A CHINESE PROVERB GOES, “Different kinds of water and soil raise different kinds of people ([水土異人])”. There is a similar saying in the West: “You are what you eat.” Only when you know the entire history of a nation can you fully understand its food culture.

The basic concepts and theories of Chinese food science that exercise a profound influence on the diet and food culture of the Chinese were largely determined during the Warring States period (5–2 centuries B.C.E.). They can be summarized by the following four principles:

1. Unity of food and medicine (医食同源).—In traditional Chinese pharmacology, whose history goes back over 4,000 years, medicine originates from food. The idea of the unity of diet and treatment was systemized and popularized during the Zhou dynasty (11–3 centuries B.C.E.). Food and medicine were considered distinct yet inseparable from each other.

2. Nursing one’s health with food (養食).—Lao-Tzu and Chuang-tzu emphasized that, when consuming food, one should realize food as medicine and medicine cannot be satisfied. According to them, not only one restrains his desire, common for all humans, to try every taste, but he can gain health, even though the taste of Chinese food may be less delicious. One, however, should not force it if it is harmful to one’s health.

3. Theory of the nature of taste (味厚薄).—The Chinese, since ancient times, have taken the nature of the taste of ingredients, the taste of food, and the influence that the interaction of the two has on a person. Believing that the nature of an ingredient is revealed in its taste, the ancient Chinese might have attached great importance to the type of an ingredient’s taste.

4. The food philosophy of Confucius and Mencius (食与礼).—A food example that Confucius would give to his disciples to explain his theory of “be defined on two things, be appropriate with three issues, and avoid ten wrongs” (二不為: 不穢不賾不貪; 十不為: 貪鄙偽不以信; from Confucius’ and Mencius’ teachings) has been interpreted as the need for survival but has to work hard to get food, more than that, one has to get food in a proper way as well as respect and practice food rituals.

It is worth mentioning that some of these ideas are extensions to the “nursing one’s health with food”; for instance, maintaining an authentic taste, being rational and refraining from extreme, following rules of nature, and seeking peace by nursing one’s health.

The food culture of the Chinese nation is characterized by five features, in terms of its forms and historical development: the broad spectrum of available ingredients, abundance of dishes, flexibility of cooking methods, continuity of regional cuisines, and richness of local foodstuffs. These features underlie the tradition and essence of the Chinese food culture to this day.

China has always been very diverse geographically, and this explains the existence of the wide variety of food ingredients and the extensive range of their distribution. The Chinese made edible many living things that are not known or considered taboo in other nations; some of these became delectable dishes.

It is this wide scope and abundance, along with the unique Chinese ideology on food and culinary art that predetermined the flexibility of traditional ways of Chinese cooking. “Collecting experience by hand” is an important characteristic of the traditional Chinese cuisine, stemming from its history.

Areas with different food cultures have developed in China separately from each other. From the perspective of food history, the culture and character of each of these areas has evolved gradually through a long historical process. In China of the Middle Ages, different regions were able to maintain their distinctive features for a relatively long time because of their isolation, self-sufficient natural economies and the conservative feudal politics on one hand, as well as the primitive commodity economies and poverty of the common people on the other.

Despite the economic and systemic barriers, there were frequent exchanges between the areas. Merchants and travelers play an important part in the introduction and dissemination of different cultures. Wars and chaos stimulated food cultural exchanges widely, quickly, and aggressively. While another significant route for foodways were appointments of public officials, study trips of Confucian scholars, hired labor, stationing of armies, expulsion of criminals, migration, escaping turbulence, and so on.

**News from Northeast Asia continued**