

An Interpretation of Taoism in Chinese Food Culture

Taking *A Bite of China* for an Example

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Abstract—The documentary *A Bite of China* is not only a luxurious enjoyment for senses, it is also a peerless masterpiece to propagate Chinese food culture. It includes massive Taoist ideas, such as the food aesthetics of simplicity and elegance, food philosophy of heaven-man unity, dietary function of human harmony and food consumption concepts of “more thrifty, less luxury”, and “more simplicity, less desire”. The interpretation means a lot to the sustainable development of the society.

Keywords—Taoism; food culture; *A Bite of China*

I. INTRODUCTION

Taoism, represented by Lao Tzu and Chuang-Tzu, plays an important role in traditional Chinese culture. With profound connotations, Taoism has a far-reaching influence. As British scholar Joseph Lee pointed out, Confucianism and Taoism will constitute the background of Chinese ideology and continue to be so for a long time in the near future.

Under the circumstance of ecological imbalance, Taoism becomes more and more popular. With frequent exposure of food safety problems and image crisis of Chinese food culture, the release of *A Bite of China* is a timely relief for the frustrated Chinese. With a vivid illustration of food-processing and moving stories, it successfully spreads Chinese food culture. What's more important, the documentary impresses us with rich Taoist ideas. From perspectives of food aesthetics, philosophy, social functions and food consumption, Taoist thoughts are portrayed in detailed concepts, such as “harmony between nature and man”, “governing a large state is like boiling a small fish” and “focus more on life and less on benefits” and so on.

II. TAOIST INTEGRATED WITH CHINESE FOOD CULTURE

The Chinese food culture originated from sacrificial activities seeking for blessings from the spirits which are worshipped by the ancients. Afterwards, a set of fixed ceremonies is formed and daily eating tools are also evolved into sacrificial utensils. Humans can interact with supernatural beings via food appliances, thus harmony is achieved. Obviously, Taoist concepts like “harmony and

unity between man and nature” are contained in the early stage of Chinese food culture.

As the Chinese saying goes, food is the heaven for people. In fact, food plays the most important role in individual life. The world-known Chinese food has a close relationship with Taoism. Taoist concepts like “peace and harmony” can be reflected in the daily cooking. Besides, Taoist concepts of keeping healthy are also showed in Chinese regimen like “medicine and food share the same source”, “extra nourishment” and so on. What's more, Chinese food accepted “bland-flavored” as beauty, thus Taoist concepts of “be simple, remain true” are apparently incarnated into food culture.

III. TAOIST IMPACTS ON CHINESE FOOD CULTURE

The Chinese food means more than basic survival, instead, it has evolved into a kind of cultural phenomena including aesthetics, philosophy and science. The traditional Taoism shows great influences on Chinese food.

A. Food Aesthetics: Beauty Lies in Bland-flavored Diet

Taste, the most instinctive feeling of human beings, is especially important in aesthetic experiences. The aesthetic consciousness of Chinese culture originates from daily diet activities. It can be seen from the connotations of Chinese character “美”, which means “beauty refers to the good taste of mutton”. Clearly, personal aesthetic consciousness originates from the sense of taste in diet, and then gradually expands to all things that can bring beauty in spiritual life.

Lao Tzu claimed that “do that which consists in taking no action, pursue that which is not meddlesome, and savor that which has no flavor”. He extended the concept of flavor into the realm of aesthetics and thought that the real delicacy appears in its original form rather than food processing. Besides, he regarded “no flavor” as an aesthetic concept and elaborated on Taoist aesthetic pursuit of “bland-flavored”. Chuang-Tzu also regarded simplicity and natural form as the highest form. From their perspectives, Taoists hold that beauty lies in the state of being natural. Besides, Taoists intentionally pursue elegant artistry in many ways like dining environment, tableware, food material and so on. The style of simplicity, elegance, freshness and unworldliness permeates many levels of Chinese cultures such as Chinese painting, home design and unpretentious behaviors.

A Bite of China abundantly reveals splendid sceneries of great China such as the delicate lakes and primitively classic houses in the south of Yangtze River, the elegant and plain bamboos, the hazy mountains and so on. All those natural sceneries are like Chinese landscape paintings, not only do they vividly portray the traditional artistic conceptions; they also create extraordinary charm and graceful beauty. The most obvious is the beginning logo, typically a landscape painting, which shows a piece of salted meat and a pair of chopsticks. What's more, a lot of Chinese elements were interspersed with, like bamboos, small boats and a china bowl. All these pictures vividly illustrate the Chinese Taoist aesthetic pursuit of "great skill seems awkward" and "natural and refined"

In the Secrets of the Kitchen, when the famous Yangzhou dish "Wensi tofu" is introduced, a vivid and tuneful voiceover follows "if you want to shred lactone tofu, which is extremely tender and vulnerable into the size of a piece of hair, it is not only a challenge toward the coordination of hands, eyes and knife, but also the integration of skill and mind. And that's what we need to prepare Wensi tofu...thin as hair, the silken tofu is put into clear water, the foggy form is often described as Chinese landscape painting". When the Chinese landscape paintings are mentioned, a close-up shot is zooming in a dark bowl, half-full, slowly floating with hair-thin silken tofu and quietly spreading out in the water. The seemingly ordinary ingredients are immediately injected into life and filled with refinement and beauty. With ordinary ingredients, simple tools, elaborate techniques and elegant artistry, Taoist food aesthetics is apparently seen.

B. Diet Philosophy: Harmony between Man and Nature

The pursuit of "harmony between man and nature" is the top target for Taoists and also the basic nature of Chinese harmonization culture. The harmony is often manifested in three ways, that is, harmony between food and man, harmony between food and nature, harmony between food and society. On the first level, harmony refers to an ideal relationship between food and man. By using some cooking skills and tools, ingredients of a dish coordinated and integrated into a perfect unity to satisfy the appetite of people. On the second level, harmony is often used to refer to the natural relationship between food and nature. On the third level, harmony is reflected in the social functions of food.

The first harmony is displayed in the mingling of different flavors. Food materials vary a lot in its categories, features and flavors. During the food-processing, flavors of all the ingredients interact with each other and therefore good taste of a dish will be achieved. Taoists hold that everything is interacting with each other; therefore, blending is extremely significant. The blending of flavor must follow the natural rules.

According to Taoists, people should have seasonal preferences for food. To be specific, spring is good for sour food, summer is fit for bitter food, autumn is suitable for spicy food and winter favors salty food. Considering the influences of geographical location, season and climate, the Chinese adjust ways of eating, which is a reflection of Taoist

harmony. Take Chongqing for example, the local people love hotpot quite a lot. The unique habit is influenced by geographical features. As a matter of fact, Chongqing is located in lowland area and it also has plenty of rainfall and humidity. Therefore, the locals eat hotpot for getting rid of coldness and keeping warm in winter; besides, eating hotpot can also help them get rid of harmful substances by the way of sweating. In *A Bite of China*, the world-renowned and unique Chongqing hotpot is also introduced. Its uniqueness lies in the cooking skills, tools, eating manners and occasions. Chongqing hotpot is not only an art of harmony, but also a perfect embodiment of the essence of harmony in Chinese philosophy.

The second harmony is particularly obvious in Taoist ideology. Lao Tzu said, "The way is broad, reaching left as well as right. The myriad creatures depend on it for life yet it claims no authority. It accomplishes its task yet lays claim to no merit. It clothes and feeds the myriad creatures yet lays no claim to being their master". He claimed that man should obey the natural rule and live in harmony with nature. Besides, he thought that man should cherish and protect nature. Another representative of Taoism, Chuang-Tzu also put forward that man should live in harmony with each other, therefore, man feel happy; man should respect and follow natural rules, that's the foundation of all living creatures. The philosophy of harmony is also depicted in *A Bite of China*, for example, in order to perpetuate the natural gift, Zhuoma and her mother buried the fungus pit timely after collecting tricholoma matsutake. The same story is that fisherman used a six-inch net for fishing so as to protect young fish. The tradition of "hunting instead of killing" has been passed down from generation to generation.

C. Functions of Food: Harmony between Man and Man

The third harmony is embodied in the functions of food. In daily dietary activities, personal emotions, interpersonal relationships and social groups are strengthened and condensed. Material satisfaction is firstly fulfilled via food and then it is sublimated to spiritual enjoyment. By virtue of food, man is united in body and soul. Therefore, the goal of harmony is achieved.

In *A Bite of China*, food becomes a media to express emotion. The documentary focuses more on Chinese homesickness. Frequent words like "mom dishes", "hometown", "childhood" and "home" moved numerous audiences. The documentary not only reminds people of the bygone memories of mouthwatering food, it also touches people somewhere. For those people who leave their motherland and stay abroad for a long time, their homesickness was particularly released. What's more, there is a vivid depiction of simple and kind-hearted laborers working happily together. For example, when kimchi, a local traditional food was introduced, audiences can feel the happiness and harmony from the screen. While making kimchi, neighbors are busy preparing food materials, washing, chopping, and working happily together in winter. Their laughs and drove coldness away, harmony was quite visible.

In Chinese culture, food is a way to communicate. From the daily life of ordinary people to political affairs of leaders, eating is indispensable. The Chinese people experience various kinds of dinners in a lifetime such as birthday, wedding day, graduation day, funeral, etc. Even for governing a country, there is a Taoist saying like “governing a large state is like boiling a small fish”. Eating is the most important part in sorts of festivals and customs throughout China. For example, dumplings, Tang-yuan, mooncake and Zongzi are typical symbols of festivals. In *A Bite of China*, people from the same village gather together to celebrate the rich harvest and also share the so-called “long- street dinner”. Similarly, in order to celebrate the harvest, the Tibetan people express their joys by drinking highland barley wine. From the above, food not only satisfies people’s appetite, it also provides a way to express people feelings.

D. Views of Food Consumption: More Simplicity, Less Desire

Lao Tzu advocates a series of natural rules of letting things take their own course. To follow the rules, man should live in a simple and frugal way, with honest and pure thinking and behaviors. He also focuses more on the importance of man’s spiritual life instead of merely satisfaction of daily necessities. Besides, he thinks man should have less desire for material benefits and seek more for selflessness and simplicity. His views of food consumption are frequently revealed in the documentary. With more exposure of food safety problems like genetically modified food, waste oil, toxic milk powder, clenbuterol, etc., timely broadcasting of *A Bite of China* is a heavy blow to those selfish, ruthless and greedy merchants. In the documentary, many merchants are highly spoken of for their outstanding qualities of integrity, purity, selflessness and diligence. For example, in Guangxi province, a young merchant named A Liang became famous for his honesty of producing sour bamboo shoot. He refused to sacrifice food quality for making much more money and kept his traditional and tedious ways of food procession. What impressed us most is the old-aged couple, Mr. Huang and his wife won respect from us for their honesty and simplicity in making and selling yellow steamed bun. The heavy work is not easy for them, but they never complain or choose to live with their daughter and enjoy the happiness of old-age life, instead, they feel the great happiness and satisfaction of labor. The old couple believes in “no pain, no gain” and put it into daily work. Besides, there are many ordinary people with their moving stories like the Mrs. Wu and her daughter from a tofu shop, the young man from the shop selling tangerine-flavored duck and professional diggers of lotus root, they are typical representatives of the majority of Chinese laborers, showing traditional qualities like honesty, strength, purity and diligence.

Although the bygone era of poverty-stricken doesn’t exist anymore, most of us won’t be worried about the daily necessities. However, we’re still anxious about food consumption. The reason for anxiety is that there is a lack of acknowledged and commonly agreed criteria of what makes a reasonable consumption. Furthermore, we need enough

support and guidance by a strong belief in Chinese traditional culture. The success of the documentary also lies in the effective promotion of positive, healthy and reasonable views of food consumption. In order to achieve sustainable development and biosphere balance, the mankind must take the overall interests of the biosphere into consideration and meet the material needs of individuals moderately.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Chinese feel proud of the world-renowned Chinese food. On the one hand, China has profound and sophisticated cooking techniques and a lot of creative minds; on the other hand, Chinese food is rich in traditional cultures. The more developed and civilized a nation is, the more excellent the food is. Civilization and food cultures are closely related and interacted with each other.

Taoism, the most representative ideology in traditional Chinese culture, aims at pursuing the harmony between man and nature. The Taoist influences on Chinese food culture are particularly obvious in *A Bite of China*. From the perspective of food aesthetics, it shows simplicity and elegance; from the perspective of food philosophy, it stresses the unity between man and nature; from the perspective of social functions of food, it focuses on harmony between man and nature; from the perspective of food consumption, it advocates thrifty, selfness and less desires. Nowadays, the Taoist ideology plays a meaningful role in promoting and spreading Chinese food culture.

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