

On Li Yu's Ecological Aesthetic Viewpoint of Nature-Oriented Diet Principle and Humanitarian Feelings in Cooking

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Abstract: This paper discusses and analyzes Li Yu's ecological aesthetic viewpoint of nature-oriented diet principle. The discussion is carried out from the following two aspects. One is Li Yu's ecological aesthetic viewpoint about vegetable-first diet, and the other about his ecological aesthetic humanistic feelings in the choice of the meat dishes and his humanistic feelings to oppose cruel treatment of animals.

1. Introduction

Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling is Li Yu's masterpiece, which is regarded as an Encyclopedia of Chinese ancient life during the late Ming and early Qing periods by many scholars at home and abroad. This book involves eight different fields, including play writing and play performance, dressing up and making-up, house and garden construction, furniture and antiques, food and drink, flower-growing and tree-planting, and health and pleasure, making a vivid description of the life and worldly customs of Chinese people during that time. Patrick Dewes Hanan, a professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University as well as the leading expert on Li Yu's works, comments on Li Yu as follows, “Li Yu is an exceptional figure in Chinese culture for two reasons: his disregard of the authority of tradition, and his dedication to the cause of comedy.”^[1]

This paper mainly analyzes and discusses Li Yu's ecological aesthetic viewpoint of nature-oriented diet principle: vegetables goes first, grains second, and meat and fish last, and his ecological aesthetic humanistic feelings in the choice of the meat dishes through the means of the contributions the livestock makes, including his humanistic feelings to oppose cruel treatment of animals. All of them also conform to the principle of the health preservation in modern China. Li Yu's diet concept reflects his great ecological philosophy and is a valuable summary of his life and is worthy of our study.

2. Towards Chinese Philosophy in Diet and Cooking

Chinese people hold the opinion that diet is the main way for human body to absorb the nutrition in order to survive in the external environment. “Food is the most important thing for the people” is a common sense accepted by all. Diet and health are the dialectical relationship of unity of opposites, the purpose of diet is to achieve health, health depends on the most important diet. The two complement each other. That's why diet and dietary activities have played a particularly important role in the development of Chinese history. Diet health theory also forms the fundamental basis of Chinese traditional medicine. Different from western medicine, the traditional Chinese medicine focuses its attention to a balanced diet, by advocating “light diet, vegetarian diet”, “A day without meat, not a day without beans”, “simple rice, green vegetables to ensure people's health”, “food, not

without green” and other principles as well.^[2] Chinese diet, as the matter of fact, contains rich philosophical connotation, and has great influence on the whole Chinese nation. Since cooking, diet and health have been closely linked with each other, the theory of diet and health is also developed and matured along with the Chinese cuisine, which has gradually enriched and advanced in China under the guidance of Chinese philosophy of not only Buddhism's ascetic practice of the vegetarian diet but also Confucianism and Taoism which advocate that diet is green and light. For them, the unity of nature and man is considered to be the highest aesthetic spirit both in food choice and in cooking method. Li Yu's highest pursuit of ecological aesthetic viewpoint of nature-oriented diet principle and humanitarian feelings in cooking echoes the values of Taoism, and is represented the aesthetic thoughts of being natural, free and simple.

3. Practical Analysis

Li Yu prefers fresh vegetables, fruits, lychees, bayberries, fu-tangerines, Yanjing grapes, apple fruits, real pears and other fruits, which also reflects his view of natural diet.

3.1. Closer to Nature: Vegetable Preference

In chapter “Yin Zhuan” about introduction of diet, vegetables are introduced ahead of meat to advocate frugality and regain ancient customs. Li Yu thinks as for music; wind music is better than string music and vocal music better than wind music. Why? The answer is because the vocal music is closer to nature and sounds more natural. Li Yu argues that the same rule could be applied in our daily diets. Unrefined meat is better than refined meat, and vegetables are the best, since vegetables are produced directly from the nature. So, the closer to nature, the better.

Li Yu takes ancient people's life as an example by saying that in early historical times, wearing grass - made clothes and living on vegetables was a popular life style. People could stay away from greasy food, and enjoy vegetarian food and fruits, which was the case in the period of Emperor Fuxi, and the period of Emperor Tangyao and Yushun, and was described as “Never let the sheep get into the vegetable garden in your stomach.” Following such a type of diet, Li Yu quotes ZuoZhuan's famous sentence that “the meat-eaters are foolish” to emphasize his viewpoint. Li Yu explains that the man who eats meat is supposed to be short-sighted at the strategy choice because fat gravy which condenses into fat has covered meat-eaters' chest, and clogged their mind as well, making their spiritual intelligence losing track to the mind.

Here is the evidence to support his viewpoint. He argues that all plant-eating animals are considered to be much more astute than predators. The tiger, as a carnivorous animal, feeds on humans or other animals, but is the dumbest of all. Li Yu quotes a story from the book on this field, which says that “Tigers do not eat children”. Why? Because a newborn calf is not afraid of tigers, so a tiger mistakes ignorant children as fearless warriors and dare not fight with them; “tigers do not eat drunks”, that's because alcohol has almost deprived the drunk of his reason, and the drunk's mad and wild manners makes the tiger mistake him a strong enemy and threatens the tiger away; “Tigers can only go straight ahead. So, when confronting a tiger, you can try to escape by taking a winding path.” Therefore, Li Yu believes that tigers are foolish for the fat from their meat which blocks the smooth and straight way of intelligence. In the light of it, people who eat meat would also be as foolish as tigers. It's very funny, right? Though illogical but demonstrates Li Yu's natural view of diet. He hopes his readers could have a healthier diet and eat less meat. His conclusion is that wallowing in meat would make brave men foolhardy like tigers and make cowards ignorant, neither way is beneficial.

3.2. Bamboo Shoots First

Li Yu thinks that vegetables which are the so-called “ambrosial tasty” should take bamboo shoots first. Only monks who lives in the mountains, people in the wild and those who grow their own can get this kind of enjoyment, but urban residents who buy them from vegetable vendors will never sense the same enjoyment. The reason for it is that unlike other vegetables that can be planted, picked, and occasionally enjoyed as long as there are vegetable patches next to the house no matter

in the city or in the mountains, the best bamboo shoots can only be available in wild mountains. Therefore, no matter how fresh bamboo shoots look, as long as they grow in towns, they would taste inferior. Bamboo shoots, the king of the vegetables, their taste completely outclasses that of fat lamb or suckling pig. If the bamboo shoots which can be bought from the market is so delicious, let alone those which is dug from the mountains, really superb cuisine.

The law of "return to nature" is the basic view of Buddhism and Taoism. So far as diet is concerned, away from the noise and serious air polluted city, to the countryside located in the mountains, people will can eat native born and bred fruits and vegetables, so that their appetite increase and become increasingly energetic. In the mountains and forests, people breathe the fresh and pure air, the state of mind returns to quiet and life, which is really a release for people to escape from the city cage, in the natural wilderness on the *laissez-faire*, unbridled, laughing, tasting fresh fruits and vegetables. Here Li Yu vividly and tangibly speak out this philosophical truth by taking Bamboo Shoots as the example.

3.3. Mushroom Second

To Li Yu's mind, the delicious food, apart from bamboo shoots, is supposed to be mushrooms, ranking the second. Mushrooms grow out quietly and imperceptibly. They have no roots or stems but come into being by gathering *Qi* of the nature such as trees and mountains. That's why mushrooms have certain shapes but no entity, and so dross-free. Wherefore eating mushrooms means absorbing *Qi* from the natural world, beneficial a great deal to human beings. As for poisonous mushrooms, according to *Compendium of Materia Medica*, that's because they have been crept and bitten by venomous snakes and worms.^[3]

The ancient Chinese philosophy interprets *Qi* in the following way that *Qi* rises from the formless, creating heaven and earth. Man is born with the breath of heaven and earth. It is believed that the unity of heaven and earth is inherent in *Qi*. This solidifies the original properties of *Qi*.

Qi is considered to be a simple natural phenomenon by ancient Chinese people. They believe that *Qi* is the most basic material that constitutes the world, and all things and phenomena in the universe are generated by the movement and change of *Qi*. The natural respiration of human and animal, the transpiration of water vapor, the change of cloud gas and so on are all the basis of ancient ancestors' perceptual understanding of *Qi*. Concretely speaking, the survival of animals and plants all need air. Ancient Chinese people realized it from the fact that people would die, if they could not breathe air, so "Qi" is regarded as the source of life. That can be used to explain why to Li Yu's mind, mushroom that is considered to come from *Qi* is so valuable, because it is closer to nature.

4. Humanitarian Feelings in Meat Choice and Cooking Method

4.1. Humanitarian Feelings in Meat Choice

Li Yu advocates eating vegetables first, however, he does not ban meat altogether, since meat is also the essential nutrition to the human body, so Li Yu puts forward an eclectic view for meat diet. Li Yu claims that wild animals are hard to hunt all the year round, because wild animals, like hares, river deer, deer, bears, tigers, live remote mountains and seldom come to human habitations. From the hunting point of view, it is human beings who set out to install traps for these wild animals, so they may not eat them as the regular food but only taste them occasionally. Different from wild animals, wild birds, like pheasants, wild geese, doves, yellow birds, quails, oriole etc., though living in the wild, are easy to be captured, so people can have plenty of opportunities to eat them. Different from wild animals, wild fowls, knowing that people want to catch them with a net, still jump into the net of their own record for eating the net food, and then follows the disaster they bring on themselves. Still different from beasts who die because of man, wild birds die because of themselves. Therefore, it serves them right to be eaten by people.

Besides, Li Yu thinks that eating fish is an accepted practice. For although fish and animals are all creatures and have a life, Li Yu finds it more acceptable to kill fish than other animals. Why? Because aquatic creatures are relatively easy to reproduce, and not easy to die out. Viviparous and

oviparous creatures can only give birth to at most dozens of offspring, while fish would spawn tens of thousands of roes that would be as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. If fish continuously breed without interference of human beings, rivers would be clogged, which would impede the free passage of ships and increase the risk of the ship transportation. Therefore, the same as woodcutter cutting down unneeded plants and trees, it is quite reasonable for fishermen to catch fish and shrimp, then the sin of eating fish and shrimps is lighter compared with eating other animals.

4.2. Humanitarian Feelings in Cooking

Two things should be noted in Li Yu's cooking art. One is that the natural match, which means when processing, pay attention to natural collocation, such as light ingredients should be mixed with light ingredients together, bringing about harmonious mutual-benefit, rather than hostile mutual-contrary effect. The other is the frugality which is reflected in improving the comfort of life with limited material resource, such as in the ordinary rice cooking.

Li Yu likes eating noodles with rich taste. "Wuxiang Noodles" or "Five-spice noodles", and the other is "Bazhen Noodles" or "Braised noodles with eight-treasures" which is usually used to entertain guests. As for "Wuxiang Noodles" or "Five-spice noodles", as its name suggests, is made up of five spices, including sauce, vinegar, pepper powder, sesame powder and soup made of bamboo shoots, mushrooms or shrimps. These natural materials are harmoniously combined and mixed together for making a delicious food. And Li Yu also describes in detail how to do it. The first step of making "Wuxiang Noodles" is to add pepper powder and sesame powder into flour, and then mix the three liquid materials together --- sauce, vinegar and soup--- for dough kneading instead of water. To make the top-quality "Wuxiang Noodles", the cook needs to mix up flour and the above-mentioned source thoroughly and then roll out the dough till it was as thin as a wafer. Cut them into very thin noodles, and then send them into the boiling water. Li Yu thinks that the noodles made in this way are worth chewing thoroughly since all essence has been blended in the noodles rather than in the soup.

"Bazhen" or "Braised noodles with eight-treasures" indicates this type of noodles contains eight natural precious ingredients, they are chicken, fish and shrimp, pepper, sesame, bamboo shoots, shiitake mushroom, all of which have to be dried, ground into very fine powder and then be mixed with flour with fresh juice. Sauce and vinegar, though also needed, are included in the precious ingredients, because they are too common to be regarded as treasures. As for chicken and fish meat, they have to be selected and prepared carefully without any fat part left, because only lean meat can be accepted by the smooth dough, and fat ingredient would damage adhesive degree of the dough, which is the fundamental step to make delicious noodles. The lesson from the noodle making shed light on the fact that adding a bit oil into flour while making flapjacks can ensure flapjacks' softness. Of the three kinds of meat, shrimp meat is the most convenient, easy to roll into powder, so it is unnecessary to prepare more in case of unexpected need.

Li Yu advocates frugality in every aspect of life, including cooking. He suggests using limited material resource to make delicious food, such as in the ordinary rice cooking. Li Yu thinks that the steamed rice for guests has to be more appetizing than usual. Different from the pure rice cooking, he has invented a way of cooking both saving money and increasing delicious taste. He suggested his wife preparing a small cup of flower dew for spilling into the freshly steamed rice, and then wait a few minutes with the lid on. When rice is evenly mixed with flower dew, put it into the bowl. All of his friends, who have tasted the rice evenly mixed with the flower dew, believe that the rice he offered was a special type instead of ordinary rice. Li Yu emphasizes that to save flower dew it is necessary to pour a small cup of flower dew into the rice, rather than much. He also proposes using multiflora roses, citrons which have similar delicate flavor with cereals or rice, so diners could hardly perceive them instead of rugosa roses whose strong flavor can be easily identified.

Li Yu loves the crab and thinks that it can make an extremely delicate dish, but unfortunately, to Li Yu's mind, its nice flavor is always destroyed by improper cooking. For example, if crab is used to make soup, the soup is fresh indeed, but at the sacrifice of its aesthetic feature of the whole. If

stewed, the whole fat crab is kept, yet its delicious taste would be gone. What Li Yu cannot tolerate is to chop the crab into two pieces, and fry it after adding oil, salt and bean powder, making the color, smell and taste of the crab all lost. Li Yu is so annoyed at such behavior that he makes a humorous statement, "Is it out of jealousy of the crab's beauty and daintiness that human beings come up with such inappropriate ways to spoil it and deform it?" Li Yu argues that all of the good things in the world are suitable for cooking with the whole body remained. The crab which is fresh and fragrant, sweet and tasty, is the perfect combination in color and aroma with its meat as pure white as jade and its ovary glittering like gold. Nothing else can be compared with it. Li Yu can't help exclaiming, "Isn't it too ridiculous to cook it by mixing it with other ingredients in order to increase its flavor?" Li Yu compares this kind of cooking method as using a bonfire to brighten the sun and pouring a handful of water to make the river go up. He insists that Crab should be kept intact when steaming, and then place it on a plate with ice. When putting it on the table, let guests take and eat what they want by themselves, the whole crab or only one leg. In this way, the flavor remains completely, since crab meat go directly from its shell to people's stomach, which is supposed to be really the essence of cooking.

4.3. Humanism: Opposing Treating Animals Cruelly

Li Yu opposes using cruel methods to handle animals. Two examples here. One is that Li Yu regards animals such as dog and cattle as human beings' best friends, he advises people not to kill them. He introduces a story about emperor Hui of Liang who refuses to use cattle as the live sacrifice in worship ceremony. Li Yu thinks that though cocks and hens also make contributions to the human beings, yet compared with the cattle and dog, their contributions appear trivial. The sun will rise no matter the cock crows or not; but the farmland could not be plowed without cattle, and thief could not be detected unless dog barks. However, compared with the goose and duck, the cock and hen seem to contribute more, since hens can lay eggs. So egg-laying hens and chickens weighing less than one jin (weight unit in China equal to 500 grams) should not be killed and eaten because too young chickens are hard to tell the male from female. Therefore, even if the cock and hen could not live a peaceful life to the old age, they do not deserve an early death by suffering the same cooking tortures as geese and ducks.

The other example is about the cooking method for goose. Li Yu first of all tells a story about a cook who is skilled at cooking delicious goose feet by employing a very merciless method. He would first of all put the goose feet in a pot of boiling oil, which would hurt the goose so much that the goose couldn't resist the terrible pain and jumped into the pond. Then the cook would repeat the same process three times. In this way, the goose feet would swallow to three centimeters thick and taste nice. Li Yu remarks that it is so cruel that he does not want to hear anything like that anymore. He cannot help shouting what a miserable fate the goose has! Though raised by the human, it has to sacrifice its life for human beings when needed, which, to Li Yu's mind, is enough to repay the human being's breeding kindness. Li Yu asks why the goose has to suffer such brutal corporal punishment before death? Li Yu argues that though the goose feet cooked in such a cruel way may taste a bit more delicious, but compared with the pain the goose suffered, the delicious enjoyment is nothing at all. For a moment's happiness at the expense of the agony of the living creature, even an unkind man would not be willing to do it, let alone of the person with a kind heart. Li Yu curses the people like the cruel cook are doomed to hell, where these cruel men would certainly get more brutal torture after their death.

5. Conclusion

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, a large number of famous scholars emerged. Li Yu, as a play composer, the novelist, aesthetes, the gourmet, food culture theorist, is undoubtedly outstanding figure of the time. Li Yu's philosophical thinking on the diet style which takes the idea of being close to nature as the pursuit of his goal is influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism and especially Taoism. Li Yu advocates simplicity and opposes extravagance, and the pursuit of luxury food life has become

his moral taboo. Therefore, vegetables first have become one of his most respected diet ideas. Frugality is also reflected in his using limited frugal materials to make the most possible delicious food, which is also the principle he has followed all his life, for example, he has invented a way of cooking, both saving money and increasing delicious taste by preparing a small cup of flower dew for spilling into the freshly steamed rice in order to preserve the delicate flower flavor. Li Yu's philosophical thinking of being natural is also reflected in his emphasis of natural match and natural collocation in cooking art, such as light ingredients should be mixed with light ingredients in order to bring about a harmonious effect in "Wuxiang Noodles" or "Five-spice noodles", and "Bazhen Noodles" or "Braised noodles".

Li Yu advocates eating vegetables first, however, he does not refuse to eat meat altogether, since meat is also the essential nutrition to the human body, so Li Yu puts forward a scientific eclectic view for meat diet by following the principle of group selection in biological reproduction. He holds humanitarian feelings in meat choice by classifying animals in different groups according to their contributions to human beings, and thinking that some animals like dog and cattle are best friends of human beings and should be protected, but there are too many fish, shrimps and crabs in the water, and eating them can not only satisfies human's appetite, but also contribute to the balance of the population and prevent the rivers from being blocked by them. What's more, Li Yu cherishes humanitarian feelings in cooking method and opposes cruel treatment of the animals, for example, he cannot bear to see the crab to be chopped into two pieces, and he opposes using cruel methods to handle animals such as goose.

This paper discusses and analyzes Li Yu's viewpoint of diet, which reflects his great ecological philosophy and is a valuable summary of his life. This kind of ecological philosophy and summary are his personal, but also his society. It is an accumulation of national culture, especially the pursuit of traditional Chinese food culture. Therefore, it is worthy of our study. Chinese food culture has a long history and is extensive and profound. However, few people pay attention to it and study it. From the perspective of philosophy, ethics and ecological aesthetics, Li Yu has a unique insight. There are still many problems to be solved and studied in the healthy development of modern society. So we should make the past serve the present.

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