

Soups: Medical and Culinary Gifts of Flavor

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One morning in July we were in Dali, Yunnan Province. We had stopped there overnight on our way north to Weixi County where we were to continue our research on minority nationality medicines in China's southwest. Recalling a favorite food from a previous summer of fieldwork, we went in search of a "Xizhou baba," a fry cake that is local to only a few places around Erhai. We didn't have time to go north to Xizhou just for breakfast, but we hoped that an adequate equivalent – a sweetened or salty pastry, fresh-made, very light, only a little oily, at once crispy and tender – could be found in Dali City. Near Dali College (大理学院) we did find a vendor selling her just-fried Baba, so we bought two and took them across the street to a noodle stand where we ordered our breakfast noodles.

As it turned out, these Dali Baba did not compare very well with our memories of the Xizhou version – probably nothing could have – but they were good enough to share while we waited for our bowls of noodles. It was the noodles that morning, however, that were the real revelation, they were so extraordinarily good. Eating and talking about them led to the argument we will make in this presentation.

Good food, revelatory food, even, is difficult to talk about or analyze. What we can (inadequately) say about those noodles in Dali is that the broth was especially delicious, tasting of peppered sesame oil (辣椒芝麻油), anise, cilantro and subtler flavors. The family running the noodle stand had provided bowls of self-serve condiments, fresh and pickled, and they encouraged us to add whatever we wished to our bowls, though they also warned us not to overdo the hot peppers lest we ruin the flavor of the soup. We found the noodles as served to us by the cook to be perfect as they were, with no additions. When we left the noodle stand to return to our hotel and the bus station, as we paid for our inexpensive breakfast, we thanked the cook and praised her cooking – she beamed with pleasure.¹

¹ We cannot demonstrate it with written evidence, but we believe that most women in China are pretty committed to being skilled at cooking. Even an infrequent or inexperienced cook is hurt if eaters find fault with her cooking. And it is common for visitors to evaluate the quality of family life in a home where they are being served a meal by judging from the hosts' (successful or failed) efforts to provide good, fresh, hot dishes and a respectably prepared "main food" (主食). See Bunkenborg 2009 for an excellent discussion of the local significance of staple foods in Henan.

We immediately felt quite attached to this very good cook. She seemed to us a truly kind and caring person, a generous giver of quite unexpected and unsolicited gifts. We wished we lived in the neighborhood so we could eat there everyday, become a “regular,” get to know the family, reciprocate their gift with our neighborliness. There is, after all, no requirement that street-stand noodles in a College neighborhood be beautifully crafted. A bowl of noodles is not expensive, and in China, as everyone knows, most soup noodles are good food. But very few people would think of this food as haute cuisine.² This particular bowl of noodles was so good, though! We felt as if this very skilled noodle stand cook had given us a rare and precious gift. Had we been locals, we would have found ways to give back in a continuing relationship.

In what follows, we want to think in terms of the logic of the gift, as explored in the Maussian tradition, to bring together two kinds of caring skill: the valorized and theorized medical techniques of formula design/drug mixing (配药 or 配方), and the almost entirely unspoken and taken-for-granted culinary skills of the good cook who combines ingredients to make a delicious unity. In keeping with the distinctions originally made by Mauss, and extended throughout an anthropological tradition of distinguishing between the gift and the commodity, both gifts exceed and even challenge notions of market value. Both kinds of experts, medical and culinary, combine *flavors* to transform the body and experience of the recipient of their gift. Both healer and cook, in other words, exert their skills to craft flavor as a force in the intimate life of bodies. Importantly, both *taste* their ingredients and both deal in *soups*: we argue that the closely related cultural forms of decocted soups (汤药) and soup noodles (汤面), as deployed in contemporary China, partake in the logic of the gift. Moreover, gifts of flavor in medicine and cuisine, prescribing and cooking, mark off a significant space of difference in a world dominated by, and usually explained in terms of, market exchange and radical commodification.³

² David E. Sutton in his *Remembrance of Repasts* (New York, Oxford: Berg, 2001, pp. 73-102) has a chapter on alterations in food thinking and experience under conditions of migration. Both of us have noticed that when we are far from East Asia one of the things we most long for is a decent bowl of noodles. But when we're in China and eating noodles almost every day, we seldom have to worry about getting bad noodles (but see below about the hotel in Weixi) and we seldom exert any effort to find truly excellent noodles.

³ Indeed, gifts of flavor in the domain of traditional medicine (either TCM or the “nationality medicines” we are currently investigating) popularly stand in contrast to biomedical pharmaceutical treatments. These latter drugs, however compounded they may be, cannot be seen as hand-crafted; rather, they are understood as a product of an impersonal, rational, and authoritative science. And they seldom participate in a gift or barter economy. Indeed, Bunkenborg (2009) has argued that their market value is part of their efficacy in the village usage he described. Rather, medical consumers are willing to pay for biomedicines in the expectation that they will be receiving a standardized, effective, and safe drug. The implicit morality and

Before we turn to the place of formula-design in the “folk” medicines we have been studying, before we reflect on soup-making in general, we want to describe a different bowl of noodles, one that Lili ordered but didn’t eat the very morning after we were in Dali. Told by a friend that the newest hotel in Weixi County Town (The Jinyu) had a good included breakfast buffet, we booked our room there and turned up for breakfast with some anticipation, more or less when the dining room opened. Here the breakfast noodles were managed at a cooking station in the dining room. It was bad enough that the staff was not ready to boil any noodles at opening time, so there was rather a wait for them. Worse, the system was annoying: The cook boiled the noodles alone in plain water and delivered them up unflavored in a bowl to the customer. We were expected to add all flavorings from a help-yourself set up featuring the usual sauces and condiments.

The result was, the noodles were no good. Adding room-temperature, or even cold, condiments to plain hot noodles has terrible consequences for the warmth and consistency of the mixture. But this system also required a certain skill and self-knowledge on the part of the consumer: Lili said, what do I know about making good noodles? She felt insulted, uncared for, disserved. She had no interest in claiming the expertise she would need to choose her condiments well, to help herself to them, to add them to her bowl in the most mixable sequence, to work at the proper speed to maintain the fresh hot consistency of the noodles themselves: this was a consumer regime that left her cold. A “serve yourself” (自助) regime of food provision suggested that the hotel management had no interest in serving or caring for us. Finally, this way of serving noodles included no soup! We could only conclude that the hotel had no interest in staffing the noodle station with a skilled cook, a soup-maker who understood and could generously share *flavors*. From then on, we referred to these as neoliberal noodles. They put far too much emphasis on consumer choice and on a kind of “help yourself” moral responsibility, while removing from the hotel all responsibility for *giving* us an “included” and flavorful breakfast.

Peiyao 配药, *peifang* 配方, *tangyao* 汤药:

It is foundational to the logic of the modern system of Chinese herbal medicine that natural medicines have properties and characters, and that they have affinities with particular visceral systems of function or circulation tracts. Along with the classic notions of character (hot, cold, warming, cooling, etc.) and the sometimes useful knowledge about tract affinities, flavor (pungent, sweet, sour, bitter, salty, astringent, neutral) is very important. Check any materia medica text, every drug listed or explained has a known flavor, sometimes two. The meaning of the term “flavor,” however, affords no simple translation into English, as one of us

rationality of market relations, especially as market exchange is realized in biomedical service delivery, may be part of the troubled cultural matrix in which tensions between consumers and health care providers have recently been violently expressed.

has argued in several places.⁴ Indeed, understanding the “five flavors” in Chinese medicine requires seeing them as both classificatory rubrics (gathering, distinguishing, and comparing diverse things with diverse properties) and as direct efficacies in themselves. Sweet replenishes, sour constricts, and so forth.⁵ Flavors in European usage, confined mainly to the realm of cooking and eating food, are weak by comparison. The medical magic bullet is a flavorless pill.

In the research we have been doing on minority nationality medicines in the southwest, however, there are a great many local herbals in use that have not made it into the national or even regional materia medica handbooks. We have wondered how local gatherers and users of natural medicines have determined the flavor classification of the previously unknown things they use in their medical practices. Trained in Chinese medicine, we presume that it would be impossible for anyone to “combine drugs” (*peiyao*) without having the classificatory system of the five flavors to aid their thinking. The technical complexities of the TCM specialty of Formulary are well known: there is both an archive of classic formulas which are analyzed and understood partly with reference to the matched flavors they include, and there is a logic and techniques for designing tailor-made formulas in ways that can maximize the efficacies of flavors and characters while avoiding clashes and cross-purposes.

So, with TCM always in the back of our minds as we worked, we asked a number of those we interviewed in nationality areas how they know what flavor any of their special wild medicines “belongs to.” Though many of these interviewees consider themselves to be primarily herbalists (*caoyi* 草医), and though many of them do consult a few published materia medica sources, most were uninterested in telling us how they classify their drugs. We expected that those who had and used books would say that they found analogs for local varieties of plants in those materials. A few did seem to do this, but most felt that the wild drugs on which they had built some of their reputation were more unique than the official materia medica system could accommodate.

With Shen Nong tasting the 100 herbs in mind, we asked many whether they personally tasted the local herbs in use. Most said they did, some of them emphasizing that this personal testing of unknown substances with their own bodies was one foundation of their knowledge and practice. Moreover, everyone knows that it takes an informed palate to classify the taste of a natural substance for medical use: that is, it may be easy to say whether a leaf or root has sweet or astringent qualities, but this unknown plant also has a number of other flavors that are of little medical use. The immediate taste in the mouth of something relatively unfamiliar, collected up in the forest, is only the first step in understanding how a

⁴ Farquhar, *Knowing Practice*, Ch. 6; *Appetites*, Ch. 1.

⁵ One need only look at Europe’s foundational text of gastronomy, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s *The Physiology of Taste*, and his translator M.F.K.Fischer’s worshipful extensions of his insights, to see the fundamental dualisms of nutrition vs. flavor, substance vs. epiphenomenon, which underpin the modern European experience of flavor.

type of flavor might translate into a predictable therapeutic effect. Some “clinical” experimentation, beginning with the vulnerable body of the healer, is required to characterize local and novel drugs in a way that can lead to more effective (and safe, and balanced) combinations.

We are suggesting that there are two moments in the practice of a mountain herbalist that are crucial to the making of good soups: one is the tasting of individual herbs (or the understanding of classificatory taste in the case of already known herbs) and one is the rare ability to combine them in an effective decoction or herbal plaster. Indeed, many of those we have talked to in the south seem to feel that one key difference between a mere “folk” herbalist and a practitioner of a genuine nationality medicine is the latter’s ability to efficaciously combine herbs.⁶ This distinction may be rather gendered: women are often credited with knowing one or a few herbs that, used singly (and often in combination with relatively non-medicinal food), have routine efficacies against common ailments. Healers, in most areas mostly men,⁷ are believed to have special skills to both *know* medicines with a special sensitivity, an informed sense of taste, gained from their time spent gathering in the mountains, and to know *how to combine them* for reliably good results. The skill of combining drugs is very often developed over years, through an apprenticeship relationship with teachers. Some of these medical forebears still communicate with living healers, speaking through dreams from the yin side inhabited by ancestors and ghosts.

Knowing how to combine herbs is a way of achieving a special, unique therapeutic efficacy. We remind you that all nationality medicines in China are committed to the principle of treating in accord with specificities of time, place, and person (因人因时因地), just as TCM is. Even if the technicalities of flavor classification in Chinese medicine are not much emphasized among southern healers, their expert work can still be seen as quite similar to great cooking: they have figured out how to combine the plant and animal substances they know to have a direct positive effect on the bodies of their patients. In parallel, our noodle-maker in Dali knew how to give us a beautifully embodied morning with her brilliant soup.

It is significant that our local collaborators in research on minority medicine are finding it difficult to persuade “nationality” healers to talk about the “theory” behind their practices. Most of the healers we have seen would rather just discuss the natural drugs they collect, process, and combine into formulas, one by one, and with considerable respect for the thing itself. Possibly great cooks, too, don’t think much about flavor in theory. Instead they know from experience and from being taught what particular foods work together well and achieve a uniquely flavorful and efficacious unity. Working with concrete locally unique foods/drugs as their

⁶ Other kinds of combining expertise is also valued, such as the coordination of needling and massage techniques, or rituals and herbals, achieved by healers with excellent reputations. [See Lili’s email.] But for this paper we will explore only the herbal medicine versions of the combining of flavors.

⁷ The Li nationality of Hainan Island may be an exception to this regularity.

central resources,⁸ cooks and healers *give* a common embodiment, that moment when the skilled combiner of flavors knows what we are tasting, because she has made it, and an event when *we know* – corporeally – that *he knows* – also corporeally – what we are tasting with our whole bodies.

Here we are emphasizing the moment of commonality embodied in the gift of medical and gustatory flavor in order to return to the logic of the gift. The medical gift of flavors both expresses the healer's hard-won experience and wisdom and addresses the patient's particular needs and situation. Moreover, it is not the flavor of each drug itself that really counts but the mixing of several that is truly, brilliantly efficacious. Though flavor in Chinese logics of eating and cooking is not separable from food substance, we can't help feeling that brilliant flavor, expert mixing, is like what Mauss called "the Hau of the gift" – its character and efficacy, its magical force.

The Gift

Gift and exchange theory in anthropology has tended to insist on a distinction between things given and things sold, between social prestations and market commodities.⁹ A cultural history of "traditional Chinese medicine" or of southern Chinese folk medicine might argue that rural local healers have traditionally maintained a significant distance from market relations, often accepting barter goods for their services, or mostly treating family members and neighbors without charge within a system of total prestation, relatively innocent of the capitalist market. But we don't see the need to insist on the anti-capitalist purity of folk healers, any more than we would think less fondly of the noodle soup maker in Dali because charged a few *kuai* for our breakfast. Certainly, healers accept money both for their services and for their packets of herbal drugs; and even contributions of rice to the stores of a shaman (considered as part of some ritual processes we have noted in the south) could be seen as a form of market exchange. Much anthropology of China has found considerable complexity in the kinds of relationships that are forged in settings where money and goods change hands.¹⁰

Some ethnography has argued that Chinese gifts have to be understood as distinguishing between *sharing* (inside, in the family, and thus being no gift at all) and *exchanging* (between people who are at least minimally outsiders to each other, and thus need to establish some kind of *guanxi* across a social space).¹¹ Exchange in the latter case is almost always both commodity and gift, both self-interested market relationship and generous action that connects people: these two poles in

⁸ Marketing for the best ingredients is probably as cultivated a skill as gathering medicines in the mountains, though the former appears to be a less theorized or articulated process. Another instance of gendered local knowledge.

⁹ Arguably the stubbornness of this distinction in anthropology is more attributable to the important history of ethnography in Oceania than to any general usefulness for comparing world cultures. Sean Dowdy, personal communication.

¹⁰ From de Gloppe to Osburg, refs. needed.

¹¹ Stuart Thompson article [ref.] on ritual food is especially helpful, as is Bunkenborg's analysis. One might bear in mind Marshall Sahlins' recent argument that kinship amounts to shared substance in many societies including China [ref.].

China can never be pure opposites, there's always a muddle. Of course some polarizing distinctions are made: some things are entirely commodity and establish no relationship except that of the public market; some things are very intimate exchanges across a social distance (e.g. between agnate and affine families in a marriage process) that can proceed only when lubricated by a lot of carefully ("givingly") manufactured *ganqing* 感情. The ambiguities could be legion, if it really mattered to anyone whether they were actually giving or receiving a gift or a commodity. But perhaps it is only those situations in which the muddle is reduced to one purity – our neoliberal noodles in a fancy hotel – that really surprise anyone or call for critical attention. Operating an almost complete "help yourself" model of commercialized food provision, the hotel noodle station avoided trafficking in the ineffable, unknowable, non-rational excess of *flavors skillfully combined and generously given*. There was no interpersonal sharing or caring, no event of common embodiment: no *hau* or magic of the gift.

An unusually tasty soup for ordinary morning noodles is experienced as an unexpected gift, its flavor crafted and offered out of the goodness of someone's heart. A miraculously effective drug formula developed by a rural healer, once cooked up in a soup at home, reaches our whole body with its care even when we have (willingly) handed over cash for it. At the same time, as the eater of this soup (吃汤 / 药), I am briefly but radically closing a social distance: I am putting my body at the mercy of the kindness and expertise of strangers.

Conclusion: The Flavor of the Gift, the Gift of Flavor

Modern Chinese consumers worry about food product safety, the hygiene of restaurants, the possibility of poison in herbs collected in the wild, the dark side of ritual practice. And, like the two of us traveling to find healers in Yunnan, we count ourselves lucky when some skilled and generous soul has anticipated our appetites and discomforts and found a way to transform them with a mixture of foods, drugs, and flavors.

I hope our listeners today are thinking of similar gifts, wonderful flavors, and effective therapies they have received in public places from total strangers. But as our neoliberal noodles reminded us, most exchange of food or medicine cannot be seen as taking the form of gifts rather than commodities. But the shared domain of food and medicine invites practitioners to achieve an inspired mixture, a wise and skilled *combination* (配). Just as healer or cook are sometimes able to combine flavors to directly address, and even, through the human faculty of taste, to share our hungry or uncomfortable embodiment, perhaps we could also say that they are able to combine gift and commodity, public exchange and intimate sharing in a salutary mixture. By understanding and using flavor, usually with their hands, eyes, and mouths rather than with their minds and books and notes, they give a gift – a transfer of effective substance from body to body – generously. It's only a pity that this kind of expertise is, and perhaps has long been, relatively rare.