

A Journal of Undergraduate
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Growing up Through Food

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I am sitting alone in my room and watching the 5th episode of [“A Bite of China”](#) (which translated literally means “China on the Tip of the Tongue”, Sun 2012), a documentary on China’s great food culture which makes a big sensation these days. At the same time, today’s supper, a cup of ramen noodles, is being cooked in the microwave oven. What I am watching on the screen in contrast to what I am going to eat makes me have a strange feeling that is hard to explain. It’s probably homesick combined with compassion for myself, especially when I am so hungry now. Later on, a narrator with his deep voice says, “La zi ji (spicy chicken) combines crispy chicken breast cubes with a fireplace of peppercorn, toasted sesame and dried bird’s-eye chili to create a plate of hot, red deliciousness” (Sun 2012). Just when my eyes fixed on this mouthwatering masterpiece, “Ding!”, the sound of microwave oven tells me my “fantastic” dinner has been done, a small cup of instant noodles added with only one seasoning bag. By the way, it’s chicken flavor.

As a Chinese person, I often feel unsatisfied with some aspects of my country just like some British complaining about foggy weather in London. But I have never been picky about China’s food. Moreover, sometimes I feel I’m lucky to live in China with so many great foods in varying cuisines throughout the whole big country.

If you are a chowhound like me, you know what I am talking about.

This is the tenth month I have been in Columbia, which also means that I have been away from home for nearly one year. For me, homesick not only means missing family and friends but also means missing food in my hometown, whatever sold in the restaurant or cooked by my mom.

Sometimes I miss my mom's cooking even more than I miss her in person. Struggling with this kind of homesick, I realized that I have experienced a process of growing up that no one can avoid. For me, the taste of becoming an adult is the taste of being deeply homesick, and the taste of home is just the taste of what I eat. To simply summarize my growing up experience might be that it is getting farther and farther away from home, missing my mom's cooking as well as getting used to different food is the most direct challenge for me.

The first time I got a feeling of homesick was one day when I sat in the student cafeteria in Shanghai Normal University and ate a zongzi (rice dumpling). "Why does it taste so sweet?" I asked my friend. She told me, "Well, that's what zongzi ought to be in Shanghai people's view." But what I had eaten the previous few years was salty with delicious pork and salty egg yolk, which was very different from this one with sweetened red bean paste. Suddenly, I missed my mom's cooking very much. In most Chinese families, rice dumplings are only cooked at a special holiday which is called the Dragon Boat Festival to in memory of a great poet, Qu Yuan. However, my mom is a very virtuous lady and good at cooking. Our family often gathers together on weekends to make rice dumplings. Although I really didn't make any contributions to this work, I enjoyed the time every one of my family was sitting

together and chatting happily. I still remember that my grandma always nagged me, “You should learn to how to make a good zongzi. See, your mother’s good cooking skills were taught by me.” I had to nod my head to show that I would take her advice into consideration because my mouth was filled with food and couldn’t speak. Different flavors of food reminded me I missed my family; I made a phone call to my mom every day and complained about anything different from my hometown which is a small and beautiful city 400 miles away from Shanghai. But I learned gradually that complaining was not a good solution and couldn’t change anything at all. Finally, I gave in to sweet rice dumplings and found that it was also worth a try. Stop useless complaining and try to accept the diversity was an important lesson I learned.

However, my homesickness for my family didn’t diminish. Living alone in a strange city far away from home, I didn’t have as many opportunities to go back home. The most important day for me is the Chinese New Year, the day when I went back home once a year. This moment for me was not only precious time to spend with my family, but also a festival to enjoy my favorite home food. Having tasty food and chatting with each other happily brought back all that I experienced when I was a kid. Rice dumplings with delicious pork and salty egg yolk—I made some of them this time.

One year later, I transferred here, a city 10,000 miles away from my hometown. Things get much worse than when I was in Shanghai. There is no need to complain about what the flavor of rice dumplings should be because I can’t find ingredients here to make them. Just after I learned to accept a sweet rice dumpling, I have to face a situation where I probably can’t eat a rice

dumpling anymore.

It was also my first time to spend the Chinese New Year's Eve alone, which was the most important day for me. Imagining what great food my family may have, I ate a bowl of beef noodles at a Chinese restaurant located downtown. The flavor of this bowl of noodles was neither like my mom's cooking nor Shanghai people's cooking; it was totally American Chinese food. Realizing that I probably will not have many chances to enjoy real Chinese food anymore made me feel sad on such a holiday that ought to be the happiest day of a year, but quickly I regulated my mood when I told myself, "Don't worry, everything will be okay just like what you experienced one year ago. Be optimistic and find a way to deal with it."

Reference List

Sun Yunfan, "Food Paradise or Hell: A New Chinese Documentary Sparks Debate." (2012), Asian Society.

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