



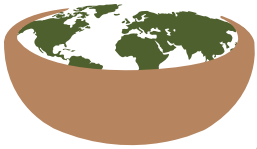
An Introduction to the Culinary Traditions of Jiangnan Region, China

By: Michael Lange and Diane Tye

As editors of *Digest*, we (Diane Tye and Mike Lange) recently accompanied Tim Lloyd, the Executive Director of the American Folklore Society, on a three day culinary and cultural program held in the Jiangnan region in eastern China. The AFS members were invited by Professor Chao Gejin, President of the China Folklore Society. We joined other scholars in ceremonies and a brief educational program designed to draw attention to regional foodways and folkways traditions and to help launch the process to include these rich traditions on governmental rosters of official intangible cultural heritage expressions. The group included international experts such as Professor Sangmee Bak from Hankuk University in South Korea, Professor Matsuo Koichi from the Graduate University for Advanced Studies in Japan, and Professor Pei-kai Cheng, President of the Chinese Culture Institute in Hong Kong, as well as a large group of Chinese scholars.

Jiangnan is a region located south of the Yangtze River. It includes the southern part of the Yangtze Delta and encompasses the municipality of Shanghai, the southern part of Jiangsu Province, the southern part of Anhui Province, the northern part of Jiangxi Province, and the northern part of Zhejiang Province. In addition to Shanghai, two of the most important cities in the area are Changzhou and Nanjing.

Changzhou, where the program began, is situated in the central Yangtze River Delta, near Taihu Lake and on the southern bank of the Yangtze River. It is an ancient city with a cultural history extending back more than 3200 years. An administrative center, Changzhou hosts a number of significant cultural and historic sites. It is also known for many local culinary specialties such as dried turnip, sesame cake, Liyang geese, wild bamboo shoots, Liyan cress, Nanshan chestnuts, and Changdang Lake crabs as well as a range of folk craft traditions including Changzhou combs, brick screens, Cloisonne painting, paper lanternmaking, silk embroidery, bamboo carving and Jintai paper cutting.



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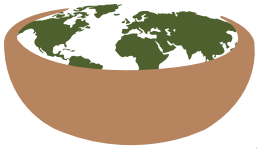
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Nanjing, the city where the program ended on day three, has a long history as a major centre of culture, education, research, politics, commerce, transportation and tourism. The capital of Jaingsu Province and the second largest city in East China, Nanjing has been one of China's most important cities for over a thousand years and is recognized as one of the Four Great Ancient Capitals of China. It is known for several culinary specialties; radish is a local favourite as are dishes based on duck: Nanjing salted duck, duck blood and vermicelli soup, and duck oil pancake.

Although Tim Lloyd had been to China ten times previously to participate in initiatives supported by the long-standing collaboration between AFS and the China Folklore, this was the first visit to the country for both of us. We found the experience both exhilarating and captivating. From the moment our plane landed, we were accompanied by helpful translators and cultural ambassadors, who not only made sure that we understood the conversations around us, but also informed us about the cultural surroundings and some of the meanings of the multi-sensory experiences in which we were immersed. The sense we engaged in that is of most interest to the readers of *Digest* is, of course, taste. And taste we did. We were treated to multi-course meals prepared by some of the best chefs in China. Most were national master chefs known not only for their expertise in regional cuisine but for their innovation at reinterpreting it in new and creative ways. Over the few days of the program, we sampled many, many specialties. At the smallest banquet meals we were served more than twenty courses and at the larger ones, we often simply lost count. Most meals were served in formal style, with guests sitting around a large, round table with a rotating center. During the meal, service staff gradually filled the center with a staggering variety of dishes.

Our first day began with an opening ceremony held in the Grand Hotel, Changzhou. It gathered together scholars and officials to recognize the importance of Changzhou and Jiangnan traditions and to designate Shuang Gui Fang, the sesame cake that is a regional specialty, as a Chinese Traditional Food. The event also marked the official creation of a Research Commission of Traditional Food Culture under the China Folklore Society to study and promote regional foodways and folkways.

Following the opening ceremony, the first banquet meal took place at Xin He Shun, a fine restaurant in the heart of Changzhou known for its "lake fresh" cuisine. The chef greeted us and spoke briefly about the sources of his recipes and ingredients. It was a pattern that would repeat itself several times over the course of our visit.



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The Jiangnan region is best known for its traditional seafood dishes and we sampled many of them in our introductory meal. A showpiece dish of this first dinner was a huge tureen of turtle soup that had a dozen or so whole turtles floating in it.

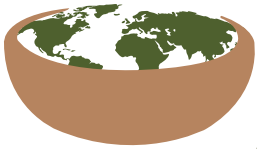
After lunch, we toured several cultural sites including an artists' workshop in an historic district, where silk embroiderers, bamboo carvers, comb makers, painters, calligraphers, and carvers all worked to maintain traditional forms of folk art indigenous to the region. In addition to demonstrations of crafts, there were performances of traditional practices such as tea ceremonies, incense burning, and folksinging and storytelling.

Dinner that evening was an elaborate banquet held at the Tingsonglou Hotel, another restaurant with a reputation for its fine lake fresh dishes. The meal featured more regional specialties and among the many dishes we sampled were Puffer fish with burdock, Crystal river shrimps, Stewed duck in beer, Green rice ball with Ay Tsao juice, Braised bean curd, Fried rice with dried turnip, Crispy beef, Stewed bamboo shoots, and Fruit yoghurt.

The second day kicked off with a breakfast meal consisting of an array of steamed and fried buns and other lighter dishes that are often served at holidays and festivals. Here we tasted Shuang Gui Fang, the special sesame cake for which Changzhou is well known and the dish that had been designated as a Chinese Traditional Food at the opening ceremony the day before. We were instructed on how the cakes were made and were guests at a graduation ceremony of apprentice chefs.

The lunch that followed this lavish breakfast was held at a hotel on Lake Taihu where all of the dishes featured bounty taken from the lake right outside the windows. A grouper, like most fish in the traditional Chinese cuisine we sampled, was served whole. It arrived with a small sword in its mouth, ready to be disassembled and distributed among the diners. Other dishes included Crab with fish corn soup, Snail and fish with pepper and soy sauce, Taihu Lake brine shrimp, Grilled eel, Steamed white fish, Dry fried Taihu Rhodeus fish, Grilled needle fish, Taihu Lake duck marinated with rice wine, and a range of sea vegetables harvested from the shore and the littoral. Yet again our stomachs and our senses were filled to beyond capacity.

An afternoon visit to Yancheng City and remarks from Prof. Lu Jianfang of Nanjing Museum introduced us to the ancient city and the archaeological work that has been



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carried out there. The evening banquet took place at Lake Tianmu, hosted by the Tianmuhu Hotel that bills itself as “China’s first fish culture theme hotel.” Again, we were fed by a national master chef and treated to a multivisual introduction to the dishes and their ingredients. The many dishes served included the hotel’s specialty, a reinterpretation of a local foodways: a braised fish head soup prepared in an earthenware casserole dish that is currently being franchised to other locations.

Our third and final day of the program began with a visit to, and banquet at, a newly opened Taoism interpretative site. Spring rolls, White fish, Shrimp, and Crispy noodles were but a few of the many dishes that made up this meal. Next we travelled to the city of Nanjing. At the Nanjing Museum we had a taste of Kunqu opera and tea followed in the evening by our last banquet together and a boat tour of the city. The final banquet featured Nanjing specialties such as famous stinky tofu. The strong, acrid smell of the tofu in preparation belies the subtle and rich flavor, which was a fine complement to yet another wonderful meal. We also were served a purple sweet-potato-based drink the consistency of yogurt. Its delicate sweetness and hint of earth made for a nice addition to the meal. The program came to a relaxed conclusion as the closing banquet erupted into the sharing of traditional songs.

It is not overstating things to say that our brief introduction to the Jiangnan region through its cuisine left us with a case of sensory overload. We have not even tried to capture here the sights and sounds of our journey, but instead have tried to focus on just a few of the highlights of taste, as is appropriate to a short piece in a foodways journal. A meal in Jiangnan was not simply a matter of a series of dishes crossing the plate and then the palate. The socialization, the toasting of friends and colleagues, the ritualized drinking and singing that are parts of many foodways traditions across China, were all present and created an overwhelming feeling of friendship and hospitality, of sharing and communion. It will come as a surprise to no one reading this that food can be an incredibly powerful vehicle for social cohesion.

Brief descriptions of the meals we encountered can only capture the barest minimum of the sociality we experienced on our visit to sample and celebrate the foodways of Jiangnan. As Tim Lloyd so aptly put it when thanking the China Folklore Society and members of the local organizing committees, we left Jiangnan with our minds filled with new experiences, our stomachs filled with delicious foods, and our hearts filled with friendship. As we made our way back home, we felt deep appreciation for the generosity of our hosts and the incredible richness of folk traditions and food ways



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in Jiangnan. We also had an increased awareness of the respect the Chinese have for forms of traditional culture and of the country's emergence as an international leader in the recognition of forms of intangible cultural heritage for safeguarding.



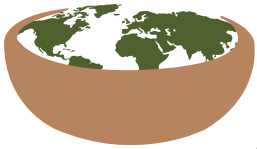


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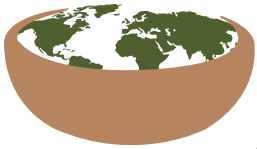
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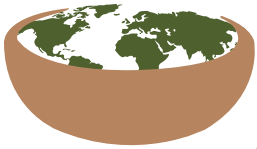




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