

Chapter 1

Eating Hong Kong: The Experiences of a Food Lover and Nutritional Scientist

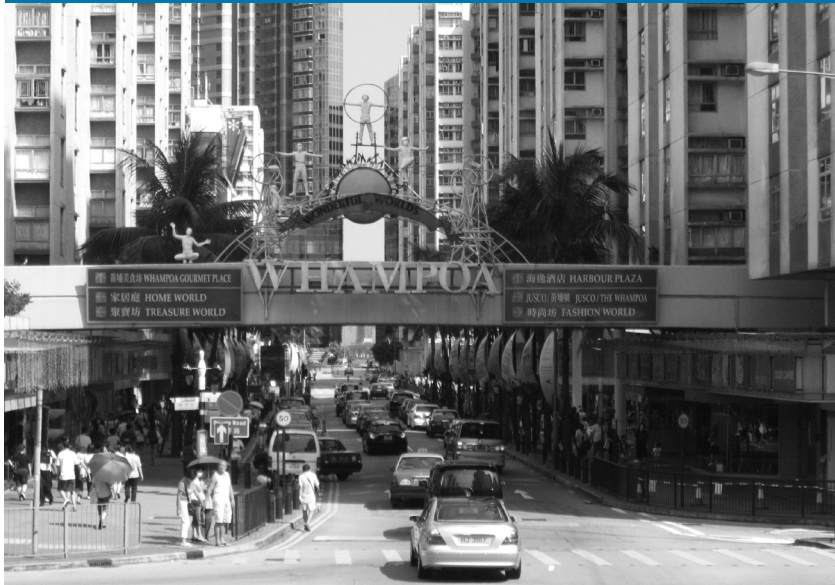
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Food has always been an important part of my life. It probably started with being breast fed but I usually date it to when I was about 12 or 13 and I became deputy cook to my mother. She started working outside the home and I was responsible for preparing lunch for those who were around. I am the sixth of eight children, although I think by that time some of the older ones were elsewhere. The food was simple and straightforward and British, but I developed a feel and an understanding for it that was unusual for somebody of that age. Living in Ghana, West Africa for a year when I was 18 expanded enormously my concept of what food might be and then in my early twenties I spent three or four years working as a chef and a baker in a variety of restaurants. That led to the pursuit of a degree in nutrition, followed a PhD and a trail that culminated as a professor of nutrition. But while my nutritional biochemistry laboratory became an important part of my life, it never totally supplanted my kitchen.

My appointment in Hong Kong was centered at Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), which is situated in the heart of Kowloon, one of the most densely populated parts of the world. I taught an introductory nutritional biochemistry course, focused on the nutrients and their function in the body and similar to courses I teach in the United States. But one of the reasons that I love nutrition as a discipline is its breadth. It considers everything from the molecular details of nutrient function inside cells to why people choose to eat the way that they do. Although in the classroom I was dealing with the biochemical, I knew that in the larger world of Hong Kong I would have the opportunity to conduct nutritional investigations of a more applied and experiential kind. I would get to eat Hong Kong.

Wonderful Worlds of Whampoa



I lived with my family in an apartment in the Wonderful Worlds of Whampoa, a high-density planned development close to PolyU, built mostly in the 1980s. It contains about 75 15-storey tower blocks, all similar to each other. They were laid out in clusters, in a pretty thoughtful way that facilitated interaction between the occupants. The wonder of the place came from all the malls and other facilities that were incorporated. There was Fashion World, Treasure World, Home World, Pebble World and then of course the ship—a full sized passenger liner, made out of concrete and sitting in six inches of water. This alluded to the shipyard past of this neighborhood, which had been built on reclaimed land. The ship contained restaurants and a department store. Just across the street was Gourmet Place, a four-

storey building above the bus station, with lots of good restaurants and a movie theater. There was even a bowling alley in the basement.

So, these wonderful worlds were what we got to call home. There were very few westerners living in Whampoa and none in our block. We looked out over Victoria Harbour, though in an easterly direction and so not directly towards Hong Kong Island. We had about 750 square feet for the four of us and our kitchen was maybe 10 x 8 feet. This is very typical for Hong Kong; we were living a middle class Chinese existence. A notable feature of this kitchen was the lack of an oven, though again that was quite usual by Hong Kong standards. We cooked on a two-burner gas stove, which we supplemented with a rice cooker (usual) and a microwave oven (less usual). We also got a small toaster oven that my sons pressed into service to make pizza and chocolate chip cookies when those cravings developed.

Those unusual situations aside, the set up of this kitchen points to immediate differences between the Western and Chinese styles of cooking. My mother would not have known how to cope with just two burners. Her standard meal structure was meat, potatoes and vegetables, which required three burners or two burners and an oven. For anything beyond the basic, very often all four burners and the oven were called into play. Chinese style cooking is heavily wok-dependent and calls for cooking dishes sequentially and quickly in that wok. Given the rice cooker, you could probably get away with a single burner stove a lot of the time. The other big difference, though I think this relates more to the overall size of the apartments rather than the availability of cooking facilities, is the extent to which people eat out. We made a number of good friends in Hong Kong, but when we were invited to eat with them, it almost always meant going out to a restaurant rather than going to their home.

Whampoa's Home World contained a supermarket, called ParknShop, ironically named because very few people drove there. It was designed as a place for one-stop shopping, basically the same as might be found in the United States though there were also significant differences. It was smaller and much more congested and carried a wide range of Western and Eastern foods. The supermarket was very convenient, being less than a five-minute walk from our apartment. As a Westerner, it would be entirely possible to live in Hong Kong and shop at the supermarkets and buy familiar foods, albeit some of them at great expense because they had been imported from afar. But more interesting was to go a little further and visit the wet market. One of the recurring themes of Hong Kong is the conjunction of British Colonial and Chinese influences, and wet markets are an interesting example of this. Every neighborhood has a municipally owned market building that sells predominantly food, though clothes and other household goods are also to be found. Our local one had the public library on an upper floor. The organizational structure always seemed to be the same. The ground floor contained vegetables, flowers, fish and tofu. Upstairs was meat, poultry and fruit and then above that places where cooked food could be bought. The vegetable stalls would look pretty familiar to a Westerner, though some of the produce would be unfamiliar, with endless varieties of greens and strange roots. Communicating prices and amounts was a challenge that could usually be surmounted.

For some reason, most of the fruit was sold at stalls and small shop fronts in the street neighboring the wet market, rather than inside the market itself. Many of these places seemed to be open all hours. A wide variety of fruits were on sale, from the very familiar and always available (apples and oranges) to the exotic and seasonal

Fresh fish stall at the wet market



(durian and lychees). Canned lychees are easy to find around the world but, of course, cannot compare to the fresh version. I have never seen canned durian, although I did come across durian-flavored chocolate in Hong Kong. It is an ugly, large and rough and thick-skinned fruit, which to my nose also had an ugly smell. There were sulfurous odors overlaying the more typical fruit fragrances. The flesh is white and creamy. It gets creamier and more strongly flavored as it ripens. When I indicated interest in tasting some, my friends advised me to try less ripe “starter durian.” It was acceptable, but did not encourage me to move on to the more advanced levels.

The manner of selling seafood is probably what gives wet markets their name. Freshness is such an important consideration for Chinese people when it comes to food, so to the extent possible, seafood is

bought live. This part of the wet market is a constant flow of water and bubbling oxygen. The finfish are almost all unfamiliar and even those fluently bilingual are hard put to give English names to what is available. The shellfish are more recognizable, with lots of clams, crabs, scallops and shrimp. When we bought finfish, they would kill, gut and scale them for us, although the head would inevitably be left on. Shrimp were sometimes in water and sometimes on ice, but they would just be scooped into a bag, weighed and handed over. They would then dance around in the bag as they warmed up on the way home. Preparation therefore involved killing in addition to cooking them. This was easy enough, if unpleasant, if they were to be boiled, and actually familiar to those who have dealt with lobster. But often, I would want to stir fry them. Apart from the ethics of consigning them live to the wok, (although I wonder how different it is from boiling water, beyond the fact that we have to watch) I did not want the legs and shells. So I became quite adept at beheading them with a cleaver. This is but one example of the consequences of being closer to your food supply and not buying everything ready to cook if not ready to eat.

Being closer to the food supply is an ongoing theme when it comes to contrasting Hong Kong food with US food. That is ironic given the ultra-urban nature of Hong Kong. The vegetables in the wet market come predominantly from the People's Republic of China, less than an hour away. Some come from rural parts of the New Territories of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, although those farmers find it hard to compete with the mainland. Interestingly, a number of the local farmers are starting to produce organic food as a means to better compete with their neighbors to the north, an approach that has become quite common for small farmers in the United States.

Much of the fish is still sold live but fewer of the chickens. Traditionally, no self-respecting consumer would dream of buying chicken wrapped in plastic and every wet market would have rows and rows of caged live birds. But bird flu and SARS caused the Hong Kong government to attempt to centralize the slaughter of poultry and keep live birds out of the wet markets. They were largely successful and many of the cages are now empty, though live birds are still available for the purists.

The chickens share the second floor of the wet market with the butchers. While beef is to be found, the predominant meat by far is pork. There are no live pigs to be seen, but clearly what is on sale there is not long dead. This is good because there is a complete lack of refrigeration, despite the sub-tropical temperatures. I am not sure what happens to the unsold meat at the end of the day. There are lots of pork chops to be sold, but of course there are many other parts of the pig and they are all on sale too. Well, I say all, but I never saw brains, which may be the tissue about which I would have most concern. There were lots of intestines and trotters and ears.

It has long interested me where people put the dividing line between what they consider food and not food. One part of this is which species of animal and plant are included, but then another is which parts of those species people actually consume. The peoples of southern China are notoriously liberal on both fronts. We heard a number of sayings related to this, for example that people would eat anything with four legs that was not a table. If food and/or protein are in limited supply then the definition of what constitutes food tends to get expanded. You can introduce whole new species, but more commonly for meat it means using all parts of the animal. Why just eat the muscle when you have all the organs available? I

was in the market in Mai Chau (in Vietnam rather than China) and saw very little of the kind of meat that Westerners are accustomed to, and a whole lot more liver, intestines, lungs, skin and feet. There weren't any English speakers around so I couldn't discover whether the muscle meat had been sold earlier in the day, or, as I suspect, was being marketed in more prosperous areas.

Even buying chicken at the supermarket in Hong Kong had its differences. I bought cut up chicken pieces, wrapped in familiar plastic at our local supermarket. When I tipped them into the pan, the expected wing and breast and leg were there, but then so were a couple of feet, as well as a "parson's nose," essentially the chicken butt. I cooked it all up happily, although one of my sons commented that the actual meat was rather sparse. But then he was not in a good mood because he had just spent two hours unsuccessfully searching for tortillas. He had a hankering for tacos, which was destined to remain unfulfilled.

From time to time I would have lunch with a historian colleague from PolyU. Once aware of my interest in testing food boundaries, he started taking me to places well-suited for such experiences. With respect to animal parts, this culminated with a trip out to Yuen Long in the New Territories to a restaurant that specialized in bovine sexual organs. Unusually, this trip also involved the rest of my family, including my oldest son who was visiting from the United States. We ordered up a large bowl of the sexual organ stew and proceeded to investigate what it contained. The penis and sliced testicles were quite obvious. I would recommend the former over the latter, mostly for textural reasons. Testicles are not muscular and kind of mealy. With the help of the menu and some translation, we also identified scrotum and what translated to "female happy parts," probably

uterus. The whole was rather tasty, rich and savory. But the social experience was probably more interesting than the gastronomic. The traditional Chinese view is that eating particular parts of an animal will assist the health and vigor of the corresponding parts in the consumer. Thus sexual organ stew might normally be ordered quietly and consumed privately in a back corner of the restaurant by men with concerns for their virility. At some point during our far-from-quiet lunch, I looked up and noticed how much the other customers were enjoying the sight of this bunch of white men taking great and public delight in eating sexual parts.

Moving from diversity of parts to diversity of species, frogs and turtles were standard fare in the wet markets. I never saw snakes there but they were available in Hong Kong. Some restaurants would house cages of snakes ready for customer collection and cooking. We visited a snake store in Shuen Wan, an old neighborhood on Hong Kong Island. One wall was covered with wooden cabinets with lots of hinged drop down doors; each marked with the Chinese character meaning poison. Behind these doors was a rich variety of live, poisonous snakes. The people running the store were very relaxed about opening the doors and pulling out their merchandise. They were snake wholesalers, selling to local medicine shops and restaurants. Snake is a hot food in Chinese terms, meaning that it produces heat in the body and should be eaten at cold times of year. It was late spring when I was at that store and so past the peak of snake eating. Therefore they did not have any ready-to-eat snake delicacies. They did have various snake pharmaceutical products available, including rather attractive looking snakes pickled in alcohol. The shape of a food is also important from the Chinese perspective. Therefore snakes are also thought to be good for male

virility. Luckily, there was one restaurant nearby still serving snake off-season and so we went there for lunch. There was actually only one snake item on the menu—snake soup with shark fin and abalone. It would not have been my first choice for a snake dish. It was good but unremarkable. It had many ingredients and figuring out what was snake and what was something else was tricky. The shark fin and abalone made it relatively expensive and neither one of those would make my list of favorite foods.

The most bizarre foods we ate were not in southern China, but rather in Beijing. We visited a market there well known for its interesting food. Some things we could recognize, but others were a mystery. We were fortunate in finding one of the stall owners who spoke a little English and he was very happy to proudly show us all he had available. So we started at his stall and selected silkworm larvae, scorpion, dog meat and sheep penis. Does that sound like a tasty meal or what! The sheep penis was the surprise on the menu, but there they were, anatomically unmistakable, butterflied and threaded onto a stick. In case, this wasn't enough to identify the organ, the vendor made several gestures that really drove the point home. Actually, everything at that stall was sold threaded onto a stick, so that we would never have known the dog was dog if we had not been told. It tasted like chicken, of course, but looked more like little pieces of pork. We wondered about the scorpion tail and whether the venom would survive the cooking process. We ended up breaking off the very tip, just in case.

The method of cooking at this stall was the same in all cases—throw them in the deep fryer, an approach that I appreciated from a food safety standpoint. It rendered everything small and crunchy. So, if you want to know what a scorpion tastes like, I could tell you

it is similar to silk worm larvae and both are very crunchy, without having a lot of other flavor. The sheep penis was perhaps a little tougher than other cuts of lamb.

Next we tried a starfish. Surprisingly, that was only shallow fried and it was the only disappointment of the day. The outside was fairly tough and fibrous and only a little crunchy. Inside it was softer, definitely nautical tasting, but not particularly appetizing. It was the only thing that we didn't actually finish. We moved on to grasshopper and centipede. The grasshopper would definitely get my vote out of those two. Once the centipede had been deep fried, it was difficult to get it off its stick—or even to tell it apart from its stick. The grasshoppers, on the other hand, better maintained their integrity and provided one of the most pleasant crunches of the meal.

Serving dog meat is not legal in Hong Kong. When I ate it in Beijing, it was without too much thought, mixed in as it was with other exotic fare. I was brought in direct contact with the reality of considering dogs as food in the town of Yangshuo, near Guilin in the south of China. This is actually a very touristy area, with the River Li and its beautiful limestone karsts that are memorialized in many Chinese paintings. I always liked to get to the food markets in these places and this one was easy to find, in a large single storey building just off the main street. There was a sign close to the entrance, interestingly in English as well as Chinese, advertising a restaurant serving dog meat. And there, buried in the back of the market, alongside the live chickens and ducks and rabbits, were the dogs. I first caught sight of one whose throat had just been slit and was bleeding out. That was right next to several cages with light colored mongrel dogs. We had been told that people think light furred dogs taste better than dark colored ones. This seems unlikely, but who

knows? It was certainly upsetting to see a dog with its throat slit, though I am not sure whether it would have been any different for me if it had been a sheep or a pig. Getting that close to the reality of being a meat eater is never easy, but is really a logical consequence of that food choice.

My PolyU colleague delighted in pushing the boundaries of what I would eat. He finally found my limit with stinky tofu. This is essentially tofu or soybean curd that has been left to rot. The normally benign tofu is marinated in a fermented brine for some length of time. Ingredients and time vary with the vendor. Shops that sell stinky tofu can easily be recognized by their distinctive odor, that of rotting protein. They tend to be take out only, probably because sitting in such a place would be akin to dining with a skunk. We therefore decided to get stinky tofu as an appetizer, and then go on somewhere else for lunch itself. This plan was agreed upon and then the day before my friend came to me suggesting I might like to change the date. As part of his attempts to become a good Buddhist, his practice was to avoid meat on the 1st and 15th day of each month and our date was for the 15th. I said that vegetarian food was fine with me and so there was no need to change.

Our gastronomic excursions always had locales and this one was to occur in East Mongkok, an older part of Kowloon. When my friend was younger, he had gone there regularly to buy pet fish. There are lots and lots of small stores selling innumerable, magically colored varieties of fish, plus all the required accoutrements. It is a relatively run-down neighborhood and so perfect for good cheap restaurants. We decided that, since it was the 15th and many people would be avoiding meat, we should go to the vegetarian restaurant first before it got too crowded. Unfortunately, when we got there,

we discovered that the restaurant had changed and was now heavily centered on meat. We elected to move on to a second choice, which focused on food from Yunnan Province. But that also no longer existed. This is not an uncommon occurrence in Hong Kong, where restaurants open and close with great rapidity. So we crossed the road to eat at a dumpling restaurant.

It turned out that it was part of a chain, a Chinese variety of fast food. They had about five different kinds of dumplings that could be sold boiled or fried. The idea was to select one or two kinds of dumpling and combine it with one of five kinds of soup. It was very simple and formulaic, but very tasty also. I had hot and sour soup for the first time in Hong Kong. All of the dumplings had meat in them, but my friend had decided that he had met his religious obligations by searching out the other restaurants. He could not be blamed for the fact that they no longer existed and he was being forced to eat dumplings containing meat.

There were several elements of this dumpling restaurant that interested me and can be contrasted with US fast food. First, one of the employees was sitting there, busily stuffing and folding dumplings. We asked her where the wrappers came from and found they were made at their central facility. In the United States, everything would be made at the central facility and delivered frozen to the outlet. Here, labor was sufficiently cheap that the assembly work was done in the store itself. Then the serving dishes, plates, bowls everything were real china or plastic, nothing disposable. It's often difficult even to get a napkin in a restaurant in Hong Kong, but that's another story. The chopsticks, spoons and small bowls were kept in drawers within the tables, from which the customers would help themselves.

Having finished lunch proper, it was time to search out the stinky tofu restaurant. Part of me was hoping that it would have met the same fate as the other restaurants we had originally intended to visit, but soon I could tell that was not the case. The unmistakable odor became apparent amidst all the other street smells from about a block away. It grew stronger and stronger until we reached the storefront. It seemed like they had a variety of things available, including sausages and animal parts, but we were single-minded. For HK\$6 (less than a US\$1) I got a brown paper bag containing a two-inch cube of the magic stuff on a stick. It had been deep-fried a toasty golden brown. By this time, we had started to become accustomed to the smell. Texturally, this food is good. A nice crunch to the outside, with soft and creamy inner parts. Unfortunately it tasted just like it smelled and as I started to eat it, the taste and smell combined synergistically in a rather unpleasant way. Fortunately there were several condiments available, both sweet and savory. I found that the hot sauce was pretty effective for masking the flavor, though it could not override the smell. My friend assured me that I was not required to finish the whole thing. I heartily agreed and jettisoned the larger half of it in a handy garbage can.

I asked why people ate it; did it have some perceived medicinal benefit? I was told no, it was just that some people liked to live on the wild side. Stinky tofu is outside of normal behavior and consumed by people who like to be a little outrageous. Other people denied that and said that they truly enjoyed the flavor. I think that must be the case, because otherwise it would not be so widely available. I have a broad definition of food, but stinky tofu was a little much for me. The soft inside part was full of gas bubbles from active fermentation. No wonder the smell was so powerful. I wondered which bacteria

were responsible and hoped that they had all been killed by the frying process.

We had agreed that this was to be a three-part luncheon adventure so now we went in search of Chinese dessert. My colleague was looking for another spot remembered from his childhood and he found it, with a little directional help from some street vendors,—the Yee Shun Milk Company. I had seen these places before, though never been in. Their windows are filled with dishes of various puddings or custards. Milk-based puddings did not seem very Chinese to me, but apparently these restaurants, which originated in Macau, have been around a long time. They definitely represent a fusion between East and West. The menu also included fried eggs and sausage and sandwiches. But we were after dessert. We both got steamed milk, flavored with ginger. I thought of it as something you might be fed in a British convalescent home. Very nutritious with all those milk and egg proteins but easy to get down. It was softly set, nicely flavored and not too sweet; the perfect antidote to stinky tofu.

As I mentioned before, people eat out a lot in Hong Kong and I bet there are more restaurants per square mile than anywhere else in the world. All shades and varieties are available ranging from innumerable, very cheap cafes to very ritzy and expensive restaurants, equivalent to any in the world and beyond my means. Real estate is very expensive and so restaurants can be found on any floor of a building, not just the ground floor storefronts. You can get excellent food in shopping malls. On one occasion, we wanted dessert late in the evening after going to a movie. The theater was about a 10-minute walk from a big ritzy mall so that was where we headed. The mall, Langham Place, is architecturally very interesting. It is spread over 12 floors and has some wonderful open areas that allow you to

look down through most of those floors. Clearly not very “green,” since it must take a lot of energy to cool that volume of air. It also has some very long escalators, which means that you can get up 12 floors in three flights. Anyway, to get back to the food, we were in search of dessert, but also noticed the crowds of people, at 10:30 p.m., sitting and eating dinner. There were lots of different kinds of food and all of it looked good. Actually, I am sure there must have been a McDonalds there also, so perhaps there were exceptions. We ended up at a Japanese/Western fusion restaurant on the 11th floor and enjoyed delicious and unusual desserts. The mall did start to close around 11:00 p.m., much later, of course, than those in most US cities.

There are other aspects of the culture of eating in Hong Kong that differ greatly from the west. Initially, people were surprised and pleased by our prowess at using chopsticks. I have long enjoyed using them. I think it does take a little more skill and attention than using a fork but this is good for the eating experience. It also has implications for what is to be eaten. You cannot eat a steak with chopsticks alone, but you can eat a whole fish, and actually chopsticks are very good for separating the meat from the bones. But preparing food to be cooked in a Chinese style often involves lots of chopping—the cleaver is a central tool in the kitchen—and this makes sense when it is to be eaten with chopsticks. Those less skilled with chopsticks are helped by the fact that creating a mess is not a problem. There can often be a lot of debris associated with Chinese food, all the bones and cartilage for example, and this spills over from the plates onto the cloth. Waiters serving tea will often slosh it around with gay abandon.

Chinese restaurants favor round tables for larger groups, in

Eating Chinese dim sum with chopsticks

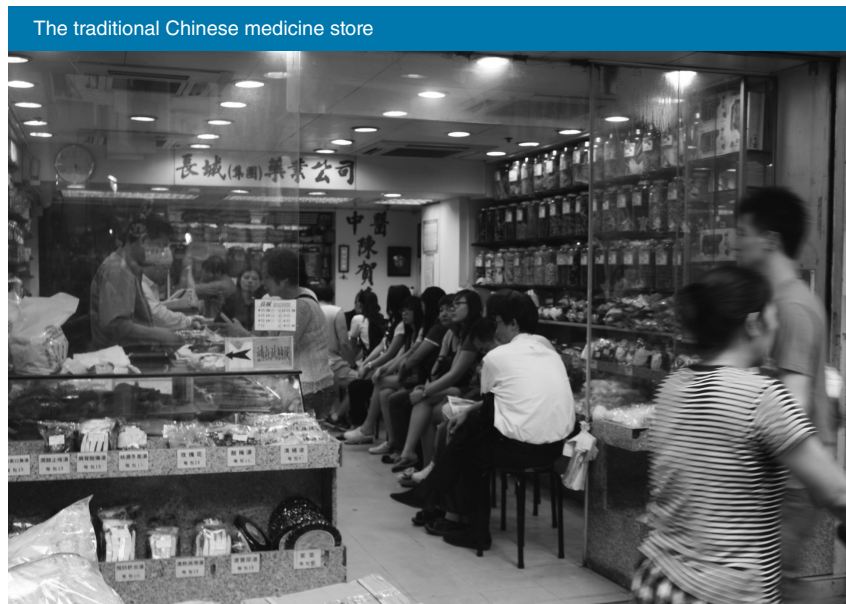


contrast to the long rectangular banquet tables found in the west. This emphasizes equality since there is no obvious head to the table. It also makes it less important who occupies the adjacent seats, since you get access to everybody around the table. Chinese restaurants tend to be very noisy as people engage in loud conversations across their tables. Talking quietly to your immediate neighbor would be considered impolite because you would be excluding others from the conversation.

Food is going to be shared. Often, one person will take responsibility for choosing it and the dishes will be delivered to the center of the table for people to help themselves. However, at least in more formal or traditional settings, it is not just a free for all. Those

with seniority either from age or position would be expected to start each dish, though this might take the form of serving an honored guest. Children might be expected to wait until others have helped themselves, but at the same time adults would be serving food to the young ones and making sure they got enough. One person may order and frequently one person will pay for the group. Publicly calculating the cost per diner and each contributing would be considered gauche, though sometimes people will argue with each other over the right to pay the bill.

Chinese people think about food in many dimensions. Nutrient content may not be one of them, at least traditionally, though effects on health are regularly considered. Several dimensions have already been mentioned, for example, freshness, shape and the ability to generate heating or cooling effects in the body. Color, taste and smell are also important. In the United States, medicines come from pharmaceutical plants, but in China, traditionally they come from plants and animals. One of my sons got sick while in Hong Kong with a sore throat and laryngitis. He decided to see what traditional Chinese medicine would do for him. We were with one of my Hong Kong colleagues and he volunteered to facilitate the process. First was finding a practitioner. There are plenty of them around, with little shops around the neighborhoods, but we wanted to make sure we found a good one. We chose one that I pass frequently on the way to and from work and there is always a line of people, sitting on stools in the store, waiting to see the doctor. My son took his place in line and slowly progressed to the front. The doctor felt various energy points and asked several questions before prescribing a concoction that was to be taken for four days. It would not be ready until the evening, and in fact we had to go back for each of



the next four evenings to pick up a 10 oz paper cup that was filled with the medicine. I don't know the ingredients (barks, leaves, roots, animal parts, etc.), but it was black and thick and smelled sort of like licorice, but worse. The taste was extremely bad—very bitter, the sort of thing you might give somebody if you wanted them to throw up. I just took a small sip to see what it was like but Duncan was supposed to consume the entire 10 oz. Many people in Hong Kong told us subsequently that they have switched to western medicine because they cannot deal with the taste of these remedies. My son did his best, and by the fourth day got down about half of it, but I think he has had his fill of Chinese medicine.

Did it do any good? Hard to say, because he was not that sick and would have got better anyway. My Chinese colleague's point of view

was interesting. He said that experiencing the bitterness was inherent to the cure. The suffering endured was part of the price to be paid to get the benefit of health. Personally, I stuck to food as food, not as medicine. The richness and variety to be found, just from a gastronomic perspective is truly outstanding.

This essay is entitled “Eating Hong Kong.” There is clearly another one to be written that would be called “Drinking Hong Kong.” Perhaps because of my English roots, tea is an important part of my family’s culture. We spent a lot of time exploring the tea culture of Hong Kong and other parts of China. Much could be written about that, as well as its contrast with the Starbucks’ coffee culture, and then just the simple issue of whether water should be drunk hot or cold. That will all have to wait for another time.