

# Thesis (an Untitled Food Book)

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## Preface

Since I moved far away from my homeland of China, I feel I have a more objective perspective on my own cultural background, which I have a desire to express in a creative way. The Chinese culture is profound, has a long history. However, every time people ask me what is the most important part, I answer FOOD without hesitation. Actually, Chinese culture has grown from the enjoyment of food. There is an old idiom that "people regard food as sky", which means food is the first and foremost concern for most people. We pay great attention to food throughout the thousand years of history. So I think food is an interesting viewing point and appropriate medium to show the culture. I am also fascinated by these ancient poems and legends about food. They are old and beautiful, but almost forgotten by people living in the new era, just like all kinds of traditional culture. The faster pace people lead means they do not have time to enjoy slow food, so they eat junk food or prepared food to feed themselves. But food is not just eatable stuff, it tells stories, shows emotion, carries memories, and represents culture. Food is identity, as Ludwig Feuerbach's well-known phrase "Man is what he eats". Therefore, I think it is meaningful to let people know and appreciate food cultures. I hope my project can make viewers rethink their attitude toward diet and traditional culture.

My food project included three parts. First, the main part of the project is a short video series called "A Recipe of Harmony", showing several types of food and their stories. Inspired by Five Elements philosophy, there are four videos in total with food in five colors. I am aiming to create a menu, for blessing the world with

harmony, happiness and unity. In the end, these films were projected side-by-side, silent and loop, work together as an installation. Secondly, the Museum Night event "Taste of Memories", I collaborated with a group of artists, is regarded as a side program of the whole project. In which, we built a cube installation, to recall and celebrate everyone's sweet childhood through tasting old-fashioned candies. The third part is this book, which you are reading, serves as graduation thesis. It combined a brief introduction of food culture in China, and presentation of the complete food project. Through this three-part work, I had a combination of research paper, moving pictures and physical objects, try to make the food project as comprehensive as possible.

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## 1. General Introduction of Food Culture in China

It has been said that the reason of great differences between the eating habits of various countries is the result of a multitude of factors, including variations in ecological environment, the level of population and productivity. China is the world's most populous country, second-largest country by land area, and one of the earliest civilizations. These conditions laid a strong foundation for unique Chinese food culture and its long history. China is one originating source of agriculture, farming techniques appeared about seven thousand years ago. As early as 5,400 BC, the Yellow River region already saw growth of foxtail millet, and had adopted the method of crop storage in underground caves. Later on, areas along Yangtze River had been planted with rice. China's vast land area crossed several meteorological zones from south to north, a variety of terrain from east to west. It is the complex and diverse natural environment breeds a wide range of food and ingredients. Perhaps, there is nowhere else can compare, having so many kinds of plants and animals within one country.

Differ from the Western rational pursuit on nutrition, Chinese cuisine more focus on color, fragrance, taste, meaning and form. These five concerns are the standard of good food since long time ago. It seems that Chinese people regard eating as a pleasure art of living. But this does not mean that we do not care about healthy diet. Actually, every Chinese know a saying "diet cures more than the doctor", and have basic knowledge of food therapy. Balance is a keyword in diet therapy, because of the deep-rooted Yin-Yang philosophy. I grow up with parent's guidance of what is Yin food and what is Yang food.

In addition, Chinese food has a close connection with folk custom and classical literature. Almost every traditional festival has its particular food, such as tangyuan for Lantern Festival, Zongzi for Dragon Boat Festival, and moon cake for Mid-Autumn Festival. In many so-called "life events", there are specific dietary

habits. For example, the snacks mixed with red dates, peanuts, longan, and lotus seeds on wedding ceremony are the wish for having lovely baby. On the other hand, poetry and literature about food is a special part of Chinese food culture. Since ancient time, refined scholars were found of delicious food just like ordinary people. They whisper poems while drinking and eating, left behind many beautiful pieces. The most famous of them is Su Dongpo. His poems have mentioned wild vegetable soup, litchi fruit, and pork. The Dongpo pork is a famous dish named after him, because it was his favorite.

There is so much to say about China food culture, so I am not able to trace the origin and explain all the details in this book, but only make brief introduction from my personal point of view. Allow readers having a general idea of Chinese food culture, so that they can understand the root of my food project. Next, I will highlight the festival catering, regional cuisine and philosophical background, so that readers can understand our food culture through three dimensions of time, space and thoughts.

## Custom and Food in Traditional Festivals

As an ancient civilized country, China has many traditional festivals, as an indispensable part of the culture. Each festival has its historical origins, wonderful legends, and unique atmosphere. They reflect national customs and traditions, morality and religious. The most well known festivals are Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, and Mid-Autumn Festival. Almost all traditional festivals correspond to a particular food. But why it is always about eating? First of all, Chinese people love eating. Food is sky, is heaven. It is so important. Secondly, I think it is because that festival is an opportunity for friends and families gatherings, sitting together and sharing food is our favorite social style. Thirdly, most festival food is easy for homemaking. When all the family members get together, help each other for making and cooking, enjoy the pleasant conversation. What a joyful

reunion. This is precisely the meaning of festivals.

(a food calendar, Lunar Calendar)

Dec 31	Chinese New Year Eve	Reunion dinner. Dumpling, Rice cake, Spring roll
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It is the night crossing from old year to new year. The most important meal of a year is the family reunion dinner in this evening. All the family members sit at a round table and enjoy big meal. After dinner, many families have the habits of watching CCTV New Year's Gala, playing Mahjong, and fireworks. Other customs during the Spring Festival are paper-cuts for window decorations, couplets pasted on the door, dragon and lion dance, etc.

Jan 15	Lantern Festival	Tangyuan
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The first full moon of the new year comes at 15th January, marking the happy ending of Spring Festival. Because full moon is a symbol of reunion, most families gather for dinner again at Lantern Festival. Tangyuan, also called Yuanxiao, is glutinous rice balls with stuffing inside, boiled in water and be eaten. At night, people enjoy the lantern parade, riddles and games, wandering around in a sea of beautiful lanterns.

April 5 Solar Calendar	Qingming Festival	Qingtuan
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Qingming is one of the Twenty-four Solar Terms, so it is not like other festivals according to the Lunar Calendar. Qingtuan is a green rice ball with red bean paste inside. In the outer layer of glutinous rice flour, there is vegetable juice, makes Qingtuan green. The day before Qingming is Cold Food festival, so Qingtuan should be eaten when it is cold. At Qingming Festival, families take trip for tomb sweeping, recall their ancestors and enjoy the greenery of springtime.

May 5	Dragon Boat Festival	Zongzi
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The Dragon Boat Festival is a day to commemorate the great poet Qu Yuan. He has been worrying about his country and people during the whole life, wrote numerous poems, and finally plunge in Milou River to finish himself at Fifth May. To prevent the fish in the river eat his body, people feed them with delicious Zongzi. Zongzi is pyramid-shape rice dumpling, wrapped by bamboo or reed leaves. There are variety of fillings, in which pork is the most popular. Dragon Boat Festival customs include boat racing, drinking realgar wine, hanging wormwood and calamus at the door.

Aug 15	Mid-Autumn Festival	Moon cake
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The full moon is always on the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month in Lunar Calendar, so Mid-Autumn Festival is also a reunion day. Just like the full moon, the moon cake is round shape. There are so many different kinds of moon cakes, vary from making methods to stuffings. The most well-known and popular one is Cantonese-style moon cakes. Besides, on the Mid-Autumn Festival dinner table, there are also crabs, taro and duck. Appreciating the bright full moon is an important activity at that night.

Sep 9	Double Ninth Festival	Chongyang Cake
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As the book "I Ching" said, 6 is Yin number and 9 is Yang, so Sep 9 is known as double Yang. In Chinese, "nine" and "long" is a homonym, so double nine has become the good wish for longevity of old people. In this day, offsprings go to visit the elderly, share the Chongyang cake and chrysanthemum wine. Climbing and enjoy chrysanthemum is the special custom of the festival.

Dec 8	Laba Festival	Laba Congee
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Laba Festival is related to Buddhism, regarded as enlightenment day of the Buddha. The legend said Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, had hard practice for many years, then he became hungry and skinny. At the time he thought of giving up, he met a kind shepherdess gave him a bowl of congee, and made him regain strength

instantly. Laba is a grand festival of the Buddhist. The laba congee included many ingredients, such as rice, longan, lotus seeds, dates, green and red beans, walnuts, and so on.

## Regional Cuisines and Eight Culinary

The greatest charm of Chinese cuisine lies in its diversity, thanks to the complex natural and geographical environment, and continuous blend of culture. From Tropics to Frigid Zone, seashore to mountains, a variety of topography and climate provide wide range of food. Different regional culture shaped different culinary art and tastes. The establishment of a regional food culture depends on its local products, climate, history, culture, religion and other factors. For example, people in the southwest part of China eat spicy food to eliminate dampness; people in north eat red meat for keeping warm. In terms of flavor, it is getting saltier from south to north, sweeter from west to east, stronger from seaside to land. The Eight Cuisines are widely recognized culinary genres, formed their distinctive regional characteristics in the long-term evolution, distinguish from the selection of materials, cutting, cooking and other skills. They are Lu, Chuan, Yue, Min, Su, Zhe, Xiang, Hui. They do not include the minority groups with different religious belief, such as Uighur and Tibetan.

(a China map divided by cuisines)

Lu	Shangdong	Lu Cuisine is the first one of Eight Culinary, with a long history and extensive influence. It tastes fresh, salty and crisp; prefer to use green onion and parsley as seasoning.
Chuan	Sichuan	The number of cooking methods used in Chuan Cuisine is about forty. They include deep and stir fry, stewing and smoke. The strong spicy flavor is because of the peppercorn and chilies.

Yue	Guangdong Hongkong	Yue Cuisine has the greatest impact in other countries. The taste is light, clear, fresh and delicious. The bite-sized dim sum is well-known specialties.
Min	Fujian	Fujian Cuisine pays attention to the selection of materials and level of heating, try to keep the natural taste and nutrition. Specialized in soup, seafood dishes and woodland delicacies.
Su	Jiangsu	Jiangsu Cuisine uses stew, steam and simmer cooking methods to maintain the original flavor of ingredients. Fresh seasonal food is often used. The taste is mellow, soft and delicious.
Zhe	Zhejiang	Zhe Cuisine prefers fresh, live and tender food, mainly fish, shrimp and seasonal vegetables, tastes sweet, emphasizes on knife cutting technique.
Xiang	Hunan	Hunan Cuisine is good at cooking river fishes and poultry livestock. It is usually in big-size dishes with heavy oil, strong color and smell, tastes hot and sour.
Hui	Anhui	Anhui Cuisine prefers stewing, steaming and braising for local herbs and vegetables, especially bamboo shoots and mushroom crops. Many dishes are simmered with charcoal fire.

## Yin-Yang Philosophy in Food and Cooking

The philosophy of Yin-Yang, lies at the heart of Chinese culture, has been applied to food and cooking since early time, helped to build a comprehensive theoretical system for Diet Therapy. The concept of Yin-Yang originated from ancient people's understanding of nature, which everything can be divided into Yin and Yang sides as a pair. They work together to keep dynamic equilibrium to push the constant change



and development of material world. The Yin-Yang philosophy in food and cooking is about achieving health through balanced diet. Food and cooking methods has their Yin or Yang quality, commonly known as hot and cold property. For example frying is hot, boiling is cold; beef is hot, cucumber is cold. For a balanced diet, food from both Yin and Yang sides need to be eaten in one meal, or make choice according to the physical condition. In addition, Five Taste in Harmony is also an important thought. These five tastes are sour, sweet, bitter, spicy and salty. They blend together, interact and support each other, make a rich flavor. If a dish has only one taste, it is unsuccessful. Five Tastes is not only to harmonize the flavor, but also the health.

(a Yin-Yang list)

Yin/ Cold	Neutral	Yang/ hot
Boil, steam, braise, stew		Deep-fry, stir-fry, roast, smoke
Wheat, barley	Rice, corn, potato	Sorghum, glutinous rice
Green bean, tofu, celery, spinach, eggplant, lettuce, cucumber, mushroom, seaweed, bean sprout	Pea, soybean, cabbage, kidney bean, carrot	red bean, pepper, leek, pumpkin, garlic, green onions, ginger
Duck egg, duck, frog, rabbit, crabs, clam, sea fish, snail	Pork, pigeon, goose, river fish, scallops	Chicken eggs, lamb, beef, dog, chicken, eel, shrimp, dairy products, ham
Pear, orange, mango, banana, watermelon, grapefruit, kiwi	Coconut, pineapple, olive	Litchi, longan, peach, walnut, cherry, chestnut
Salt, soy sauce	white sugar	Chili, pepper, curry, star anise, brown sugar,

## 2. "A Recipe of Harmony" video series and installation

### Eat for Cohesion and Happiness

Take account to the way of dining, Chinese people love sharing. The traditional family feast is not about big meal, but an activities spending time with family and friends, sharing everything. People sitting around, happily eating and drinking together, reflects the idea of "harmony is precious" from Confucianism. People say, "Eat for cohesion and happiness". Enhancing interpersonal relationship through dining together is the most important social way in China. Therefore, reunion is the initial aim of eating. In Confucianism, the most important contributor of Chinese culture, "Unity of the World" is the highest realm. It is the dream of Confucius, means all human are equal, love each other, and unite as one family. This is an ideal society, just like "Utopia" in ancient Chinese form. So I think Chinese eating style is originated from the thought of "Unity of the World".

I found the similar idea from another food book I have been reading. It is written by an American author, shows the Western culture. It is called "In the Devil's Garden, a Sinful History of Forbidden Food". This book categorizes the forbidden food stories by Seven Sins. In the third chapter Pride, the author mentioned, "Man is what he eats. If we eat in a different way, or we eat different food ---- we are enemies. In some culture, 'enemy' can be literally translated as 'people with different mouths'. Does this mean that world peace can be achieved by a common recipe?" It reminds me the reunion purpose of Chinese dining, and the ideal harmony society. They inspired me to do this film series, creating a menu for the unity of the world, a recipe of harmony.

In addition, "Harmony" is also one of the cores in Chinese classical philosophy, closely related to "Yin-Yang and Five Elements", and "Unification between Human Beings and Nature". In food culture field, "Harmony" is about following the natural rules, eat regularly everyday and choose local seasonal food. It also emphasizes the Flavors Harmonize, suggests to have balanced diet following "five grains as foundation; five fruits as support; five animals as benefit; five vegetable as supplement." I think it is reasonable and brilliant to use Five Elements idea for my harmony menu. Therefore, I applied Five Colors: blue-green, red, yellow, white and black, and selected food in these colors. Then, according to the symbolism and legends of each food, I made this harmony recipe with Balance, Love, Regeneration and Peace.

In the following sections, I will introduce the four harmony recipes respectively. First explain their meaning and origin of the food symbolic, and then describe the details of my short films. In the end of each section, there is a recipe of one dish cooked with the certain food. In terms of the selection, I have chosen those dishes I love and very familiar with. They are mostly from Shanghai or the cities nearby.

### Balance ---- Yin-Yang Food

There is no doubt that Balance is the first one of Harmony Recipe, as it is the principle of Yin-Yang Philosophy. Yin and Yang, cold and hot, black and white are not enemies, but perfect pairs with opposite force promoting the dynamic development.

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### Love ---- Red Bean

I believe that love, the great love, must be the foundation of the Unity of the World. The Taoism says, "The highest good is like water, thus the greatest love is unlimited and boundless." Respect everyone and love everything, dedicate to the world as

much as possible, should be the faith of people living in the harmony world.

It is well known by most Chinese people that red bean is a symbol of loving and missing. I found the origin legend from Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D), about a woman after waiting for her husband fighting in the war for a very long time, started weeping and cannot stop. Her tears became blood and dropped into soil. Later on, the red bean trees were grown on the soil. It is also mentioned in the masterwork A Dream of Red Mansions, "like drops of blood fall endless tears of longing".

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#### Dates and Red Bean Soup

Chinese dates and red Beans are all Yang food, can warm and nourish qi and blood. As opposite, green bean is Yin food, so green bean soup is summertime sweet soup and red bean soup is for wintertime. I usually add Coix Seed for eliminating dampness. There are some optional food you can add, which are longan, lotus seed, wolfberry and small rice ball. Red beans need to be soaked in water for more than 6 hours before cooking the soup.

Red bean	0000g
Dates	0000g
Coix seed	0000g
Water	0000g
Crystal sugar or brown sugar	0000g

Cook with low fire for 1.5-2.5 hours.

#### Regeneration ---- Chicken Egg

"In the beginning of the universe, there was formless chaos like an chicken egg. Within it, the perfectly opposed principles of Yin and Yang became balanced and giant Pangu woke up from the egg. He created the Earth (murky Yin) and the Sky (clear Yang)..." ---- Pangu is the god-like figure in Chinese mythology. Different from other gods, Pangu did not create things from nothing, but made chaos in order, gradually breaking down the messy situation and began the regeneration. It

requires wisdom, patience, ambition and courage, which are essential of great personality.

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Egg Dumpling

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Peace ---- Green Tea

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Shrimp with Longjing Tea Leaves

### 3. "Taste of Memories" Rotterdam Museum Night Project

<http://www.facebook.com/TasteOfMemories>

In the summer time of 2011, I met and joined an artist collection, Studio Zi. They are Chinese artists and designers based in Holland, some were born and raised here, and others moved here and were working for many years. We work together for assignments and projects, also organize events and exhibitions. This time we were invited to participate in Rotterdam Museum Night 2012, as one of the programs. Coincidentally, the theme is "Smaak" (taste), which can be directly link to my food project. So I shared my research on food culture, spent lots of time and energy in the whole process, and made it as a side program of my graduation project.

At the very beginning of my food project, I passed by an idea of talking about the relation between diet and era. At that time, I was watching a Japanese TV series. The story is that, living in intensive Tokyo, people get used to eat prepared ramen and sushi from supermarkets. However, there is a hundred-year-old restaurant keeps doing traditional slow food. They will never ever cut corners, make mass production and open chain stores. Unfortunately, they can hardly survive in the new

era. "Tongue Memory" is mentioned in the story. They say the taste before ten years old will be memorized and loved for a lifetime. That is why everyone loves his or her parents cooking. In the last episode, the owner of the restaurant offered a boy some fine dishes, hoping he can remember the wonderful taste. But the boy said they are tasteless, and put tomato ketchup on each dish. Because his parents are always too busy to cook for him, ketchup became his tongue memory and he will never fall in love with traditional slow food. So pity! This touched me, and raised my desire to inherit and protect food culture. It is my initial intention of making this food project.

The rapid development of China in the past few decades ruined many ancient architectures and traditional culture, but on the other side, it brought high-quality infrastructure and convenient urban life. What makes me heartbreak is something carrying my memories is gone, like my demolished high school, and the street snacks I addicted to when I was small. So I shared this idea, and we finally decided to focus on past candies and childhood memories. We want to let this "Taste of Memories" project wake up visitors tongue memory, recall their beloved candies, snacks, celebrate sweet childhood, and think about our fast-changing era.

This is a teamwork project by eight people. We discussed the concept and details together, and then allocated tasks. Our works were placed in the gallery-like space of Studio Zi. The main part is a wooden cube installation, our Memory Cube, 2.5m each dimension. There are hundreds small grip bags filled with candies hanging on the outside of the cube. Colleagues working on the outside are all born in Holland. They know the Dutch old-fashioned candies and snacks. In the end, candies were divided into two groups, LOST & RENEWED and LOST & FOUND. Visitors are welcome to take the candies, then write their memories on a small piece of paper, and put it back. So it is an exchange of candies and memories. Inside of the cube is a fancy, dreamy and childish world, built by sliver wallpaper, clouds and colorful lanterns. The idea is to make high contrast between inside and outside. To create a

totally different world inside, and push visitors back to the childhood dream.

Apart from the cube installation, there are a photo spot, a game zone, a tray wall, and some Missing Posters. Visitors can fill in a paper, "I just ate .... My taste of memory is ...", then hold this paper and take pictures at photo spot. In the game zone, they can join the traditional Dutch game, spijkerpoeppen (nail poop). And on the tray wall, there are two Studio Zi members, Lulu and I, did art works to show personal stories about food. The Missing Posters is a really cool idea that every one loves it. They are posters of lost food, asking people find it and take our information. We pasted these posters everywhere in the city as promotion. In the event, some of the posters are blank, so that visitors can draw their missing candies and leave personal information, hoping people can help them to find it. On the other side, we also attempted to use social network, a facebook page. This page started two weeks earlier than Museum Night event, works as a communication platform and promotional medium. People can post their lost candies and childhood memories on the page. Some posts inspired us a lot, and engaged in the cube installation. At the night, we rewarded those people, who posted on our facebook page, by free hand-made chocolates.

It was a big task, big challenge, and finally a big success! During the six-hours event, we reached over 200 visitors and got about 100 memories back, even though we are not located in the center of Museum Night. We are glad that visitors were very interested and really involved in the interactivity. They wrote memories seriously and were talking with friends about childhood so happily. As time goes by, the outside candy wall changing into memory wall. People were sharing their beautiful past stories. It was a very touching and sweet moment. I was so moved by visitors reaction, and proud of this Taste of Memories project. All the muscle pain and sleepless nights are worthy!

Bibliography

Personal Reflection and Acknowledgements