

TABOOS RELATED TO FOOD CULTURE AT THE 13TH–14TH-CENTURY MONGOLS*

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This article reviews the characteristics of terms used by the Mongols to express taboos concerning food and examines their food-related culture based on sources from the Mongolian Empire (Plano Carpini's *Historia Mongalorum*, Marco Polo's *Il milione*, Chinggis Khan's *Yeke Jasag*, Rashīd ad-Dīn's *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh*, and the Yuan Dynasty's 飲食須知 *Yin shi xu zhi*). The Mongols left behind fairly strict food-related taboos in the form of eating habits. To better understand Mongolia's food-related taboo expressions, we have examined five mediaeval sources written in various languages in which diverse food taboos are recorded.

Key words: taboo expressions, Mongolian food culture, Plano Carpini, Marco Polo, Chinggis Khan, Rashid ad-Din, mediaeval literature.

Introduction

Every ethnic group harbours taboos that are directly related to their eating habits and natural environment. The Mongols are no exception; their taboos are to be found in both food-related documents and the numerous travel notes written by foreign envoys who were sent to the imperial court.

To some extent taboos mirror the system of a society. Thus, the food taboos found in mediaeval Mongolia not only differentiate the Mongolian society from others, but specify some distinct characteristics as well.

The purpose of this study is to describe the characteristics and social aspects of these taboos by analysing Plano Carpini's *Historia Mongalorum*, Marco Polo's *Il*

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milione, Chinggis Khan's *Yeke Jasag*, Rashīd ad-Dīn's *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh* and some other food-related works.

We will investigate the lifestyles of 13th-century Mongols with a special view to how new taboos developed in response to societal changes and the relationship between food-related taboos and spiritualities.

Food and Eating Taboos in the *Historia Mongalorum* and the *Il milione*

There are thirteen food-related taboos in Plano Carpini's *Historia Mongalorum* and Marco Polo's *Il milione*. These works not only present the eating habits of the Mongols, but also yield a comprehensive picture of the Mongolian culture of the day. In the following we will examine them according to their emergence in the sources.

The *Historia Mongalorum* (1252) describes in great detail the food-related taboos, how they are organised and maintained. Some of them will be enumerated below (Plano Carpini–Di 1996, pp. 50–54).

- (1) One must not toss milk or other drinks, or food on the ground.¹
- (2) Each man respects his fellow: they are friendly to each other, and though food is scarce among them, there still is enough to share.
- (3) They do not wash their bowls, but sometimes rinse them with broth which is afterwards returned to the meat in a jar.
- (4) In winter, unless they are rich, they do not consume mare's milk.
- (5) Each one of them drinks one or two cups in the morning, and then nothing more during the day. In summer, because they have enough mare's milk, they rarely eat meat unless it happens to be given to them or they hunt down some animal or bird.
- (6) Drunkenness is honourable among the Tartars; even when someone drinks a great deal and is sick right on the spot, it does not prevent him from drinking more.
- (7) The Tartars do not have wine, ale, or mead unless it is sent by other people or given to them.
- (8) It is a great sin among them if any food or drink is allowed in any way to go to waste; they are not permitted to give bones to dogs unless the marrow is first extracted.
- (9) They regard all animals as edible: they eat dogs, wolves, foxes, and horses, and, when in difficulty, they eat human flesh.²

¹ Chapter three: Religion, what the Tatars believe are sins; divination, absolution and funeral rites (p. 45).

² Chapter four: Their good and bad customs, their food and their habits (pp. 51–53).

Items (1) to (6) indicate that most of the taboos are features of the rules regarding Mongols' eating habits. The fact that some of them are very detailed shows how important the taboos were for them. In (7), Mongols enjoyed drinking *airag* and milk alcohol, but occasionally they drank *arki*, which was not prepared by them. In addition, they usually drank traditional drinks fermented from cattle's milk. Other types of drinks were prohibited unless they were a gift.

Item (8) concerns their native religion, known as shamanism. Mongols believed in a kind of reincarnation; that is, once people died, they were reborn as another human or animal. According to these beliefs, there were three types of spirits that resided in animal's bones: flesh and blood, bones, and heavenly spirit. Through these beliefs the Mongols held that, once someone died, his or her spirit remained in the bone for a while before ascending to heaven.

However, with regard to item (9), the claim that Mongols resorted to cannibalism in the 13th century is questionable. It is not clear whether Plano Carpini during his four-month visit to Mongolia actually witnessed such practices (either through physical evidence or direct observation) or if his reports were merely based on information he received in verbal communication at that time.

Il milione is a travelogue written by the Venetian merchant and traveller Marco Polo who travelled across large tracts of Asia during a seventeen-year expedition between 1271 and 1295. Currently translated as *Travels of Marco Polo*, it contains stories about the Yuan Dynasty of Kubilai, as well as food-related taboos related to shamanism.

- (10) We must not omit to notice a peculiarity of the Great Khan, that where an accident has happened by lightning to any herd of cattle, flock of sheep, or other domestic animals, whether the property of one or more persons, and however large the herd may be, he does not demand the tenth of the increase of such cattle during three years; and also if a ship laden with merchandise has been struck by lightning, he does not collect from it any custom or share of the cargo, considering the accident as an ill omen. God, he says, has shown himself to be displeased with the owner of the goods, and he is unwilling that property bearing the mark of divine wrath should enter his treasury (Marco Polo 1926, pp. 168–169).

As can be seen from item (10) many taboos were connected with both social structure and religion. A fundamental component of their religion was shamanism. For example, Mongols believed if a pregnant woman saw a deer, she would bear a baby with four eyes (Taowentai 1985, p. 80) as shown in the 飲食須知 *Yin shi xu zhi* which illustrates the full extent to which taboos shaped the characteristics of the Mongol mentality and lifestyle. As confirmed in other sources, these are deeply rooted in shamanism. Mongols regarded religion so seriously that Plano Carpini wrote “The Tartars do not wash their clothes, or permit them to be washed, especially when there is thunder, until it ends” (Plano Carpini – Di 1996, p. 53). In Mongolian shamanism, thunder represented God's anger.

Also, regarding thunder-struck food or products, *Qutadyu bilig* (22nd verse) differentiates what is holy from what is not, or what is permitted to be brought into the tent or warehouse.

- (11) Chinggis Khan also said: “My bowmen and warriors loom like thick forests: their wives, sweethearts and maidens shine like red flames. My task and intention is to sweeten their mouths with gifts of sweet sugar, to decorate their breasts, backs and shoulders with garments of brocade, to seat them on good geldings, give them to drink from pure and sweet rivers, provide their beasts with good and abundant pastures, and to order that the great roads and highways that serve as ways for the people be cleared of garbage, tree-stumps and all bad things; and not to allow dirt and thorns in the tents” (Riasanovsky 1997, p. 89).

Food Taboo Expressions in the *Yeke Jasag* and the *Jāmi‘ al-tawārīkh*

1. *Yeke Jasag*, Chapter three, article of life in a group (Kim 1998, pp. 105–106).

In the *Yeke Jasag* Chinggis Khan’s written account of his life experience, the food-related taboos signify the importance of the taboos for the Mongol Dynasty (Kim 1998, p. 102).

- (12) When eating animals, tie up all legs, cut its belly, and tightly hold the heart until it dies. After this, you can provide it as food. Just like with Muslims, whoever kills will be killed himself (Article 8).
- (13) The one who is providing food shall examine to see if it is intoxicated before sharing with others (Article 12).
- (14) The person who is provided with food shall examine if it is not harmful/to ensure it is good to eat before consuming.
- (15) You should not consume more food than your peers (Article 12).
- (16) Fire should not go above the plate (Article 12).
- (17) One who passes by someone who is eating food can have it without permission. The owner should not resist (Article 13).
- (18) He (Genghis Khan) prohibits putting hands in water, and water should be scooped with dishes (Article 14).
- (19) One who chokes must be pulled out of *ger* and killed (Article 32).
- (20) If you cannot quit drinking, drink only three times a year. If you exceed this, you will be punished. Two is great, and one is even better. None is the best, but who can do that? (Article 33).

From the above paragraphs, it is apparent that taboos in the *Yeke Jasag* deal mainly with food. For many centuries (since about the 13th century), Mongols have strictly differentiated what is holy with the word *arigun*. Fire, so necessary for the preparation of food, symbolises the divinity as well as the prosperity of the family and

clan. As the bottom half of animals are in close proximity to the excretory organs, this part of the animal was considered unholy, and thus cooking and eating legs was prohibited.

Item (18) is an interpretation of other customs based on the Mongols' religion and mythology. Halsan Gomboev, a monk, wrote the following about Plano Carpini: "Mongols consider fire as origin of cleanness and symbol, which is why they make efforts to keep it clean. They do not throw things that stink or diminish the brightness of fire into the fire. Also, pouring water or spitting is a crime. Things on fire must raise flames like alcohol or butter. Going over fire or poking fire with a sharp weapon is prohibited" (Gomboev 1857, pp. 238–240).

Food-related taboos in the *Yeke Jasag* are evident in the Mongols' customs. For example, the most serious punishment is confiscation of property. Interfering with food delivery to the emperor is subject to such a punishment, and anyone who declines staying overnight or koumiss is subject to the same.

Especially severe was the punishment for the theft of the Mongols' basic property and source of nourishment, i.e. their cattle. Thus, the theft of a camel was punished by a fine of 15 nines of cattle; the theft of a gelding by 10 nines; the theft of a mare by 8 nines; the theft a cow by 6 nines; etc. (Riasanovsky 1997, p. 166).

The prescribed punishment in the 1640 Mongol-Oirat regulation is very similar to Chinggis Khan's *Yeke Jasag*. For example, "if you steal one horse, 9 horses must be paid back. If you don't have horses, you need to pay back with your son. If you have no son, you will be killed" (Article 29) (Kim 1998, p. 105).

As such, although Chinggis Khan's constitution did not cover the entire lifestyle, it was enforced in every nation. In the *Yeke Jasag*, the absolute authority of Chinggis Khan is apparent. Carpini's *Historia Mongalorum* describes the application of *Yeke Jasag* as follows:

"Do not toss milk or other drink or food on the ground. Also, one must not urinate inside a tent. If a person does this intentionally, he is killed; if done otherwise, he must pay a heavy fine to a sorcerer who purifies him, and he must have the tent and all that is in it pass between two fires, but before it is purified in this way no one dares enter or take anything from it. Also, if a piece of food is given to anyone and he cannot eat it and he spits it out of his mouth, a hole is made beneath the tent and he is drawn out through the hole and killed without mercy"

(Plano Carpini – Di 1996, p. 45).

2. In Rashīd ad-Dīn's *Jāmi' al-tawārikh's* (*Compendium of Chronicles*) first chapter, "The Mongol and Turkish Tribes", two different taboos regarding the thundered food at the Uriangqat tribe are treated:

(21) "It is their custom, when there is a lot of thunder and lightning, to curse the sky and the thunder and lightning and cry out against them. If lightning hits an

animal and it dies, they do not eat its flesh and avoid it. They claim that when they do, these storms dissipate.”

- (22) “Since it gets unusually cold in Mongolia, particularly in the region called Barqujin Tögüm, there are constricting lightning storms. They also report that if they pour wine, kumiss, or yoghurt on the ground, it has a property to cause lightning to strike animals, particularly horses. If wine is poured, its effect is even greater, and the lightning will certainly strike their animals and tents. For this reason they take extreme measures to avoid it” (Thackston 1998, p. 82).

Food Taboos in the 飲食須知 *Yin shi xu zhi*

Books about food in the Yuan Dynasty are diverse, including customs, theory, poems, and so on. During the period spanning from the Tang Dynasty to the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, such great strides occurred in the development of food quality and quantity that nearly fifty books were devoted to the subject. These books are valuable for studying customs regarding the exchange of food. The 飲食須知 *Yin shi xu zhi*, in particular, describes 360 different kinds of food during the Yuan Dynasty, and a list of the taboos related to food and livestock is also registered. Livestock farming was treated in the eighth book and domestic animals in the seventh. The taboos are as follows (Taowentai 1985, pp. 67–86):

1. 羊肉 *lamb*

- (23) 水肿人食之，百不一愈 None that has dropsy is good.
 (24) 妊妇食羊目，令子睛白 If a pregnant woman consumes a lamb, the child’s eye will be white.
 (25) 白羊黑头，食其脑，作肠痈。羊心有孔者勿食，能杀人 You may die if you eat a lamb, the heart of which has a hole.
 (26) 羊肺三月至五月其中有虫，状如马尾，长二三寸，须去之 Between March and May, there are bugs in the lambs’ organs. If eaten without eliminating them, it may cause diarrhoea.
 (27) 伤人妊妇食之，令子多厄 If a pregnant woman eats lamb meat, her children are not lucky.
 (28) 白羊黑头，黑羊白头，独角者，并有毒，食之生痛 A white lamb with black hair, a black lamb with white hair, or a lamb with a horn is toxic (Chapter 8, pp. 75–76).

2. 山羊肉 *mountain lamb*

- (29) 疫病后忌食 Do not eat it after fever.
 (30) 妊娠食之，令子多病 If a pregnant woman eats (mountain lamb meat), the child suffers many diseases.
 (31) 肝尤忌之 Liver is especially prohibited (Chapter 8, p. 82).

3. 黄牛肉 *beef*

- (32) 黑牛白头者大毒，勿食 Do not eat a black cow with a white head.
 (33) 患冷气人勿食 If you have a cold, do not consume beef.
 (34) 煮病牛入黄豆，豆变黑色者，杀人 If (meat is) yellow while boiling, and black afterwards, it can kill you (Chapter 8, pp. 76–77).

4. 犀肉 *buffalo meat*

- (35) 妊妇勿服 能消胎气 Pregnant women should not eat buffalo meat due to the danger of miscarriage (Chapter 8, p. 84).

5. 马肉 *horse meat*

- (36) 同猪肉食，成霍乱 If eaten with beef, you will go mad.
 (37) 妊妇食之，令子过月难产 You will give birth to a dead child.
 (38) 马肝及鞍下肉有大毒，食之杀人 A horse's liver or bottom part is toxic.
 (39) 马脑有毒，食之令人发癫 A horse's chest is toxic (Chapter 8, pp. 78–79).

6. 驼肉及峰脂 *camel meat*

- (40) 驼黄味苦性平，微毒 似牛黄而不香 bitter, toxic, similar to beef (Chapter 8, p. 81).

7. 猪肉 *pork*

- (41) 疫病者，金疮者，尤宜忌之 Do not eat with fever.
 (42) 猪肉毒在首，故有病者忌之 Patients must not eat.
 (43) 久食令人肾少子。虚寒者尤忌 It reduces the number of sperm. If it is cold inside, do not eat it.
 (44) 冬月食之，损真气，发虚壅 When eaten in the winter, it ruins metabolism.
 (45) 脂微毒，男子多食损阳 Toxic in fat and diminishes stamina.
 (46) 凡花猪，病猪，白蹄猪，自死猪，煮汁黄者为黄镡猪，肉中有米星，俱不可食 Do not eat baby pork (that was) ill with white toenails, (or) that died naturally, with molls.
 (47) 夏天用醋煮肉，可留数日 Grill with vinegar in the summer to keep it longer (Chapter 8, pp. 73–74).

8. 驴肉 *mule*

- (48) 勿同猪肉食，伤气 Makes you tired when eaten with pork (Chapter 8, p. 79).

9. 鹿肉 deer

- (49) 二月至八月不可食，发冷痛 If this is eaten with horse meat between February and August, you will get sick.
- (50) 白臆者，豹文者并不可食 Do not eat deer with a white chest or stripes.
- (51) 久食鹿肉，服药必不得力 If consumed for too long, it counteracts medicine.
- (52) 勿同猪肉食 Do not eat with pork (Chapter 8, p. 80).

10. 麋肉 female deer

- (53) 味甘性温。多食令人弱房，发香港脚。妊妇食之，令子目病 Pregnant women can give their child an eye disease.
- (54) 孕妇见麋，生子四目 If a pregnant woman sees a deer, her child may have four eyes (Chapter 8, p. 80).

11. 兔肉 rabbit

- (55) 忌同鹿肉 Do not eat with deer.
- (56) 兔死而眼合者杀人 If you eat a rabbit that has closed eyes when captured, you will die.
- (57) 妊妇不可食，令子缺唇 If a pregnant woman eats (meat), her child's lip will swell (Chapter 8, p. 83).

12. 鼠肉 mouse

- (58) 误食鼠骨，能令人瘦 It can make a man lose weight.
- (59) 鼠粪有小毒，食中误食，令人目黄成疸 Since mice are toxic, if you eat what a mouse was eating, it may cause jaundice (Chapter 8, p. 85).

13. 狗肉 dog

- (60) 疫证及热病后食之，杀人 During or after fever, this may kill you.
- (61) 勿同鲤鱼，鱼，牛肠食，令人多病 If eaten with fish and cow organs, you will become ill.
- (62) 春末夏初多犬，宜忌食 Do not eat in late spring and early summer.
- (63) 瘦犬，有病，发狂，暴死，无故自死者，有毒杀人 Eating thin or ill dogs, or dogs that died naturally, may kill you (Chapter 8, pp. 77–78).

14. 鹅肉 chicken

- (64) 鹅卵味甘性温，多食鹅卵，发痼疾，易软 If blue or young, it may cause an inveterate disease (Chapter 7, p. 67).

On the basis of the above list of prescriptions concerning eating taboos, there emerge five kinds of livestock as important in pastoral nomadism. It includes each cattle and describes various taboos connected to them. Each taboo is associated with human metabolism and involves pregnant women. Certain parts of the meat were prescribed for consumption only during particular seasons:

- (65) 春不食肝，夏不食心，秋不食肺，冬不食腎，四季不食脾 Do not eat liver in spring, no hearts in summer, no lungs in autumn, and no kidneys in winter, no turtles in all four seasons.

Food taboos as described in the 飲食須知 *Yin shi xu zhi* must have greatly influenced the exchange of food between the Mongols and other civilisations.

Conclusion

So far we have reviewed sixty-five Mongolian food-related taboos that existed during the Yuan Dynasty (13th–14th centuries). Many of the above-listed Mongolian food taboos have almost disappeared, or have radically changed. Since the taboos observed by visitors in the Mongolian Empire were based on personal experiences during a short period, partial inaccuracies may appear. Specifically, what Plano Carpini allegedly witnessed about cannibalism is not objective and have the potential to cause some misunderstanding of the subject.

The Mongolian Imperial Code, the *Yeke Jasag*, based on the experiences of Chinggis Khan's Mongols, also contains food-related taboos which show that the nomads followed the taboo prescriptions very seriously. The use of fire was especially important for the Mongols. Also, the 飲食須知 *Yin shi xu zhi*, which describes how to consume each animal, is very significant. Fourteen different animals (including the five kinds of traditionally raised livestock) were listed per part, stating which part not to consume. Taboos for pregnant women are also mentioned among them.

It is apparent that the most strictly prohibited action for the nomads was to throw away food. The reason for that lay in their belief that food was a heavenly gift from above. Because of this, they believed that if you neglect to care about these gifts, blessing of the heaven would be lost. For this reason, Mongols very much disliked eating excessive amounts of food and leaving any leftovers. This kind of attitude is still maintained and is pervasive in their society even in modern times (Park 1996, p. 156).

The Mongols' traditional eating habits and ethical standards have not changed much, even after momentous historic events such as the spreading of the Buddhist religion. Even in the 21st century, notwithstanding the growing number of multi-ethnic families, value ideas of eating habits have been maintained and respected by the Mongols.

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