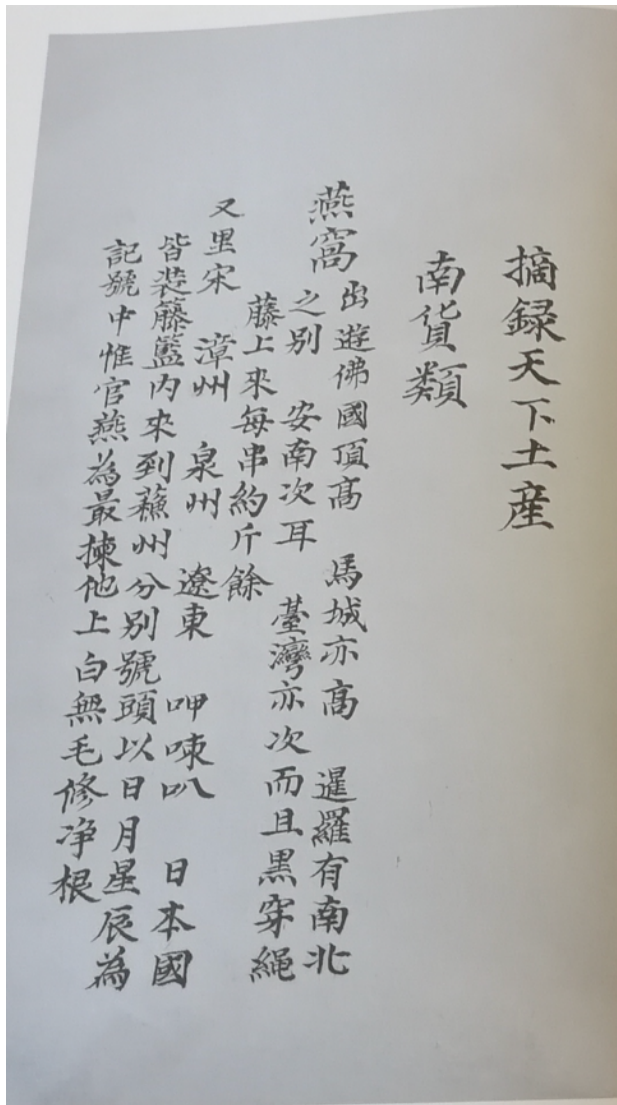


Figure 3.5 A Huizhou merchant handbook of southern goods, original size unknown (ca. 1784-1820s).

⁵⁵ *Huizhou minjian zhenxi wenxian*, vol. 15, 293-294.

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Source: *Huizhou minjian zhenxi wenxian*, vol. 15, 293.

Such sophisticated commercial knowledge about an edible exotic supposedly from the sea indicates that the southern goods trade had become highly professional and competitive. Commodities were supplied from rivalling sources across the China Seas. Traders had to understand the preferences of consumers and offer the most desirable and affordable commodities. For promoting their goods, some traders began to issue flyers. One such flyer dating from the late eighteenth century was even circulated to Japan, showing that a “long-established” trading house in Zhapu, a port city to the south of Suzhou, offered all kinds of southern and northern goods as well as sea taste from “the two oceans” (the East and West Ocean Routes in the Chinese junk trade network) (Figure 3.6).

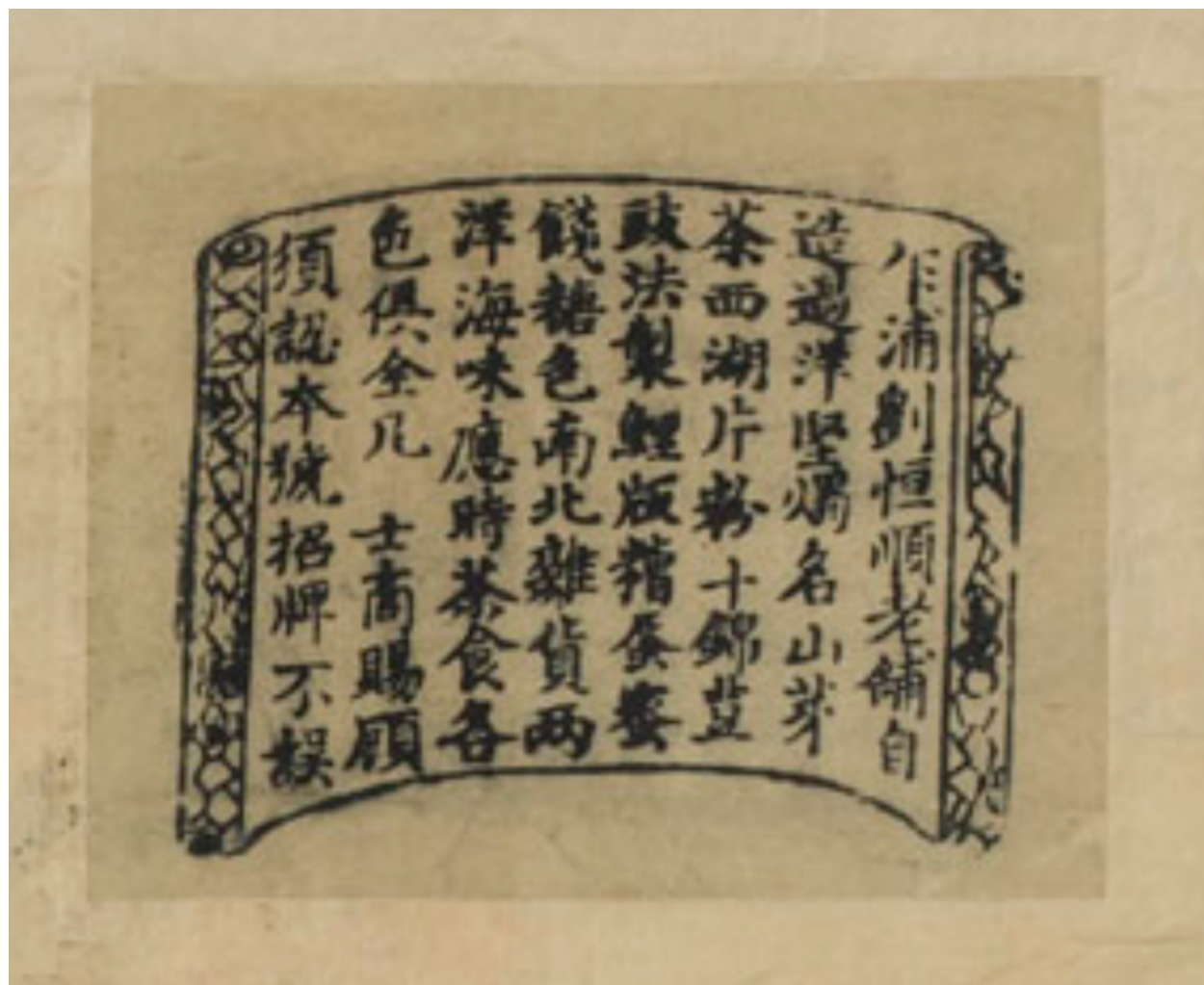


Figure 3.6 A flyer by a trader in Zhapu (ca. late eighteenth century, original size unknown).

Source: Waseda University Library, 文庫 08 J53, 惜字帖, vol. 2, fol. 22.

As a result of these changes, by the eighteenth century, smelly salted fish had become desirable sea taste, and the markets of smelly salted fish had become respectable department stores. The ancient derogatory term, *baoyu*, also lost its function in everyday life and was invested with a new meaning. It was observed by an erudite scholar-official, Xie Zhaozhe (1567-1624), in the early seventeenth century, that his contemporary northerners loved abalones, but they strangely called them *bao* (鮑). He tried to make sense of this mistake from a phonetic perspective, pointing out that the pronunciation of abalone (鮑 pronounced *fu* in modern Chinese and *biuk* in ancient Chinese) was like smelly salted fish 鮑 (*bao*).⁵⁶ About two centuries later, another learned scholar, Hao Yixing (1757-1825), who was from a principal abalone-producing area, Dengzhou, also pointed out that his contemporaries in Beijing called abalones *baoyu*.⁵⁷ In his treatise on marine creatures, he found it ridiculous to confuse abalones with smelly salted fish merely because of their similar pronunciation.⁵⁸

Xie and Hao were not the first to raise this issue. For their similar pronunciations, a phonetic confusion between abalones and salted fish had been long lingering in China. A no longer extant dietetic guide, authored by a Tang physician and quoted by a tenth century Japanese medical compilation, indicates that by the Tang period, people had already begun to mix *fu* (*biuk*) and *bao*. However, besides this isolated case, Chinese written sources are consistent in distinguishing these two terms.⁵⁹

Yet, by the eighteenth century, the semantic shift of *bao* from salted fish to abalones had become a matter of fact. The aforementioned merchant handbook only refers to abalones as *baoyu* (鮑魚) without evoking its original name *fu* (鮑魚). It uses *bao* as a generic term for all types of commercially

⁵⁶ Xie, *Wuzha zu*, *juan* 9, 259.

⁵⁷ Hao, *Shaishu tang bilu*, *juan* 3:45a.

⁵⁸ Hao, *Haicuo yijuan*, 7a.

⁵⁹ Tanba, comp., *Ishinbō*, *juan* 30, 639. Nakahashi, “*Cui Yuxi shijing no kenkyū*.”

traded abalones, such as horseshoe *bao* (*mati bao* 馬蹄鮑) referring to dried abalones as big as horseshoes.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, for dried and salted fish, the handbook uses not *bao*, but the aforementioned more agreeable term, *xiang*.⁶¹

Therefore, although learned scholars, like Xie and Hao, insisted on the classical meaning of *baoyu*, in everyday life, this term had lost its connotation as smelly salted fish, becoming instead a generic term for abalones. We may consider that, besides their phonetic affinity, a precondition for such a complete semantic shift was that by the eighteenth century, preserved seafood, now known as sea taste, was no longer perceived by Chinese consumers as distasteful, but, as we will discuss soon, had become an essential part of Chinese high cuisine. The negative connotations of *baoyu* hence became meaningless to most consumers, who instead used this term for a completely different marine product, abalones, which, albeit also preserved and dried, had since long been perceived as a top delicacy in China.

3. Broths and Sea Delicacies

Through the trade of sea taste, preserved seafood became widely available to inland consumers, and a seafood culture shared by both coastal and inland communities emerged in China. In this culture, preserved seafood also did not only end up as substitutes for fresh seafood, but out of it some top sea delicacies would rise to redefine high cuisine in China. A recent article by Lin Yu-ju points out that in nineteenth-century Taiwan, a place with renowned fisheries, what was preferred by local wealthy families was not locally abundant fresh seafood, but expensive preserved seafood imported from mainland China.⁶² This seemingly unnatural dietary preference can also be identified in the

⁶⁰ *Huizhou minjian zhenxi wenxian*, vol. 15, 302-303.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 305-306.

⁶² Lin, “Jinkou daoxiang.”

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aforementioned late eighteenth-century cookery book by Yuan Mei, in which the top sea delicacies were nearly all preserved.⁶³ In comparison, delicacies made of fresh fish, either from rivers or the sea, were categorised under the rubric of “river delicacies” (*hexian* 河鮮) and tiered below the sea delicacies.⁶⁴ Among these sea delicacies, the most important, as suggested by Nie Huang at the end of the seventeenth century, were edible bird’s nests, sea cucumbers, shark fins, and abalones.⁶⁵ They were also ranked as the top four in Yuan Mei’s recipe collection.

How did this small group of preserved seafood rise to top delicacies? Among them, only abalones were long documented in Chinese sources. At least since the first century CE, abalones had been a well-known delicacy, craved by several famous rulers in ancient China.⁶⁶ For the iridescent inner layer of their shells, abalones had also been used as a medicine for brightening eyes since at least the fourth century CE.⁶⁷ By the Northern Song period, strong demand further stimulated industrial production along the Shandong Peninsula in North China. Su Shi (1037–1101), who once held a post there, described local collectors diving into the cold waters of the North China Sea and chiselling abalones from a rocky seabed. Once ashore, they ground their shells, boiled them, removed the shells, and dried the meat. For long-distance trade, merchants would pickle abalones with dregs (*zao* 糟) or oil.⁶⁸ By the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, those preserved abalones from Shandong had been sold in the imperial capital, Kaifeng.⁶⁹

⁶³ Yuan, *Suiyuan shidan*, 40-44. The only uncertain item was scallops, which were mainly from a place close to the Lower Yangzi region, Ningbo, and were preferably served in a fresh status. Kuo, “Xianqing de chi,” 69-78.

⁶⁴ Yuan, *Suiyuan shidans*, 45-47.

⁶⁵ Nie, *Haicuo tu*, *juan 2*, 186-187.

⁶⁶ Wang, “Zhongguo gudai haichan zhenpin,” 78-80.

⁶⁷ Ge, *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, *juan 15*, 274; Su, *Xinxiu bencao*, *juan 16*, 234. For the medical function of abalones, see also Tsurumi, *Namako no me*, 530-532.

⁶⁸ Su, “Fuyu xing.”

⁶⁹ *Chongxiu zhenghe jingshi zhenglei beiyong bencao*, *juan 20*, 416.

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Whereas abalones enjoyed a long reputation of being a top sea delicacy, edible bird's nests, sea cucumbers, and shark fins had no such a tradition to claim. They instead emerged from obscurity around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Among them, only the shark fins had a “pre-history” to trace, as Chinese consumption of sharks was long documented. Su Song, in his mid-eleventh century drug survey, noted that southerners identified two types of sharks, of which those of a larger size and with a saw-like snout were more delicious (Figure 3.7). He also noted that the southerners preserved their meat with salt and ground off their sandy surface and turned their skin into a delicious dish. Over half a century later, Kou Zongshi noted that shark skin was used for decorating saddles and swords.⁷⁰ Yet, none of these sources mentioned the fins. The first *materia medica* paying attention to shark fins came centuries later. Li Shizhen's 1596 *Systematic Materia Medica* for the first time noted that contemporary southerners highly appreciated the dorsal and pelvic fins of sharks, because their taste was “fatty and delicious” (味並肥美).⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid, *juan* 21, 434.

⁷¹ Li, *Bencao gangmu*, *juan* 44, 2469.

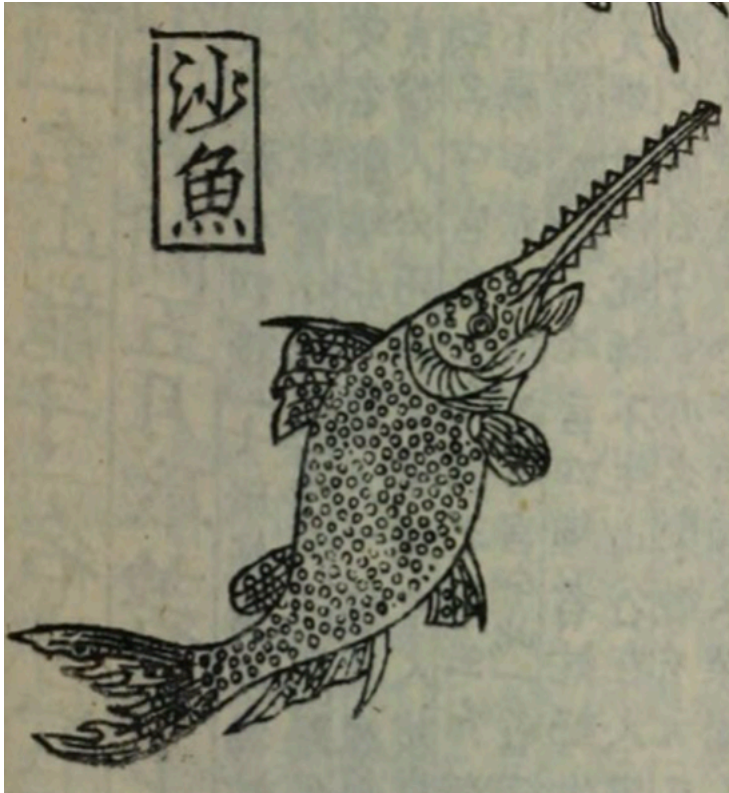


Figure 3.7 Illustration of a saw-like shark from the mid-eleventh century drug survey.

Source: *Chongxiu zhengbe jingshi zhenglei beiyong bencao*, juan 21, 434.

Why did the previously unremarkable fins become “fatty and delicious” by the age of Li Shizhen? After a thorough survey of Chinese sources, a pioneering researcher in this field, Feng Lijun, suggests that the earliest textual evidence concerning Chinese consumption of shark fins is from the mid-Ming period, in a poem by a prominent scholar-official, Shao Bao (1460-1527).⁷² Shao composed this poem sometime between 1516 and 1527 when he retired to his hometown in the Lower Yangzi region.⁷³ The poem shows that he first stripped the fin(s) into fine silver-like filaments and then seasoned them with fresh Chinese chives (*jin* 韭菜).⁷⁴ This operation, namely, dividing fins into filaments, was known as the most basic step for preparing the shark fins.⁷⁵

⁷² Feng, “Qingdai Zhongguo yu Dongnanya de yuchi maoyi,” 85.

⁷³ Shao Bao enjoyed this dish in a pavilion, Haitian Pavilion, in his academy, Erquan Academy, in Wuxi. That academy was built by Shao in 1516 when he retired. Shao, *Rongchun Tang xuji*, juan 2:3b; Hua, “Erquan shuyuan.”

⁷⁴ Shao, *Rongchun Tang xuji*, juan 2:3b.

⁷⁵ Feng, “Qingdai Zhongguo yu Dongnanya de yuchi maoyi,” 86.

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Why was it necessary to divide the fins into filaments? Whereas there is no contemporary record about how it exactly worked in the early sixteenth century, a cookery book dating from the mid-eighteenth century, *Notes from Awakening Garden* (*Xingyuan lu* 醒園錄), describes this process to a great detail:⁷⁶

Method for boiling shark fins (煮魚翅法)

Preparation

Thoroughly soak a piece of dried shark fin, and boil it until soft enough to be able to be ripped by hand. Put the boiled fin into cool water. Thereafter, one can remove its bone and skin, and strip it into bundles of filaments, which shall remain interconnected instead of being completely divided into separate threads. These stripped filaments shall be dried and stored in a porcelain container.

Cooking

By the time of cooking, take a certain amount of processed shark fin in accordance with the number of bowls one is going to serve. Soak it for half a day, boil it once or twice, and wash it. It is better to mix it with boiled pork or chicken shreds. Add Manchurian wild rice stem (*xianggu*, *Zizania latifolia* 香菰), together with oil and garlic, and stir-fry it several times. Add a little water and cook until it smells good. Thereafter, add broth, just enough to cover it, add vinegar, and make it boil several times. Add a little water with flour, add spring onion stem, and make it boil again.

Dividing fins into filaments was, therefore, an important step in the time-consuming preparation that transformed the strongly structured dried shark fins into soft and edible fibrous tissue (Figure 3.8).

⁷⁶ Li, *Xingyuan lu*, *juan shang*, p. 30.

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That transformation demanded repeated soaking, boiling, and drying. Through these operations, the original flavour of the shark fins, if there was any, had all but disappeared. What remained were bundles of filaments, dried, resilient, elastic, and ready to absorb any flavour offered by broths and seasonings.



Figure 3.8 A piece of nearly dried shark fin.

Source: Photo by the author in Makassar, 2020. The author denounces shark finning and is working on the demystification of this unethical, exotic foodway.

While demanding different level of preparations, the other three top sea delicacies also need to go through a basic process of soaking or boiling, known in Chinese as *fa* (rising, growing, or expanding 發), before being ready to cook. This process is necessitated by the texture of these sea delicacies. As we can find in a Chinese dried seafood market, all the four top sea delicacies are deeply dried and have fibrous (shark fins and edible bird's nests) or gelatinous (edible bird's nests, sea cucumbers, and abalones) texture. Before cooking, they have to be soaked with water and carefully washed. It helps

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remove unpleasant impurities and odours and soften their structure. In this process, they are also deprived of their original flavour, and their fibrous or gelatinous texture swells immensely through water absorption. Thereafter, they will be re-invested with flavour from a delicately prepared broth, which pervades the hydrophilic texture of their meat and largely replaces the previously absorbed water. As a result, the taste of a cooked sea delicacy ultimately depends on the flavour of the broth they absorb, as well as the chewy structure of their own meat.

Yuan Mei's late eighteenth-century recipes elaborated on how this cooking technique worked for these four top sea delicacies specifically. Abalones, for their tough meat, first, need to be cut into thin slices before cooking and thereafter can be cooked together with chicken broth and tofu. Shark fins can either be cooked with ham and chicken broth, together with fresh bamboo shoots and sugar candy, or with chicken broth and white radish strips. In the former case, less chicken broth is needed because the ham already has a strong flavour. In the latter case, the shark fins have to be divided into fine strips so that they can intermingle with sliced white radish. More dependent on the flavour of broths are sea cucumbers. For covering a fishy smell, they need to be first boiled with a meat broth three times, and thereafter to be stewed with a broth of meat and chicken, together with shiitake (*xiangxun*, *Lentinus edodes* 香菇) and wood ear, until very tender. The rule is that if you want to treat a guest with sea cucumbers, you have to start stewing them a day ahead. A relatively fast method to prepare sea cucumbers is to first chop sea cucumbers into small pieces and then stew them with a chicken broth, together with diced bamboo shoots and shiitake. The most subtly flavoured sea delicacy is the extremely expensive edible bird's nests. The edible nests have to be first poured with boiled spring water, and black impurities picked out. Thereafter, they shall be infused with three hot broths made separately of young chicken, ham, and fresh *möög* mushrooms (*mogu*, *Tricholoma mongolicum* 蘑菇).

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When the nests absorb these broths thoroughly and their colour turns jade-like, they are ready to serve.⁷⁷

Therefore, after being prepared for cooking, all four top sea delicacies had to be boiled with one or multiple broths. Among them, chicken broth was most commonly used. This technique of making broth for imparting flavour was long-established in Chinese cuisine. The 1330s *Extensive Records of the Forest of Affairs* collected two recipes for making broths. One was a stock made of mutton and bones and the other was a broth made of mushroom. In both cases, they were made of strained soups. For instance, the mutton stock was added with blood water to induce coagulation of impurities. Thereafter, foam, oil, and sediments would be removed. The purpose was therefore to keep only desirable flavour, while leaving no impurity. Whereas the flavour of the mushroom broth is unmentioned, the desirable flavour of the mutton stock was noted as “sweet and hot-spicy” (*tianla* 甜辣). The sweetness, according to the recipe, was from the mutton and bones, and the hot spiciness was from a spice, ginger.⁷⁸

Before being widely used for cooking sea delicacies, these broths had likely already played an important role in Chinese cuisine for making noodle soups or dumpling soups. The aforementioned 1504 recipe collection compiled by a lady of a wealthy family in the Lower Yangzi region, to whom we will return soon in the next section, contains four recipes for making noodle soups. Among them, one soup used a “fatty broth” (*feizhi* 肥汁) of chicken or goose, to be seasoned with pepper, Sichuan pepper, soy sauce, spring onion stem, and a little vinegar.⁷⁹ We may imagine that the same “fatty broth” could be also used for infusing stripped shark fins, turning the latter into a flavour-rich and fatty dish.

⁷⁷ Yuan, *Suiyuan shidan*, 40-44.

⁷⁸ *Xinbian zhuantu zenglei qunshu leiyao shilin guangji* (Xiyuan jingshe edition), *bieji*, *juan* 10:8b.

⁷⁹ Song, *Songsbi yangsheng bu*, *juan* 2, 37.

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This may help explain why Li Shizhen at the end of the sixteenth century noted that shark fins tasted “fatty and delicious” (*feimei* 肥美).

What was relatively underdeveloped in these pre-seventeenth-century broth recipes is a key gustatory concept, *xian*, which would play a definitive role in integrating these broth-saturated sea delicacies into an aestheticised taste-scape of Chinese literati. While in present-day Chinese cuisine, *xian* (鮮) can be roughly translated as “savoury” or “the flavour of umami”, the term originally referred to the pleasant flavour of fresh food, such as recently caught fish, recently butchered animals or recently harvested vegetables.⁸⁰ Therefore, when fresh seafood became popular in the Northern and Southern Song periods, they were generically referred to as *baixian* (海鮮), literally meaning “sea fresh”.⁸¹ However, a strange phenomenon in the eighteenth century was that this term was also used for preserved seafood. Yuan Mei used *baixian* as the generic term for all these above-mentioned sea delicacies, which as we have seen were nearly all preserved, and noted that his contemporaries loved dishes made from this kind of *baixian*.⁸²

Why was preserved seafood referred to as “sea fresh” (*baixian*) by eighteenth-century Chinese elite consumers? For understanding this puzzling contradiction, we need to closely engage a critical reconceptualisation of *xian*. A well-studied topic in Chinese food history is that in the seventeenth century, along with the ascendancy of literati-style cuisine, *xian* was elevated by Chinese literati as the most refined flavour.⁸³ A definitive work was a jotting by a celebrated literatus, Li Yu (1611-1679), *Sketches of Idle Pleasures* (*Xianqing ouji* 閒情偶寄, 1671), which repeatedly referred to *xian* as an idealised flavour for the literati’s aestheticised taste.⁸⁴ Li gave no clear definition of *xian* but attempted to make

⁸⁰ Yi, “Xianwei yu quanli,” 10-11.

⁸¹ Ibid, *passim*.

⁸² Yuan, *Suiyuan shidan*, 40.

⁸³ Wu, “Ming Qing yinshi wenhua zhong de ganguan yanhua yu pinwei suzao,” 71-72

⁸⁴ Li, *Xianqing ouji*, *juan* 5, 234-258

sense of it through comparisons. In a comparison between vegetables and meat, he suggested that the most pleasant flavour of vegetables that could surpass the flavour of meat was *xian*.⁸⁵ In describing the taste of fish, he suggested that the most valuable flavour of fish was *xian* and the secondary was fatty (*fei* 肥). Li attempted to correspond these two flavours to two different ways of cooking techniques. For attaining the *xian* flavour, Li recommended to “make a soup through purely boiling” (清煮作湯) a fish, indicating that it aimed to arouse the natural flavour from the fresh fish itself. By contrast, for some fish whose desirable flavour was fatty, Li suggested to “make minced fish through heavy cooking” (厚烹作膾), indicating that the fatty flavour was relatively heavy.⁸⁶ With these examples, Li conceived of *xian* as being pure, light, and close to the natural flavour of food.

This conception of *xian* was followed by eighteenth-century literati such as Yuan Mei.⁸⁷ Yuan also frequently referred to *xian* in the *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment*. He further proposed that *xian* surpassed blandness, which was a highly esteemed and sublimed concept in literati’s aesthetics.⁸⁸ Yuan contended that blandness (*danbo* 淡薄) had little merit, because “if one only covets blandness, then it is better to drink [clear] water” (如徒貪淡薄，則不如飲水矣).⁸⁹ Instead, a clear and *xian* (*qingxian* 清鮮) flavour was the “true flavour” (*zhenwei* 真味) of food. Therefore, by the age of Yuan Mei, *xian* developed into a “perfect flavour” embodying literati’s pursuit of pure and true flavour of food, subtly balanced between heavy flavour and blandness.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 235-236.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 253.

⁸⁷ Wu, “Ming Qing yinshi wenhua zhong de ganguan yanhua yu pinwei suzao,” 76-77.

⁸⁸ Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*.

⁸⁹ Yuan, *Suiyuan shidan*, 20.

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The literati's enthusiastic reception of this elusive flavour, *xian*, shall be understood in the context of the tension between heavy flavours and blandness as we have seen in chapter two. Before Li Yu, this tension was essentialised in an influential literati-style cookery book authored by Gao Lian (ca. 1527-1603), *Discourse on Food and Drink* (*Yinzhuàn fúshí jiān* 飲饌服食賡, 1591). In this work, Gao noted that “one shall abide by blandness in everyday dietary practices, lest things that are supposed to nourish you instead harm you, and the five flavours become villains in the five internal [organs]” (人於日用養生，務尚淡薄，勿令生我者害我，俾五味得為五內賊。)⁹⁰ This concern, as discussed in chapter two, was based on the correspondence theory that associated the five flavours with the five palace viscera and the five body elements. The theory, however, had no place for the *xian* flavour, which was outside the conventional framework of the five flavours: sweetness, sourness, saltiness, bitterness, and acidity (spiciness). Unfettered by the restrictions imposed by the correspondence theory, *xian*, as a pleasant flavour with connotations of being fresh, pure, and natural, offered a common ground for reconciling human desires for gustatory enjoyment and the literati's aesthetical and medical concerns, becoming a “perfect flavour” worth to be pursued with utmost vigour and art.

As a pure and natural flavour of food, *xian* was also elusive. Before the invention of MSG (*umami*) in the twentieth century, there was no condiment specifically carrying a *xian* flavour. The only solution was to make a broth to absorb this flavour from a typically *xian* food ingredient. Li Yu proposed bamboo shoots, *xun* mushrooms (蕈, a kind of mushrooms mainly from Southeast China), and shrimp as *xian*-flavour-rich bases for making broths. Through such broths, their *xian* flavour could be transmitted to other food.⁹¹ Li even pointed out that cooks often stole *xian* flavour from food by

⁹⁰ Gao, *Yinzhuàn fúshí jiān*, 1. For further discussions on Gao Lian's literati-style cuisine, see Su, *Culinary Arts in Late Ming China*.

⁹¹ Li, *Xianqing ouji*, *juan* 5, 236-237, 254.

adding extra water during boiling, which helped them keep more *xian*-flavour-rich broth for themselves, at the expense of the diners whose food lost *xian* to the extra water added by the cooks.⁹²

An anonymous cookery book roughly dating from the later eighteenth century, *Collection of Seasoning Ding Vessels* (*Tiaoding ji* 調鼎集), provided professional advices about how to make clear and *xian*-flavour-rich broths.⁹³ It shows that the gist was to purify a broth until it carried a desirable flavour without any impurity. That was achieved by transforming unwanted suspense into removable sediment and foam, by adding certain catalysts, including sweet sauce (*tianjiang* 甜醬), soy sauce (*jiangyou* 醬油), shrimp paste, and eggs. It also shows how different broths served different gustatory functions. Pork broth had a fatty flavour, ham broth had a good smell, and pig's trotter broth served as a thickener. Chicken broth, which was most commonly used for cooking the sea delicacies was now, together with duck broth, defined as possessing a *xian* flavour.⁹⁴ Spices were also used for seasoning these broths, often being encased in a cloth bag to avoid decomposing during boiling and leaving impurities. Among them, pepper was recommended, most interestingly, no longer for hot spiciness, but for enhancing *xian*.⁹⁵ *Xian* even became the generic title for all of the above-mentioned broths, which were collectively known as “*xian* broths made of all sorts of things” (諸物鮮汁).⁹⁶

Thanks to these delicately prepared broths, *xian* was no longer an elusive flavour carried only by fresh food. It could be materialised by a broth. The broth could then infuse the hydrophilic texture of the sea delicacies, transmitting the *xian* flavour to the latter and turning them into “sea fresh”. This

⁹² Ibid, 253.

⁹³ This voluminous book is anonymous and undated. Before being edited for publication in the 1980s, it was preserved as a manuscript in the Beijing Library (the National Library of China). Several places in this book refer to a salt merchant, Tong Yuejian, who was active in Yangzhou during the Qianlong period (1736-1795), indicating that Tong was likely a compiler. *Tiaoding ji*, editor's preface.

⁹⁴ Ibid, *juan* 1, 54-56.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 55-57.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 56.

chain of flavour transmission explains why the deeply preserved seafood became top sea delicacies and were strangely referred to as “sea fresh”. After all, in a culinary culture that favoured the subtle *xian* flavour, the adaptable nature of the deeply dried seafood became its merit. Without a remarkable flavour by themselves and prone to richly absorb liquid, they could be perfectly re-invented by a broth with a desirable *xian* flavour imparted from chicken, mushrooms, or bamboo shoots. Yuan Mei was well aware how desperately these so-called sea delicacies depended on taste of others. He ridiculed that an official for showing his generosity extravagantly offered four taels of purely boiled edible bird’s nests in a big bowl, making them but insipid. Using this example, Yuan admonished that those expensive rarities, such as sea cucumbers and edible bird’s nests, had no merit in terms of their own flavours. The flavours of ordinary food ingredients, such as chicken, pork, fish, and ducks, were instead essential.⁹⁷

4. Transforming Edible Nests: From Hot-Spicy Stir-Frying to “Clear and Replenishing”

Yet, we shall also keep in mind that the feature of being both taste-neutral and hydrophilic is widely shared by many dried edible things. The question is: Why was it only this small group of edibles, supposedly from the sea, rising to the top delicacies? In the previous section, we have attempted to address the rise of abalones and shark fins. The former had a long-established reputation of being a top delicacy in China. The latter also had a long “pre-history”, as the other parts of sharks had since long been consumed in South China as delicacies. The rise of shark fins in the sixteenth century was an extension of that food culture, facilitated by the new technique that transformed the strongly structured dried fins into soft and delicately flavoured filaments.

⁹⁷ Yuan, *Suiyuan shidan*, 24-25.

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What remains unaccountable is the two foremost sea delicacies, namely, edible bird's nests and sea cucumbers. In both Yuan Mei and Nie Huang's texts, edible bird's nests and sea cucumbers were arranged ahead of shark fins and abalones, indicating that they were the top two. Their rising trajectories are, however, an enigma. Till the end of the fifteenth century, there is no record of their uses in Chinese cuisine.⁹⁸ Thereafter, sources concerning edible bird's nests emerge from the beginning of the sixteenth century, and then sea cucumbers begin to be recorded from the late sixteenth century. They gradually become richly documented in Chinese sources in the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, the records have become abundant. With these sources, in the remaining two sections of this chapter, we are going to first focus on edible nests and then sea cucumbers, to deeply contextualise their rise in relation to critical changes of Chinese medical and food culture from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries.

To begin with, we need to clarify that edible bird's nests by their nature are not a seafood. They are solidified saliva secreted by several species of swiftlets in the *Aerodramus* genus, who use it for building nests along a steep cliff or inside a cave. The natural habitats of these swiftlets are the mountainous and forested areas in Southeast Asia, as well as a few locations in the Far South of China.⁹⁹ Feeding on small insects, their life cycle is completely independent from the sea, except that their nests are often laid in coastal caves or on coastal cliffs, accessible to collectors approaching from a sea route.

With only a putative link to the sea, edible nests, in their advent in Chinese cuisine, also did not assume a culinary function as a sea delicacy but were instead integrated by a spicy foodway as a sort

⁹⁸ An often cited "earlier" work, *Guidance of Food and Drink* (飲食須知 *yinshi xuzhi*), mentioning both edible bird's nests and sea cucumbers is a fake book, falsely attributed to Jia Ming (14th century) by a publisher in the late seventeenth century. Cheng, "Yuan Jia Ming yu Qing Zhu Benzong *Yinshi xuzhi* zhenwei kao," 143.

⁹⁹ Salmon, "Le goût chinois pour les nids de salanganes," 252-253. For the expansion of the commodity frontiers of edible bird's nests in Southeast Asia, see Blussé, "In Praise of Commodities"; Feng, "Luelun Ming Qing shiqi Zhongguo yu Dongnanya de yanwo maoyi."

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of dried vegetable. The key testimony to this ignored “spicy stage” of edible nests in Chinese foodways is the aforementioned 1504 recipe collection, which is also the first Chinese written source referring to edible bird’s nests. A remarkable feature of this work is that it was based on culinary knowledge of a female cook, Madam Zhu (朱太安人 fl. later 15th - early 16th c.). She orally transmitted recipes to her son, Song Xu (fl. early 16th c.), who compiled them into the private collection of the Song family in Songjiang (present Shanghai) in 1504.¹⁰⁰ These recipes were later published as a cookery book under the title of *The Life-Nourishing Collection of the Song Family* (*Songsbi yangsheng bu* 宋氏養生部).

According to her son’s preface, Madam Zhu learned these recipes when accompanying her father and later on, her husband, on their long-term services in a number of posts across the Ming Empire, including the imperial capital, Beijing.¹⁰¹ This recipe collection, therefore, reflects the culinary culture of the political elites of the Ming Empire in the late fifteenth century, namely, the period immediately before its compilation. It has three recipes referring to edible nests. The first is, most strikingly, our familiar hot-spicy stir-fried chicken.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Song, *Songsbi yangsheng bu*, preface, 1-3.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. For the background of the Song family, see Li, “Songjiang fu Songsbi jiazu shixi ji wenxue chengjiu gaishu.”

¹⁰² Song, *Songsbi yangsheng bu*, *juan* 3, 119.

Hot-spicy stir-fried chicken (*la chao ji* 辣炒雞).

Chop chicken into pieces, put them into a heated pan, and stir-fry them until their colour changes. Add water and fully cook them. Season them with sauce, pepper, Sichuan pepper, and spring onion stem, and fully cook them again.

During cooking, one can also add following “harmonise things” (*hewu* 和物):

Cooked chestnuts, cooked water caltrops (*ling* 菱), edible bird’s nests, *möög* mushrooms (*Tricholoma mongolicum*), *jizong* mushrooms (a kind of termite mushrooms from Yunnan 雞棕), *tianhua* mushrooms (a kind of oyster mushrooms from Mount Wutai 天花菜), *yangdu* mushrooms (a kind of true morels from North China 羊肚菜), *haisi* seaweed (a kind of marine alga 海絲菜), fresh *xun* mushrooms, rock-ear lichen (*shi'er* 石耳), konjac jelly (*juruo*, jelly made from the starchy corms of konjac, *Amorphophallus konjac* 蒟蒻), asparagus, lesser bulrush roots (*puruo*, starchy roots of *Typha angustifolia* 蒲蒻), dried bamboo shoots, cucumbers, carrots, jelly fish, and dried arms and tentacles of cuttlefish (*mingfu xu* 明脯須).

What makes this spicy dish unique is a wide choice of the so-called “harmonising things”, functioning as toppings to garnish the stir-fried chicken. These toppings consisted not only of ordinary food ingredients widely available in China, such as chestnuts, water caltrops, dried bamboo shoots, cucumbers, and carrots, but also some rarities only accessible to privileged consumers, such as those mushrooms and edible bird’s nests. In the fifteenth century, the mushrooms used in this recipe, such as *jizong* mushrooms, *tianhua* mushrooms, and *yangdu* mushrooms, were precious rarities offered by local society from remote parts of the Ming Empire as tributes to the imperial court, often at an

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enormous cost.¹⁰³ These rarities were all preserved in dried form, as the recipe suggested that before being used for cooking, those mushrooms and edible nests should first be “washed with warm water” (溫水洗). Elsewhere, the cookery book also advised storing edible nests together with these mushrooms close to a fireplace, indicating that they were all dried.¹⁰⁴

The second recipe also suggests cooking edible nests and precious mushrooms in a spicy foodway, known as “stir-frying with oil and sauce” (*you jiang chao* 油醬炒).¹⁰⁵

Stir-frying with oil and sauce (*you jiang chao* 油醬炒)

1. Heat oil, add water and *tianhua* mushrooms, and then add sauce and vinegar.

or

2. Heat oil, add sauce, vinegar, and water, and heat again. Thereafter, add *tianhua* mushrooms.

Both shall be seasoned with spring onion stem, pepper, Sichuan pepper, and a little pine-nut oil or apricot kernel oil. Both can be further garnished by fresh vegetables (*xiancai* 鮮菜).

The *tianhua* mushrooms can be substituted with one of the following items as the main ingredient of this dish:

Jizong mushrooms, edible bird’s nests, *yangdu* mushrooms, *möög* mushrooms, *haisi* seaweed, *xun* mushrooms, bamboo shoots, Chinese yam, Manchurian wild rice stems, asparagus ...

(In total, 35 types of “vegetables” are recommended)

¹⁰³ Lu, “Mingdai jingji shiyongjun,” 65-67. For drugs as local tribute in the Ming dynasty, see Bian, *Know Your Remedies*, 49-73.

¹⁰⁴ Song, *Songsbi yangsheng bu*, *juan* 6, 227.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, *juan* 5, 167.

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Arranged in the section of “vegetables and fruits” (菜果), this recipe was for stir-frying broadly defined vegetables, including mushrooms and edible nests, in a bouillon made of water, oil, and sauce, instead of directly in hot oil.¹⁰⁶ This technique could help keep the vegetables unscathed, and make it richly flavoured by first being coated by oil and sauce during stir-frying and then being seasoned with spices, including pepper and Sichuan pepper. By the end, the dish would also carry a numbing and hot-spicy flavour like the “hot-spicy stir-fried chicken”.

The third recipe is entitled “preparing a soup for cut-up meat” (*gengzi zhi* 羹裁製).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ It is known as “*luotang chao*” (drop into bouillon and stir-fry) in modern Chinese cuisine. Sabban, “Court Cuisine in Fourteenth Century Imperial China,” 186, note 14.

¹⁰⁷ Song, *Songshi yangsheng bu*, *juan* 5, 195-196.

Preparing a soup for cut-up meat (*gengzi zhi* 羹裁製)

A General Guideline

For preparing a new soup, first boil water, and then add the following broths in sequence: 1) A small amount of clear broth of bamboo shoots and gourds; 2) A small amount of clear broth of chicken, goose, and pork; 3) A small amount of clear broth of fresh shrimp. Keep the fire, spoon out oil on the surface, and filter out the sediment at the bottom (Blood water or water mixed with duck eggs can be added to induce coagulation). Add soy sauce, and a little amount of powdered pepper and Sichuan pepper. Remove oil and sediment again...

The following (vegetable) items can be added to the soup (one item for one soup):

Fermented bean curd, safflower seed paste, sesame curd, tofu, *tianhua* mushrooms, *yangdu* mushrooms, *jizong* mushrooms, edible bird's nests, *haisi* seaweed, konjac jelly, *möög* mushrooms, *xun* mushrooms, rock-ear lichen ...

(In total, 56 (vegetable) items are recommended)

Following cut-up meat can be added to the soup:

Fresh and fatty beef, mutton, and pork are the best. They can either be ripped and sliced to thin pieces and soaked in salted water, and then be “quickly boiled” (*weixun* 微燻) in the simmering soup, or thoroughly boiled [without being divided into thin pieces]. Chicken and goose can also be cut into pieces and boiled. Fish, shrimp, and crabs shall be quickly boiled. The meat of pigeons, deer, rabbit, muntjac deer, wild boars, and gazelles is also recommended.

This was therefore a guideline for preparing a hot-pot meal, with a menu including base soup, vegetables, and meat. Edible nests and these precious mushrooms functioned as vegetables to be

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boiled in the base soup. The soup, albeit being a mixture of several clear broths, was interestingly not for imparting a subtle flavour through slow cooking but served as a hot-pot soup to have “vegetables”, including edible nests, absorb a relatively strong flavour to be a companion for meat.

Reading these recipes, we may find that in late fifteenth-century China, edible nests assumed a culinary function distinct from the sea delicacies in eighteenth-century Chinese cuisine. We may even doubt whether Madam Zhu would agree that edible nests were a sort of sea delicacy, as in her recipes, the nests were not aligned with seafood but akin to these precious mushrooms and classified as “vegetables”, mainly for carrying relatively spicy and heavy flavours.

In the following two centuries, edible nests would leave this spicy food culture behind, to be reconceptualised as a top sea delicacy embodying a core aesthetic value of the literati. This shift began with an epistemological turn. Before the sixteenth century, Chinese literati’s knowledge about the sea was largely confined to trade and geography, as there had been a number of important geographic books, such as the aforementioned works by Zhou Qufei, Zhao Rukuo, and Wang Dayuan, on commodities and trading ports of overseas countries.¹⁰⁸ In comparison, knowledge about marine creatures was relatively underdeveloped, as although *materia medica*, such as the *Illustrated Materia Medica* (1061) by Su Song, incorporated substantial information about seafood, there was no specific treatise dedicated to marine creatures.

A pioneering work that kindled Chinese literati’s interest in the natural world of the sea was Huang Zhong (1474 - 1553)’s *Words of the Sea* (*Hai yu* 海語, 1536). This work was based on information from seafarers in Canton, from whom, Huang learned not only about commodities and trading ports,

¹⁰⁸ These works are extensively referred to in chapter two.

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but also fish, animals, and birds in the marine world.¹⁰⁹ From them, Huang learned an account about edible-nest swiftlets as follows:

Sea swiftlets are as big as crows. They return in the spring and pile up their nests on aged rocks and steep cliffs, which are [made of] white seaweed. Island barbarians wait until their departure in the autumn. They then make poles with spades to fetch the nests to sell. The nests are called the nests of sea swiftlets. They are carried by ocean-going ships to Canton. Wealthy families value them as a precious item for banquets. Their price is soaring.

海鷺大如鴉，春回，巢於古巖危壁葺壘，乃白海菜也。島夷伺其秋去以修竿接铲，取而鬻之，謂之海鷺窩，隨舶至廣，貴家宴品珍之，其價翔矣。¹¹⁰

This is the first Chinese description of the nature of edible nests. It would be soon followed by many curious accounts. In 1585, Wang Shimao (1536-1588), a prominent official serving in Fujian, proposed an alternative account that the swiftlets, while crossing the sea, carried their nests. When they felt tired, they let the nest float and had a rest on it.¹¹¹ This account was discredited by another official serving in Fujian, Tu Benjun (1542-1622). In his 1596 *Commentaries on a Miscellany of Marine Creatures in Fujian* (*Minzhong haicuo shu* 閩中海錯疏), Tu affirmed Huang Zhong's account with an adaptation that the nests were made of small fish, instead of white seaweed.¹¹² Thereafter, in the 1610s, Zhang Xie (1574-1640), a local literatus from southern Fujian, denied Wang Shimao's account, and explained that the swiftlets ate seaweed and spit out it for making the nests.¹¹³

Whereas these descriptions were merely about the nature of edible nests, new accounts emerging from the beginning of the seventeenth century would use the natural knowledge about edible nests to

¹⁰⁹ Papelitzky, "Editing, Circulating, and Reading Huang Zhong's *Hai yu*."

¹¹⁰ Huang, *Hai yu*, *juan* 2:4b; Salmon, "Le goût chinois pour les nids de salanganes," 256.

¹¹¹ Wang, *Minbu shu*, 11a, 681.

¹¹² Tu, *Minzhong haicuo shu*, *fulu*, 35

¹¹³ Zhang, *Dongxi yangkao*, *juan* 1, 15.

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redefine their medical nature. Sometime around 1607, an official serving in Quanzhou, Chen Maoren (fl. late 16th and early 17th centuries), noted that “in a place beyond the outer sea of Fujian and close to foreign countries” (閩之遠海近番處) there were “golden-thread swiftlets” (*jinsi yan* 金絲燕), who nested in rocky places near tideland and pecked “silk-worm sea snails” (*cangluo* 蠶螺). These sea snails had two strong white sinews on their back, like the silk of maple silkworms. These sinews could “replenish body depletion and stop exhaustion with dysentery” (可補虛損已勞痢). The swiftlets digested the meat of the sea snails but not their sinews, which were instead vomited out together with saliva to build the nests.¹¹⁴ This account systematically offered a plausible interpretation of the nests’ white and fibrous texture and their medicinal functions for the first time. In the 1690s, Nie Huang, after dissecting an edible nest, decided to follow this account, and depicted two golden-thread swiftlets attending a white nest in a rocky place near tideland (Figure 3.9).¹¹⁵

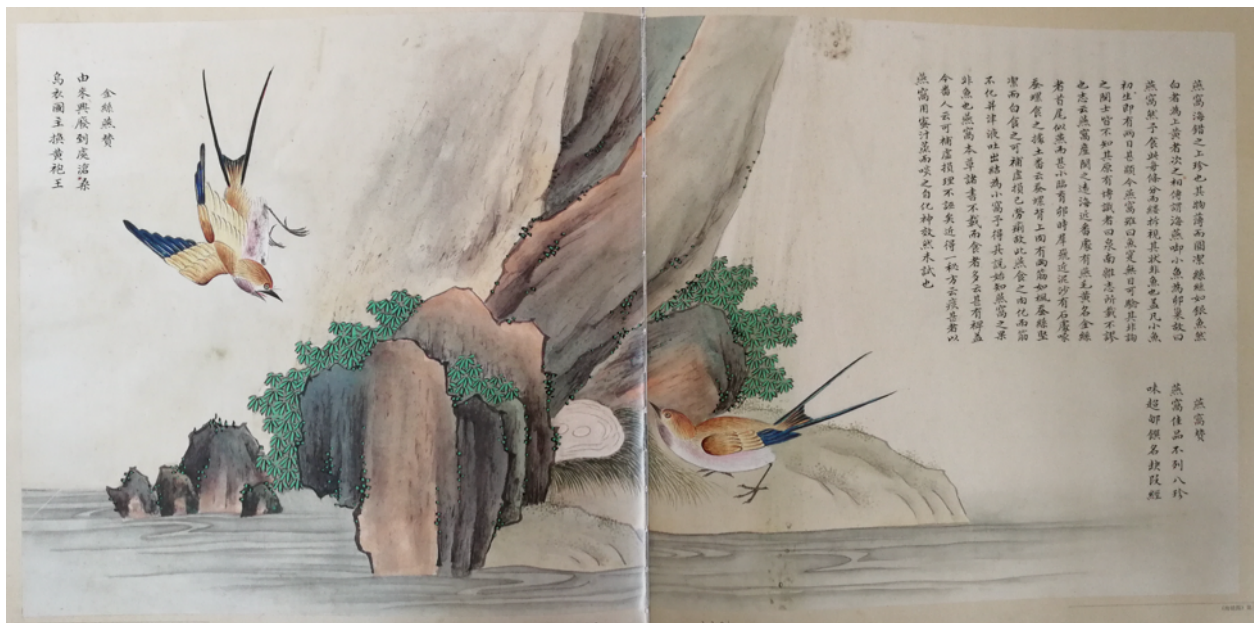


Figure 3.9 Nie Huang's illustration of edible bird's nests (1698).

Source: Nie, *Haicuo tu*, *juan* 3, 228-229.

¹¹⁴ Chen, *Quannan zazhi*, *juan shang*, 5. This work was undated. Its author was serving in Quanzhou in the beginning of the seventeenth century and the work refers to events in 1606 and 1607. Ibid, *juan xia*, 35-36.

¹¹⁵ Nie, *Haicuo tu*, *juan* 3, 228-229.

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Whereas this sea-snail account conceptualised edible nests as a replenishing agent, another account emerging from the end of the seventeenth century would make them not only replenishing but also “clearing” (*qing* 清). First recorded by a prominent scholar, Qu Dajun (1630-1696), in Canton in the 1680s or 1690s, it shows that there was some *hai fen* (海粉), literally meaning “sea powder”, on seashore rocks, accumulating and forming moss-like structures.¹¹⁶ The swiftlets first ingested it and then vomited it out for making the nests. This process, according to Qu Dajun, was transformative. *Hai fen* originally had a cold nature and a salty flavour. After being digested by the swiftlets, the cold nature was transformed into warm, and the salty flavour was transformed into sweet. Through this transformation, Qu believed that the nests acquired medicinal properties of “clearing phlegm” (*qingtan* 清痰) and “stimulating appetite” (*kaiwei*, literally meaning “opening up the stomach” 開胃).¹¹⁷

Why did this *hai fen* link matter? *Hai fen* (sea powder) by its nature is the egg masses laid by some shell-less molluscs commonly known as sea hares (Anaspidea). After being properly dried, these egg masses become string- and powder-like and their colour turns yellowish-green. The Chinese in the sixteenth and seventeenth century perceived *hai fen* to be sea slug excretion.¹¹⁸ Nie Huang depicted it as greenish waste excreted by a slug-like creature after it ingested marine algae (Figure 3.10).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Qu, *Guangdong xinyu*, *juan* 14, 391.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Tu, *Minzhong baicao shu, fulu*, 35; Nie, *Haicao tu, juan* 2, 194-195.

¹¹⁹ Nie, *Haicao tu, juan* 2, 194-195.



Figure 3.10 Nie Huang's illustration of *haifen* (1698).

Source: Nie, *Haicuo tu*, *juan 2*, 194-195.

From the fifteenth century, *haifen* emerged as an important medicine for treating viscous and heat-pattern phlegm, because of its salty flavour and cold nature. It was first touted by an important medical text, compiled by physicians who followed Zhu Zhenheng's teachings, in the second half of the fifteenth century, together with *haishi* (porous lava 海石), as a principal medicine for treating tough phlegm.¹²⁰ Thereafter, Wang Lun (1453-1510), the self-styled follower of Zhu Zhenheng, proposed a “dissolving phlegm pill” (*huatan wan* 化痰丸) in his famous *Miscellaneous Writings of Enlightened Physicians* (*Mingyi zazhu* 明醫雜著). The pill was made of eight overwhelmingly cooling drugs, including *haifen*, whose function, according to Wang, was for “softening hard” (*ruanjian* 軟堅) phlegm with its salty

¹²⁰ *Danxi xinfa*, *juan 2*, 177.

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flavour.¹²¹ This idea of using salty flavour to soften hard phlegm was based on the correspondence theory of the *Inner Canon*, which defined efficacies of the five flavours as follows:

Acrid [flavour] disperses (辛散);

Sour [flavour] pulls together (酸收);

Sweet [flavour] relaxes (甘緩);

Bitter [flavour] hardens (苦堅);

Salty [flavour] softens (鹹溼).¹²²

Besides that, *hai fen* also benefited from a nomenclatural link to clamshell powder (*ge fen* 蛤粉). Clamshell powder was recommended by Zhu Zhenheng as a perfect medicine for treating phlegm, with “a capacity to bring down [heat phlegm], dissolve [tough phlegm], soften [hard phlegm], and desiccate [wet phlegm]” (能降能消，能軟能燥).¹²³ In practices, physicians preferred powder made of sea clamshells (*hai ge fen* 海蛤粉), because they believed freshwater clams had no contact with the sea and hence carried no salty flavour for softening. As a result, *hai ge fen*, whose abbreviation was *hai fen*, became the most popular trading name of clamshell powder on the drug market, causing confusion with *hai fen*.¹²⁴ Another confusion was with *haishi* (porous lava). A late sixteenth-century medical text suggested *haishi* (porous lava) was the root of *hai fen*. Only the *hai fen* that naturally grew out of *haishi* was the best. It also indicated that clamshell powder was artificially made through burning and therefore not as good as the naturally grown *hai fen*.¹²⁵ Because of these connections, the three therapeutics from the sea, namely: *hai fen*, *haishi*, and clamshell powder, became interchangeable for

¹²¹ Wang, *Mingyi zazhu*, *juan* 1, 36-39.

¹²² *Huangdi neijing suwen*, *juan* 22, 73; Unschuld, *Huang Di nei jing su wen*, 298.

¹²³ Zhu, *Bencao yangyi buyi*, 71.

¹²⁴ Li, *Bencao gangmu*, *juan* 46, 2534-2535.

¹²⁵ Li, *Yixue rumen*, *juan* 2, 243.

treating phlegm.¹²⁶ *Hai fen*, for its connotation of being natural growth from the sea, was preferred by some contemporary physicians.

The phlegm that *hai fen* treated was different from the phlegm that pepper used to treat as we have seen in chapter one. There was a division between cold and heat patterns of phlegm in Chinese medicine. The phlegm caused by cold was supposedly waterier and clearer, known as cold phlegm (*bantan* 寒痰) or clear phlegm (*qingtan* 清痰).¹²⁷ It demanded warming medicines such as pepper. Yet, what Zhu Zhenheng and his followers mainly focused on was the phlegm caused by heat and fire. It was more viscous and muddier and demanded cooling and softening agents. Wang Lun conceptualised that “in regard to phlegm caused by rising fire, lung *qi* is unclear, cough at times occurs, and old phlegm and pent-up phlegm bind to become sticky lumps, which stagnate in the throat, difficult to be vomited and coughed out” (若夫痰因火上，肺氣不清，咳嗽時作，及老痰、鬱痰，結成粘塊，凝滯喉間，吐咯難出).¹²⁸ For such a symptom, *hai fen*, being both salty and cold, would be welcomed as a softening and cooling agent to clear the tough and muddy phlegm caused by fire and heat.

The idea of *hai fen* being able to clear tough and muddy phlegm contributed to the conceptualisation of *qing* (清). Tu Benjun in his 1596 *Commentaries on a Miscellany of Marine Creatures in Fujian* noted *hai fen*'s “flavour is very *qing* (clear). It can bring down phlegmatic fire” (其味甚清，可降痰火).¹²⁹ Nie Huang, in his 1698 *Album of a Miscellany of Marine Creatures*, also noted that *hai fen* had “a *qing* flavour and a cold nature” (味清性寒).¹³⁰ Later, a prominent eighteenth-century physician Wu Yiluo (ca. 1704 - 1766), noted in his *Materia Medica Conforming to New Standards* (*Bencao congxin* 本草從

¹²⁶ *Danxi xinfa*, *juan* 2, 177, *juan* 5, 300; Li, *Yixue rumen*, *juan* 2, 243.

¹²⁷ *Danxi xinfa*, *juan* 2, 177.

¹²⁸ Wang, *Mingyi zazhu*, *juan* 1, 36-37.

¹²⁹ Tu, *Minzhong baicao shu*, *fulu*, 35.

¹³⁰ Nie, *Haicuo tu*, *juan* 2, 194-195.

新, 1757) that *haifen* “is sweet, cold, and salty. It clears hard, tough, and heat phlegm” (甘寒而鹹。清堅、頑、熱痰).¹³¹

The interchangeable use of *qing* as a medical property and as a flavour points to the rich connotations of this term in Chinese culture. *Qing* can be translated as clear or pure, associated with the nature of clear water, in contrast to *zhuo* (濁), which means muddy or muddy water. In line with that, *qing* can also refer to a clear flavour that is bland and simple, like the taste of clear water. Like other sea delicacies, *haifen*, usually being traded in dried form and used for making soup, would lose its original salty flavour after being carefully washed and infused with clear water.¹³² It hence gave rise to a gustatory perception of being bland, simple, and clear, corroborating its medical function of clearing tough and muddy phlegm, making *haifen* an essentially clear (*qing*) thing.

Being conceptualised as characteristically *qing* notwithstanding, *haifen* could not become a top sea delicacy without going through a further transformation. Its culinary use was hindered by a strong concern over its cold nature. That concern had become intense after the publication of Wang Lun’s popular *Miscellaneous Writings of Enlightened Physicians*. Critics of this work cast doubt on the overwhelmingly cooling nature of the drugs it used. In terms of the “dissolving phlegm pill”, Xue Ji (1487-1559), as a major commentator of *Miscellaneous Writings of Enlightened Physicians*, pointed out that all the ingredients in this pill, including *haifen*, belonged to the categories of sweet, bitter, salty, and cold agents. “Although they can soften hard [phlegm], break pent-up [phlegm], dissolve phlegm, and bring fire down, isn’t there also peril of damaging the stomach?” (雖能軟堅開鬱、化痰降火，而不無損胃之禍乎?).¹³³ In the early seventeenth century, another influential physician, Zhao Xianke

¹³¹ Wu, *Bencao congxin*, *juan* 11, 168.

¹³² For soup made of *haifen*, see Qu, *Guangdong xinyu*, *juan* 24, 597.

¹³³ Wang, *Mingyi zuzhu*, 37.

(fl. early 17th century) criticised that in Wang Lun's prescription for dissolving phlegm, "cold and cool items are many, mostly causing damage to the stomach" (寒涼之品甚多，多致損胃).¹³⁴ At the end of that century, a leading physician, Zhang Lu (1617-1700), in his famous *Encountering the Origin with the Canon of Materia Medica* (*Benjing fengyuan* 本經逢原, 1695), pointed out that *haifen* was used for cooking and could dissolve poisonous heat (解毒熱), "but its nature is cold and slimy. The one whose spleen and stomach are in a state of depletion should not eat it" (但性寒滑，脾胃虛人勿食).¹³⁵

Concerns such as this remind us of the medical culture of warming the centre, which, as we have discussed in chapter one, perceived warming, instead of cooling, agents as essential to the well-being of the digestive system. Facing criticisms from Liu Wansu (fl. later 12th c.) and his followers, this culture survived through a major adaptation. It turned away from spices and aromatics, which were usually defined as "acrid and warm" (*xinwen* 辛溫), and embraced relatively mild therapeutics that were "sweet and warm" (*ganwen* 甘溫). The most influential physician in this reformed warming culture was Li Gao (1180-1251). Li's medicine focused on the spleen and the stomach, as he conceptualised these two organs as essential to the treatment of all internal damage (*neishang* 內傷).¹³⁶ For spleen and stomach-associated internal damage, Li recommended sweet drugs. He suggested that such an ailment "can only be cured when one uses sweet and warm medicines to replenish the centre and raise yang, and sweet and cold [medicines] to drain fire" (惟當以甘溫之劑，補其中，升其陽，甘寒以瀉其火，則愈).¹³⁷ He also proposed sweet and warm medicines for replenishing the primordial *qi* of the spleen and the stomach, which was essential to effectively absorbing vitality from

¹³⁴ Zhao, *Yiguan*, *juan* 4:18a.

¹³⁵ Zhang, *Benjing fengyuan*, *juan* 4, 235-236. Zhang Lu was a leading physician in a current of learning that aimed to reestablish medical authority through a return to the classics. Bian, *Know Your Remedies*, 111-112.

¹³⁶ Li, *Piwei lun*, 557-601.

¹³⁷ Li, *Nei wai shang bianhuo lun*, *juan zhong*, 542.

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food.¹³⁸ Li's preference for sweet drugs drew on a theory in the *Inner Canon*, which indicates that when there is an illness in the spleen, "the spleen wants relaxing. Quickly consume sweet [flavour] to relax it, use bitter [flavour] to drain it, and sweet [flavour] to replenish it" (脾欲緩，急食甘以緩之，用苦寫之，甘補之。).¹³⁹ This account supported the use of drugs of a sweet flavour for treating spleen ailments and for replenishing the spleen. As the spleen and the stomach were considered closely tied, the remedy could be extended to the stomach.

This concept helps decipher the fantasy of *haijen*'s metamorphosis into edible nests. According to Qu Dajun, after being ingested and vomited by the swiftlets, the salty and cold *haijen* would be transformed into sweet and warm edible nests. The transformation goes as follows:

Haijen's nature is cold, but it turns warm after being swallowed and vomited by the swiftlets; *haijen*'s flavour is salty, but it turns sweet after being swallowed and vomited by the swiftlets. Its shape and nature are thoroughly transformed. Therefore, it can clear phlegm and stimulate appetites.

海粉性寒，而為燕所吞吐而暖。海粉味鹹，而為燕所吞吐而甘。其形質盡化，故可以清痰開胃云。¹⁴⁰

Through this sophisticated imagination, edible nests became transformed *haijen*. They inherited *haijen*'s intrinsic clearness (*qing*), got rid of its unwanted cold nature, and became instead a sweet and warm digestive.

Qu Dajun was not alone. Contemporary to him, Zhang Lu, in his 1695 *Encountering the Origin with the Canon of Materia Medica*, offered a slightly different account. It shows that the swiftlets built

¹³⁸ Ibid, *juan zhong*, 542, 546; *juan xia*, 549; Li, *Pivei lun*, *juan shang*, 568; *juan xia*, 586-588.

¹³⁹ *Huangdi neijing suwen*, *juan 22*, 70; Li, *Pivei lun*, *juan shang*, 572.

¹⁴⁰ Qu, *Guangdong xinyu*, *juan 14*, 391.

their nests with *hai fen*, which “receive yang and harmonious *qi* from the sun and wind” (得風日陽和之氣). That influence transformed the salty and cold nature of *hai fen* into sweet and neutral, so that it could no longer harm the stomach. Moreover, this transformation, according to Zhang, was also a process through which “metal and water generate each other” (金水相生). It has a link to Zhu Zhenheng’s “discourse on the Heaven and *qi* belonging to metal” (天氣屬金說), in which Zhu defined that the Heaven (sky) and *qi* (air) both belong to metal.¹⁴¹ As the Heaven (sky) and *qi* (air) belong to metal, the upward movement of *hai fen* to becoming edible nests can be understood as a movement through which water (the sea) generates metal (*qi* or the Heaven).

It represents a harmonious relation because, according to the five-circulatory-phase theory, metal is the mother of water, if water turns to generate metal, it means they are benefiting each other. Following this metaphor, Zhang suggested edible nests could help “kidney *qi* move upward to nourish the lungs” (腎氣上滋於肺). As, according to the five-circulatory-phase theory, the kidneys correspond to water and the lungs correspond to metal, the upward movement of *hai fen* from the sea (water) to becoming edible nests in the sky (metal) is therefore like the movement from the kidneys (water) to the lungs (metal). This movement represents a harmonious relation: The kidneys (water) as the child return to nourish the mother lungs (metal), representing mutual benefit.¹⁴² Therefore, Zhang concluded that “among food items, (edible nests) are the most tamed and benign” (食品中之最馴良者).¹⁴³

Behind these complicated fantasies and metaphors, we may find that the making of edible nests as a top therapeutic was a result of the elite physicians and literati’s deep engagement with some critical

¹⁴¹ Zhu, *Gezhi yulun*, 31-32.

¹⁴² For more details about how the idea that “metal and water generate each other” works in the treatment of lung ailments, see Zhao, *Yiguan*, *juan* 4:17b-26b (particularly, *juan* 4:23a).

¹⁴³ Zhang, *Benjing fengyuan*, *juan* 4, 236.

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debates on Chinese medical theories. For them, the imagined metamorphosis of edible nests from a certain marine creature was a subject open to new interpretations. Throughout the seventeenth century, these interpretations continuously contributed to new medical properties of edible nests. Thereafter, into the eighteenth century, these seventeenth-century accounts would be amalgamated and integrated. For instance, in the mid-eighteenth century, Wu Yiluo collected a number of these accounts in his *Materia Medica Conforming to New Standards* (1757) and made a summary as follows:

Edible nests immensely nourish the *jin* of the lung, dissolve phlegm, stop coughing, are replenishing and clearing, and are the holy therapeutic for recuperating from depletion detriment and exhaustion-illness with consumption. For any illness that cannot be cleared and moved downwards because of the depletion of the lung, they can be used as a remedy. They [also] stimulate appetite, stop exhaustion with dysentery, and help children recover from smallpox papules.

大養肺陰，化痰止嗽，補而能清，為調理虛損癆瘵之聖藥。一切病之由於肺虛，不能清肅下行者，用此皆可治之。開胃氣，已勞痢，益小兒痘疹。¹⁴⁴

In this account, the properties for treating lung illness were developed from the concept of clearing phlegm, which, as we have seen, originated from the *haifen* link. The property of “stimulating appetite” (開胃氣) drew on Qu Dajun’s interpretation of the metamorphosis from *haifen* to edible nests, which transformed cold and salty *haifen* into warm and sweet edible nests, making the latter a restorative for the spleen and the stomach. The idea of using edible nests for “replenishing” and for “stopping exhaustion with dysentery” (已勞痢) stemmed from the metamorphosis from sea snails to edible birds, which, as mentioned, assumed that the sinews of sea snails could “replenish body depletion and

¹⁴⁴ Wu, *Bencao congxin*, *juan* 16, 220.

stop exhaustion with dysentery”. The efficacy for “helping children recover from smallpox papules” (益小兒痘疹) drew on a 1667 account by Zhou Liangong, to whom we will return in the next section. That account indicated that edible nests of a red colour was most difficult to obtain and could “helping children recover from smallpox papules”.¹⁴⁵ Combining these accounts, Wu Yiluo proposed a concept that the edible nests were essentially “replenishing and clearing” (補而能清).

By the second half of the eighteenth century, while *hai fen* had become marginal because of the concerns over its cold nature, edible nests, benefiting from these imagined transformations, emerged as a top restorative sea delicacy embodying clearness (*qing*). In Zhao Xuemin’s (fl. 1753-1803) *Supplement to Systematic Materia Medica (Bencao gangmu shiyi 本草綱目拾遺)*,¹⁴⁶ there is a note against a popular practice of cooking edible nests with chicken broth, for a concern that this practice would potentially “disturb [edible nests] essential nature of being clear and replenishing” (亂其清補之本性).¹⁴⁷ Yuan Mei also developed a strong distaste for anything that might negatively influence the “clear” nature of edible nests. He objected to the practice of mixing minced crab meat and roe (*xiefen 蟹粉*) with edible nests as the strong flavour of the former would disqualify the latter’s clearness.¹⁴⁸ He also ridiculed that “vulgar cooks” (*suchu 俗廚*) preferred to scald heat lard on edible nests, because it polluted this “clearest thing” (至清之物).¹⁴⁹ He instead recommended cooking edible nests with winter gourd in order to “let clear things match each other” (以清入清).¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Zhou, *Min xiaoji*, *juan* 1, 41.

¹⁴⁶ The exact date of this work is hard to establish. It was prefaced in 1765, but some information was apparently supplemented thereafter. For an in-depth study of this work, see Bian, “An Ever-Expanding Pharmacy.”

¹⁴⁷ The paratext indicates that this note was cited from Wu Yiluo’s *Bencao congxin*, but we cannot find it in Wu’s original text. It is more likely that Zhao himself added this note but made an editing mistake attributing it to Wu. Zhao, *Bencao gangmu shiyi*, *juan* 9:33a.

¹⁴⁸ Yuan, *Suiyuan shidan*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 40-41.

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Yuan Mei's seemingly fastidious taste was cultivated in a food culture where edible nests had a preeminent role to play. From the eighteenth century, edible nests had become the top delicacy representing the so-called Manchu and Han banquets (*Man Han xi* 滿漢席), serving the ruling elites of the Manchu Qing Empire, including Emperor Qianlong (1733–1796).¹⁵¹ In this banquet culture, edible nests were not always cooked in the clear way as Yuan suggested. What we may find is a soup of edible nests with pork or chicken shreds,¹⁵² a stew of edible nests with sugar,¹⁵³ a dish mixing edible nests with quickly boiled chicken mince,¹⁵⁴ or a meatball coated with edible nests to be boiled in a clear broth.¹⁵⁵ Yet, the spicy tradition had disappeared, as there was, after all, no longer a dish using edible nests for hot-spicy stir-frying, for stir-frying with oil and sauce, or for a hot pot.

5. Conceptualising Sea Cucumbers: Towards a Perfect Therapeutic

While saturated with delicately prepared broth and framed by literati's aestheticised taste-scape, these sea delicacies were also global things. They were produced and circulated from littoral society marginal or even external to Chinese literati culture. The distance between these two cultures, on the one hand, made these sea delicacies exotic to Chinese elite consumers, and, on the other, also attracted Chinese literati to conceptualise their dietary functions with exoticised knowledge about their nature. Whereas the imaginative transformation of *haifen* to edible bird's nests has already demonstrated such an example, sea cucumbers, as the last top sea delicacy we have yet to closely examine, provide a better-documented case about how an invertebrate animal from the bottom of the sea was conceptualised as a perfectly restorative in China.

¹⁵¹ Zhao, *Manban quanxi yuanlin kaoshu*, 229-303; Waley-Cohen, "Food and China's World of Goods," 296-299.

¹⁵² Li, *Xingyuan lu, juan shang*, 29; Li, *Yangzhou huafang lu, juan 4*, 106.

¹⁵³ *Qinggong yushan*, vol. 1, 105, 189, 192.

¹⁵⁴ *Tiaoding ji, juan 2*, 63.

¹⁵⁵ Li, *Xingyuan lu, juan shang*, 30.

To begin with, a long-debated question in sea cucumber history is when they became part of Chinese cuisine. Akamine Jun, a leading anthropologist in this field, suggests that this process took place around the late sixteenth century.¹⁵⁶ A similar point of view was proposed by a Chinese historian, Dai Yifeng.¹⁵⁷ Thereafter, through an in-depth survey of Chinese sources, another Chinese historian, Feng Lijun, proposed a number of earlier sources.¹⁵⁸ These sources, however, demand further scrutiny. For instance, an isolated source allegedly dating to the Northern Song period is in fact a 1636 recompilation which, as its preface acknowledges, had undergone some major reorganisations.¹⁵⁹ Another source often falsely attributed to a late fourteenth-century author, Jia Ming, has been discovered as a fake work forged by a book dealer in the late seventeenth century.¹⁶⁰

Revisiting this issue, I suggest that, instead of narrowly depending on these apocryphal sources, we shall also take evidence from the broader world into consideration, which can help us contextualise when, how, and why sea cucumbers emerged as a sea delicacy in Chinese cuisine. This approach is inspired by pioneering works by two Japanese anthropologists, Tsurumi Yoshiyuki and Akamine Jun, who have convincingly shown that sea cucumbers connected a world from Hokkaido to Australia, of which China was merely one of the constituent parts.¹⁶¹ Following that model, this section goes a step further to critically examine how sea cucumbers, which were first documented in Japan and Korea, were appropriated by Chinese elite consumers from the late sixteenth century and conceptualised as extraordinary ginseng from the sea with perfect efficacies for solving a theoretical impasse in Chinese medicine.

¹⁵⁶ Akamine, “*Namako* and *iriko*,” 25.

¹⁵⁷ Dai, “Yinshi wenhua yu haiwai shichang,” 83-85.

¹⁵⁸ Feng, “Renzhi, shichang yu maoyi,” 49-56.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 49-50. Shao, comp., *Menglin xuanjie*, xu:7b-9a, juan 17:25a. For the textual history of this dream interpretation book, see Vance, “Textualizing Dreams,” 38-56

¹⁶⁰ Cheng, “Yuan Jia Ming yu Qing Zhu Benzong *Yinshi xuzhi* zhenwei kao.”

¹⁶¹ Tsurumi, *Namako no me*; Akamine, *Namako o aruku*.

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In this world of sea cucumbers, Japan keeps the earliest documentation. An unearthed wooden tablet shows that Nara as the imperial capital of Classical Japan received from Noto, a peninsula along the Japan Sea, six catty dried sea cucumber (*iriko* 煎海鼠, literally meaning “boiled sea rats” or “boiled *ko*”) in 732. Thereafter, a 927 code regulated that Noto was obliged to pay sea cucumber guts (*konowata* 海鼠腸, literally meaning “sea rats’ guts” or “*ko*’s guts”) as a tribute to the imperial court.¹⁶² In both cases, the written documents refer to sea cucumbers with two Chinese characters 海鼠, *haisbu* (Mandarin Chinese pronunciation) or *kaiso* (Japanese *kanji* pronunciation), literally meaning “sea rats”. Given that Japanese has a completely different *kana* syllable, *ko* (コ), for sea cucumbers, which has no corresponding *kanji* character, we have good reason to assume that the *kanji* rendering of “sea rats” was a loanword introduced by a Sinicised literate-culture.¹⁶³

It is unclear why the Sinicised Japanese elites in the eighth century employed this Chinese term for sea cucumbers. A missing link might be some no longer extant Chinese texts which were appropriated by Japanese literate culture in an early stage but left no trace in China. A comprehensive tenth-century Japanese compilation of Chinese medicine, *Ishinbō* (*Formulas from the Heart of Medicine* 医心方, 982), cites two such archaic Chinese texts for sea rats. The first text is a dietetic guide entitled after its author, Cui Yu 崔禹 or Cui Yuxi 崔禹錫, dating to circa 650-891.¹⁶⁴ It shows that sea rats have a salty flavour, a very cold nature, and no toxicity. They “replenish the *qi* of the kidneys and remove hundred joints wind” (主補腎氣，去百節風). Their body has tens of small protuberances. “Dried sea rats are of a warm nature, control diarrhoea, stimulate hair growth, and treat yellow *dan*-illness and emaciation” (干者，溫，主下利，生毛髮，黃疸疲瘦). “Sea rats’ guts are especially

¹⁶² Kakiuchi and Kigoshi, “Noto no namako,” 64.

¹⁶³ Tsurumi, *Namako no me*, 534-535.

¹⁶⁴ Nakahashi, “*Cui Yuxi shijing* no kenkyū.”

effective for curing haemorrhoids” (其腸尤療痔為驗). Another text is elusively titled *Seven-Fascicle Canon* (*Qijuan jing* 七卷經), showing sea rats have no special medical function. Only raw sea rats may have a remedy for internal fatigue (*neidan* 內瘕).¹⁶⁵

These two texts appear in fascicle 30 of *Isbinbō*. That chapter consists of natural things indigenous to Japan. The compiler, Tanba Yasuyori, elaborated their medical properties with heavily adapted Chinese sources and Japanese oral pronunciations, with the purpose to integrate Chinese medicinal knowledge into Japanese practices.¹⁶⁶ We may find a similar function for these two Chinese texts. They supported Japanese dietary practices of eating fresh sea cucumbers (*namako*), dried sea cucumbers (*iriko*), and sea cucumber guts (*konowata*).

They also indicate that before the tenth century sea cucumbers used to be part of Chinese cuisine and might even be known as sea rats in China. However, for some unknown reasons, these two texts leave no trace in the mainstream medical publications sponsored by the Northern Song imperial state around the eleventh century and at a certain point became irrelevant to Chinese dietary and medical practices.¹⁶⁷ As a result, Chinese literati culture lost the term of “sea rat”, as well as its associated food and medical culture, and would import a new term from a very different sea cucumber culture.

This new term first emerged in Korea. The early evidence is from *King Sejong’s Treatise on Geography* (*Sejong sillok chiriji* 世宗實錄地理志, 1454), which showed that five places in Kyōngsang Province (慶尙道), including Tongnae (東萊縣 the county where Pusan is situated), had sea cucumbers as a local product (*tuchan* 土產) or a local tribute (*tugong* 土貢) to the Korean court.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Tanba, *Isbinbō*, *juan* 30, 638.

¹⁶⁶ Mayanagi, “*Isbinbō* kan 30 no kiso teki kenkyū.”

¹⁶⁷ For the Northern Song Imperial State’s proactive role in reorganising medical knowledge, see Goldschmidt, *The Evolution of Chinese Medicine*.

¹⁶⁸ *Sejong sillok*, *juan* 150:9b, 27b, 29b, 31a, 32b.

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Facing the island of Tsushima, this region had close ties with Japan and witnessed many cross-strait trading, piratical, and military actions in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.¹⁶⁹ These exchanges might have facilitated a spread of a sea cucumber food culture across the Korean Strait.

This potential cross-strait link notwithstanding, neither of the Japanese names for sea cucumbers, *kanji* and *kana*, managed to cross the Korean Strait. Instead, two new names for sea cucumbers emerged, namely: a literate rendering, *haishen* (海參 or 海蔘), meaning “sea ginseng”, and an oral rendering, *ni* (泥), meaning “mud”.¹⁷⁰ The former appears in official documents, referring to a local tribute or product worth attention from the Korean imperial government. After those few records of “sea ginseng” in *King Sejong’s Treatise on Geography* in 1454, in a new geographic survey dated 1530, “sea ginseng” appeared again as a local product or tribute in many places along the south, east, and west coasts of the Korean Peninsula, indicating the production was rapidly expanding through the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries.¹⁷¹ The usage of mud likely arose from coastal inhabitants’ everyday observation, as some sea cucumbers may change the stiffness of their body and turn into “muddy” jelly when leaving water.¹⁷² This term was recorded in a 1611 Korean cookery book.¹⁷³ Also in the beginning of the seventeenth century, a Korean scholar, in a trip to China, noted that Korean people referred to sea cucumbers as “mud” but Chinese people did not think so.¹⁷⁴

Whereas the oral rendering of mud had no influence in China, the rendering of sea ginseng was enthusiastically adopted by the Chinese, because of the nomenclatural link with ginseng. In Chinese

¹⁶⁹ Robinson, “An Island’s Place in History.”

¹⁷⁰ Heo, *Domundaejag*, 232; Tsurumi, *Namako no me*, 535.

¹⁷¹ *Sinjūng tongguk yōji sūngnam*, *juan* 19:12a, 16b; *juan* 22:3b and 28b; *juan* 23:4a, 20b, 22b; *juan* 25:20a; *juan* 30:7b; *juan* 31:9a, 12b, 20b, 31b; *juan* 32:22a, 33a, 39a, 44a, 49b; *juan* 37:10b, 15b, 23a; *juan* 40:4b, 29b; *juan* 43:44a; *juan* 44:7a, 36a; *juan* 45:2a, 9b, 15a, 20b, 27b, 32b; *juan* 48:8b, 19b; *juan* 49:5b, 12a, 21a, 25b, 29b, 32a; *juan* 50:4a, 10b, 17a, 21a, 27b, 36a, 39b, 48a.

¹⁷² Yi, *Jibong yuseol*, *juan* 20.

¹⁷³ Heo, *Domundaejag*, 232.

¹⁷⁴ Yi, *Jibong yuseol*, *juan* 20.

medicine, ginseng was long perceived as a top medicine able to cure a wide range of illnesses and was one of the most valuable drugs with insatiable demand. It led to long-term overexploitation in its natural habitat in North China. Into the Ming period, the most renowned ginseng land of North China, Shangdang 上黨, was exhausted,¹⁷⁵ the Chinese consumer market became dependent upon supplies from Manchuria and Korea.¹⁷⁶ That shift made the origins of ginseng and sea ginseng closely associated with each other, namely, one from the mountain of continental Northeast Asia and the other from the sea of Northeast Asia.

While ginseng and sea ginseng became entangled in Northeast Asia, Chinese physicians were engaged in a tense debate concerning the clinical use of ginseng. This debate revolved around two rivalling medical cultures, namely, “nourishing yin and bringing fire down” and “warming and replenishing”. It was largely instigated by the aforementioned polemic work by Wang Lun (1453-1510),¹⁷⁷ which criticised his contemporaries’ preference for taking ginseng and astragalus root (黃芪 *huangqi*) for warming and replenishing the body that was depleted by alcohol and sexual indulgence. Wang’s primary concern was that this practice would stir up fire in the body and damage yin. Therefore, he instead touted a “replenishing yin pill” (補陰丸 *buyin wan*) to be taken regularly, in order to keep the kidneys’ minister fire from exhausting yin.¹⁷⁸ This pill theoretically drew on Zhu Zhenheng’s famous discourses on “minister fire” and “yang is in excess, and yin is deficient” as discussed in chapter two.¹⁷⁹ It contains, among other cooling agents, an aquatic, namely, decayed turtle’s shell,

¹⁷⁵ Li, *Bencao gangmu*, *juan* 12, 701.

¹⁷⁶ Wang, “Renshen yuanliu kao”; Nappi, “Surface Tension”; Jiang, *Renshen diguo*; Kim, *Ginseng and Borderland*.

¹⁷⁷ Simonis, “Illness, Texts, and “Schools” in Danxi Medicine”.

¹⁷⁸ Wang, *Mingyi zazhu*, *juan* 1, 14-16.

¹⁷⁹ They are the titles of two important essays in Zhu’s anthology. Zhu, *Gezhi yulun*, 7-8, 28. For the philosophical background of these discourses, see Furth, “The Physician as Philosopher of the Way,” 423-456.

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which was recommended by Zhu Zhenheng as a “perfect” *yin* restorative, because turtles were “a thing of the uppermost yin among yin” (*yinzhong zhibiyin zhibiwu* 陰中至陰之物).¹⁸⁰

This nourishing yin therapy catered to a male audience consisting of well-off literati and merchants who eagerly embraced Zhu Zhenheng’s teachings, in which the body was conceptualised as weak and relatively yin, being vulnerable to social, sexual, and gustatory desires.¹⁸¹ These desires could supposedly instigate the dangerous minister fire in the kidneys, which would burn the waters and yin of the kidneys, leading to ailments and death. As a self-styled follower of Zhu Zhenheng, Wang Lun’s solution was to bring fire down by using cooling agents, in order to keep a balance with the water of the kidneys.¹⁸² Therefore, ginseng, a warm medicine that would raise up yang, should be cautiously used, and cooling medicines, such as decayed turtle’s shell, which could nourish yin, should be promoted.

However, Wang’s opponents, often collectively known as “warming and replenishing” physicians, developed an opposite therapy on the basis of similar theories.¹⁸³ Like the criticisms we have seen against the use of *haifen*, they contended that the therapy that brought fire down with cooling agents would at the same time undermine the digestive system and yang vital force.¹⁸⁴ Their solution was that the nourishing yin therapy should be supported with warming and replenishing medicines that could help keep the digestive system peaceful and yang vital force robust.¹⁸⁵ There was moreover an attempt to interpret the typical warming and replenishing medicine, namely, ginseng, as a balanced panacea that was able to not only raise up yang and replenish vital force, but also give rise to blood

¹⁸⁰ Zhu, *Bencao yanyi buyi*, 71; Zheng, ““Guijia, baigui, guiban” kaobian,” 57-58; Zhang, “Danxi buyin wan,” 99.

¹⁸¹ Furth, *A Flourishing Yin*, 145-151; Zhang, “Danxi buyin wan,” 107-111; Grant, *A Chinese Physician: Wang Ji*, 140-143; Hanson, “Depleted Men, Emotional Women.”

¹⁸² For the affinities between water, kidney, reproduction, and vitality, see Furth, *A Flourishing Yin*, 29.

¹⁸³ Simonis, “Illness, Texts, and “Schools” in Danxi Medicine”; de Vries, “The Dangers of ‘Warming and Replenishing’.”

¹⁸⁴ Zhang, “Danxi buyin wan,” 103-106.

¹⁸⁵ Wang, *Mingyi zazhu*, *juan* 4, 17; Zhao, *Yiguan*, *juan* 4:7a-13a; de Vries, “The Gate of Life,” 169-195.

and yin.¹⁸⁶ However, the tension between the “warming and replenishing” and “nourishing yin and bringing fire down” cultures remained, as it was difficult to argue that a warming and replenishing medicine such as ginseng could directly nourish the water and yin of the kidneys.

Amid this medical debate, sea cucumbers, under the name of “sea ginseng”, emerged in Chinese cuisine. Their earliest occurrence is in a 1591 accusation against the chief military commander of Liaodong, to which we will return in the next chapter. Thereafter, a concise dietary *materia medica*, compiled in 1614, describes sea cucumbers as a marine creature that had sweet and salty flavour, slightly cold nature, and was slimy, nontoxic, and able to moisten the five depot organs and to replenish the body, but should be avoided by those who were suffering from diarrhoea.¹⁸⁷ The early 1640s *Materia Medica of Edible Items* shows that the sea cucumbers considered the most desirable were black, with many rugged outgrowths, about 5-6 *cun* (15-18 cm) long, and very clean. This kind of sea cucumber was “extremely delicious, good at replenishing, and the most precious delicacy among all food” (味極鮮美，功擅補益，穀品中之最珍貴者也).¹⁸⁸

While these dietetic *materia medica* texts presented sea cucumbers merely as a sea delicacy without referring to the ginseng link, another genre of texts, authored by literati who were concerned with the above-mentioned medical debates, began to associate sea cucumbers with ginseng, the kidneys, and male sexuality. In the mid-1610s, Xie Zhaozhe noted:

Sea cucumbers (sea ginseng): The littoral region of Liaodong has them. They are called “men of the sea”, because their shape is like the external genitalia of men, forming a pair with mussels. Their nature is warming and replenishing, able to match ginseng. They are therefore called sea ginseng.

¹⁸⁶ Wang, *Shishan yi'an*, *juan* 1, 66; *fulu*, 111; Grant, *A Chinese Physician*, 69-71.

¹⁸⁷ Mu, *Shimn jiyao*, *juan* 7:15b, 364. For a comprehensive study of this text, see Yang, “Mingke Mu Shixi shiwu jiyao kaolue.”

¹⁸⁸ Yao, *Shimn bencao dianjiao ben*, *juan* 11, 695.

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海參，遼東海濱有之，一名海男子，其狀如男子勢然，淡菜之對也。其性溫補，足敵人參，故名海參。¹⁸⁹

This account evokes two affinities. The first was an erotic pair with mussels. Mussels had since long been known in China as “ladies of the East Sea” (*donghai furen* 東海夫人), because of their hairy vagina-like shape.¹⁹⁰ The recently risen sea cucumbers filled the vacancy as “men of the sea” (*hai nanzi* 海男子) for their male genitalia-like shape. The second affinity, based on the nomenclatural link, associated sea cucumbers (sea ginseng) with ginseng, and appropriated the latter’s reputed efficacy of being warming and replenishing for the former. Together this account implies that sea cucumbers were a kind of warming and replenishing aphrodisiac.

While Xie Zhaozhe’s account only superficially explained sea cucumber’s medical property, a new account emerging from the mid-seventeenth century provided a more sophisticated interpretation of its medical nature. This account was learned by a renowned literatus, Zhou Liangong (1612 - 1672), from an anonymous physician in Weixian (present Weifang, Shandong), likely during the early 1640s when Zhou served as a magistrate in that county. It goes:

Ginseng benefits human beings. Although the types of sandy (*sha* 沙), black (*xuan* 玄), and bitter (*ku* 苦) ginseng have different natures, they are all replenishing. Sea ginseng acquires its name also because it can warm and replenish [the body]. People liken the kidneys to the sea. This creature grows in saline water of the North Sea. Its colour is black. To nourish kidney water with it complies with their affinities. The one that grows in the earth is ginseng and the one that grows in the waters is sea ginseng. Therefore, sea ginseng collected from the Sea of Liao is better.

¹⁸⁹ Xie, *Wuzha zhu*, *juan* 9, 259.

¹⁹⁰ Li, *Bencao gangmu*, *juan* 46, 2545; Nie, *Haicuo tu*, *juan* 3, 258-259.

Ginseng is like human beings; sea ginseng is like the genitalia of men, with no less efficacy than ginseng.¹⁹¹

參益人，沙玄苦參，性若異，然皆兼補。海參得名，亦以能溫補也。人以腎為海，此種生北海鹹水中，色又黑，以滋腎水，求其類也。生于土者為人參，生于水者為海參，故海參以遼海產者為良。人參像人，海參尤像男子勢，力不在參下。

Zhou concluded, “this argument is convincing” (說亦近理). It was convincing to a learned scholar such as Zhou because of its thorough integration with Chinese medical theory. It first made the nomenclatural link between sea ginseng and ginseng meaningful. The Chinese term for ginseng is *renshen* (人參), literally meaning “human (gin 人) *shen* (seng 參)”. Li Shizhen, whose father was a ginseng expert,¹⁹² explained that its original form was 人藎 (also pronounced as *renshen*), literally meaning “human immersion”, because its human-shaped root acquired divine power from long immersion in nature.¹⁹³ However, gradually, the second character “藎”, literally meaning “immersion”, was replaced by a simpler character “參” (both pronounced *shen* in Mandarin Chinese).¹⁹⁴ Thereafter, several other root herbs were also named as *shen*, such as *shashen* (*Adenophora stricta* Miq., sandy ginseng 沙參), *xuanshen* (*Scrophularia ningpoensis* Hemsl., black ginseng 玄參), *kushen* (*Sophora flavescens* Ait., bitter ginseng 苦參), and *danshen* (*Salvia miltiorrhiza* Bunge, red ginseng 丹參). For their different colours, flavours, and texture, these root herbs were associated by Chinese physicians with different medical functions, which supplemented the “warming and replenishing” efficacy of ginseng.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Zhou, *Min xiaoji*, *juan* 2:11b-12a.

¹⁹² Li Shizhen's father, Li Yanwen, composed a treatise on ginseng *Renshen zhuàn* 人參傳 [The story of ginseng], which was substantially quoted by Li Shizhen in his entry for ginseng. Li, *Bencao gangmu*, *juan* 12, 703-704; Unschuld, *Medicine in China: A History of Pharmaceutics*, 145-146; Nappi, *The Monkey and the Inkpot*, 13, 173 (note 101).

¹⁹³ For the implications of ginseng's human-like shape, see Nappi, “Surface Tension.”

¹⁹⁴ Li, *Bencao gangmu*, *juan* 12, 699-700.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, *juan* 12, 710-712, 754-756, 758-761; *juan* 13, 798-802.

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Without referring to the Korean origin of sea ginseng, this account took a different approach to explain why a non-herbal marine creature was called “sea ginseng”. It argued that it was because they both had a warming and replenishing efficacy. The limit of this circular reasoning notwithstanding, it further likened sea cucumbers to ginseng in terms of origin and appearance. As ginseng from the land of Liaodong was renowned in seventeenth-century China,¹⁹⁶ sea cucumbers (“sea ginseng”) from the sea of Liaodong (the Sea of Liao, Liaohai 遼海) were perceived to be high-quality ginseng from the sea. As ginseng was taken as a top warming and replenishing medicine because of its human-like shape, “sea ginseng” for its genitalia-like shape should be no less potent than ginseng for male consumers.

Whereas the ginseng link catered to the warming and replenishing medicine, this account also attempted to address concerns from the “nourishing yin and bringing fire down” medicine with a kidney-sea metaphor. The idea of “the kidneys as the sea” (以腎為海) was a concept popularised by an important work by a famous physician in the warming and replenishing medicine, Zhao Xianke (fl. early 17th centuries). In this work, for explaining different manifestations of fire and water, Zhao proposed that, although there were different types of waters in the human body, all ultimately converged to their source, namely, the kidneys, which functioned as the sea of the body. In the same chapter, he also suggested that the minister fire in the kidneys was like a dragon in the sea of kidney water and should be guided to stay there peacefully. These metaphors served a key thesis in Zhao’s warming and replenishing medicine that, instead of using cold and bitter medicines to bring fire down, the water of the kidneys should be nourished to support and balance minister fire.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Jiang, *Renshen diguo*, 33-36; Kim, *Ginseng and Borderland*, 21-24.

¹⁹⁷ Zhao, *Yiguan*, *juan* 1:30a-33b; de Vries, “The Gate of Life,” 146-154.

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This kidney-sea metaphor was key to the conceptualisation of sea cucumbers as a perfect nourishing yin medicine. It worked with some seemingly natural features of typical temperate sea cucumbers, as they grew in saline water of the North Sea and their colour was black. It points to a correspondence theory of the *Inner Canon*, which is expounded in a chapter captioned “General Discourse on the Motion of Five Circulatory Phases” (“Wuyun xing dalun” 五運行大論).¹⁹⁸ This chapter is part of the seven chapters that was most likely added by a commentator in the eighth century and had a transformative role to play in the evolution of Chinese medicine since the eleventh century.¹⁹⁹ The chapter offers highly synthesised correspondences between directions, environments, natural elements, flavours, viscera, colours, etc. Among them, there is a correspondence concerning the kidneys, showing that “the North generates cold, cold generates water, water generates saltiness, saltiness generates kidneys” and “its colour is black” (北方生寒，寒生水，水生鹹，鹹生腎...其色為黑).²⁰⁰ Therefore, these seemingly independent natural features of temperate sea cucumbers became interconnected pieces of evidence to support that sea cucumbers had perfect affinities with the kidneys because they were from the North Sea, namely, from the saline waters of the North, and their colour was exactly black.

Combining these affinities with the kidney-sea metaphor, sea cucumbers emerged as a perfect therapeutic for nourishing the kidneys. If the kidneys, for its watery nature, were like the sea, then a black creature from the saline water of the North Sea with perfect affinities with the kidneys would be ideally conceptualised as a perfect medicine for replenishing the water of the kidneys. The replenished water of the kidneys, in turn, helped nourish yin and control the minister fire in the kidneys, addressing a major concern of the “nourishing yin and bringing fire down” medicine over the warming

¹⁹⁸ *Huangdi neijing suwen, juan 67*, 189.

¹⁹⁹ Despeux, “The System of the Five Circulatory Phases and the Six Seasonal,” 128-129.

²⁰⁰ *Huangdi neijing suwen, juan 67*, 189.

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nature of ginseng. As a result, sea cucumbers became both warming and replenishing as ginseng and perfectly able to nourish the kidneys and yin. They hence perfectly reconciled the theoretical impasse between two these rivalling medical cultures. Published in the 1660s, this account received wide publicity in China and would be cited by two important *materia medica* compilations in the eighteenth century, becoming an integral part of Chinese medical and dietary culture, and had profound implications with the rise of a world of sea cucumbers, which will be elaborated on in the following chapter.²⁰¹

Conclusion

Through these changes, food supposedly from the sea underwent a chain of transformations in Chinese material culture. From an alien and despicable thing of the South, it was first accepted by Chinese literati as appreciable seafood through the Tang-Song Transition. Thereafter, preserved seafood, known as sea taste, became important commodities for long-distance trade, and were traded together with other edible exotics, such as pepper and sugar, as southern goods or southern and northern goods. Eventually, from around the sixteenth century, out of the preserved seafood, a select group of sea delicacies emerged to redefine Chinese high cuisine, amid some critical changes in Chinese cooking techniques and medical culture.

In these transformations, the sea featured prominently in different manners. For seafood in the Tang-Song Transition, the sea was essential to identities. Food from the sea was initially perceived by northern aristocrats in inland China as things of others, and thereafter from the eleventh century by newly risen literati from coastal and south China as things of ours. In the second transformation, when preserved seafood, known as sea taste, became important commodities in the domestic market of the

²⁰¹ Wu, *Bencao congxin*, *juan* 17, 252; Zhao, *Bencao gangmu shiyi*, *juan* 10:37a.

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Ming and Manchu Qing empires, the sea was associated with taste. This term, sea taste (*haiwei*), aroused gustatory desires of inland consumers who might never have a chance to see the sea per se. However, for those top sea delicacies emerging amid the third transformation from the sixteenth century, the gustatory link with the sea became no longer essential. These sea delicacies were usually repeatedly soaked and boiled, before being infused with a delicately prepared broth, typically made of characteristically *xian* food ingredients, such as chicken, mushrooms, and bamboo shoots. Through these preparations, any intrinsic flavour carried from the sea would be diluted or even completely lost. Instead, the fibrous or gelatinous texture of these sea delicacies became crucial for its capacity to richly absorb a subtly flavoured broth.

Yet, a conceptual link with the sea remained essential for constructing the top two sea delicacies, namely, edible bird's nests and sea cucumbers. As the most precious sea delicacy, edible nests were, by their nature, not from the sea at all. They were associated with the sea because they were imagined as a metamorphosis of other marine creatures, such as *haijen* or sea snails. They played an indispensable role in transforming edible nests from a vegetable serving a hot-spicy foodway into a "clear and replenishing" sea delicacy. For sea cucumbers, the sea further became a source of intellectual inspiration. It became pivotal for constructing affinities with the kidneys and for conceptualising sea cucumbers as extraordinary ginseng from the sea, with a capacity to not only warm and replenish the body, but also to nourish the kidneys and help address a major concern of the "nourishing yin and bringing fire down" medical theory.

These cultural constructions were, meanwhile, not simply self-amusement among elite physicians and literati. They were, on the one hand, an essential part of literati's social distinction in an increasingly commercialised Chinese society in which the consumption of edible exotics was no longer a privilege of the political elites. On the other hand, they were also entangled with a broad

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world extending far beyond the coast of China, which will be explored in the following chapter with the example of the world of sea cucumbers.