



Characteristics of Food Culture in the Ming Dynasty from *Xu Xiake's Travels*

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Abstract

Xu Xiake (1587-1641) was an exceptional traveler during the late Ming Dynasty. He journeyed extensively throughout the country, documenting his experiences in *Xu Xiake's Travels*, which serves as a vital resource for understanding Chinese society and culture during this period. *Xu Xiake's Travels* presents insights into the natural landscapes, local customs, and social conditions of regions such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Hunan, and Yunnan in a diary format. It is important to note that while some scholars have acknowledged the significance of *Xu Xiake's Travels* in the context of dietary history, these discussions remain incomplete and do not fully leverage the text to explore the characteristics of Ming food culture comprehensively. This paper delves into the dietary records found in Xu Xiake's writings, conducting a thorough investigation, and posits that the diet of the Ming Dynasty exhibits three key characteristics: a greater variety of food types, a higher degree of marketization, and more pronounced local distinctions.

Keywords

Xu Xiake's Travels; Xu Xiake; Ming Dynasty; food culture

More food scriptures appeared in the Ming Dynasty, specializing in recording the diet of that time. These food scriptures have been preserved relatively intact and are very rich in content (Xiaoming Sun & Chenlong Sun, 2023). However, *Xu Xiake's Travels*, which is not a food bible but contains numerous accounts dealing with food, is an important historical source for the study of Chinese food culture in the Ming Dynasty.

It contains numerous accounts involving food and drink. Studies of these accounts have focused on *Xu Xiake's Travels* as a whole. For example, Pang Yiming's *Examination of Xu Xiake's Diet on the Journey* is divided into two main categories, staple food and side dishes, presenting a comprehensive picture of Xu Xiake's diet on the journey, which is considered to be simple and crude (Yiming Pang, 2003) et al. There are also studies on the food culture of the regions visited by Xu Xiake, such as Yao Weijun's *Xu Xiake's Travels and Yunnan Food Culture in the Ming Dynasty* argues that Yunnan has a better climate, constant ingredients and rich fish resources, which makes Yunnan food in the Ming Dynasty use a wide range of materials, different flavors and unique dishes. It also discusses Yunnan's food culture, centering on Lijiang's food culture (Weijun Yao, 2005).

Ming Dynasty, with the development and improvement of China's farmland water conservancy, land use technology, further refinement of farming and cultivation techniques, the improvement of production tools, breeding technology, the promotion of multi-cooking system and the budding of ecological agriculture, and food life directly related to the production and processing of food raw materials have also made great achievements in the past (Hairong Xu, 1999). After decades of rest and recuperation, in the middle and late Ming Dynasty, the commodity economy gradually developed, and people's living standards were also improving, and at this time the food culture was very different from that of the early Ming Dynasty (Ning Li, 2020). In this paper, on the existing research on Xu Xiake's diet, it is believed that there are more categories of diet in the Ming Dynasty, the degree of marketization is higher,

and the local characteristics are more obvious, and this paper takes the *Xu Xiake's Travels* as the heart to illustrate the characteristics of the diet in the Ming Dynasty.

1. More food categories

There were many types of food in the Ming Dynasty, which, according to Xu Xiake, could be categorized into staple foods, vegetables, fruits, meats, beverages, and other foods.

Ming Dynasty people's staple food is mainly "rice" and "wheat" products, Xu Xiake long traveled in the south plus Xu Xiake for the south, so in the record of Xu Xiake's staple food to rice products. Xu Xiake often ate "rice" and "porridge", which is related to the geographical environment in which he lived. He often recorded that he bought rice to make rice or porridge when he arrived at a certain place. In addition to "rice", wheat is also commonly eaten staple food, but he rarely bought flour to process, but often in the market to buy noodles, or steamed bread to eat, such as his meat buns here in Guangxi with leeks mixed with sugar instead of salt seasoning, and congee early in the morning with chicken with food (Xu Xiake, 2015). In addition, there are *Vigna radiata*, *Colocasia esculenta*, *Hordeum vulgare*, *Castanea mollissima* Blume, millet, etc. in the Ming Dynasty is also a staple food, they are cooked in different ways, such as *Colocasia esculenta* in the Ming Dynasty consumption method is generally to boil, chestnuts are baked to eat. Millet made into pastries to eat.

Vegetables are generally locally sourced, eating the most common or easily accessible vegetables in the area. Xu Xiake ate more bamboo shoots on his journey, bamboo shoots can be eaten in a variety of ways, can be boiled, can also be fried, smoked or made into dried. Next is a variety of mushrooms, such as *Auricularia auricula*, *termitomyces albuminosus*, etc. These mushrooms also have different ways to use. In addition, Xu Xiake went to the market to buy vegetables during his journey, and at night there were vegetable plots in villages, or next to temples. According to "Materia Medica", there were 107 kinds of vegetables in the Ming Dynasty. For example: *Allium tuberosum* Rottler ex Sprengle, *Spinacia oleracea*, *Beta vulgaris*, *Porphyra*, etc.

Xu Xiake often eat fruits during his journey, citrus is the most common, in addition to persimmons, pears, longan, lychee, raspberries, etc. In addition, *Xu Xiake's Travels* recorded fruits such as persimmons, pears, longan, lychee, and raspberries. The *Materia Medica Compendium* on fruits also contains related records across five volumes, listing fruits such as jujube, pear, hawthorn, pomegranate, and citrus, among others. Fruits themselves are more regional and temporal, so Xu Xiake mostly consumed citrus, raspberry, longan, lychee and other common fruits in the southern region.

Meat is the main source of protein, most commonly fish and chicken, because Xu Xiake spent most of his time traveling in the south, where water resources are richer and there are more fish, mainly nine varieties of crucian carp, silver chub, catfish, and blackfish, and Xu Xiake said, "Fish is very cheap" (Xu Xiake, 2015). Accordingly, it is best obtained. Next is chicken, and pork is mainly found in rituals and more luxurious banquets, such as when Xu Xiake was in Lijiang, the Mufu to his hospitality, banquets eat soft pig. This small pig five or six pounds, fed with rice, soft and brittle bones, will be a whole roasted and then sliced with a knife to eat (Xu Xiake, 2015). Beef and mutton, consumed less often. Other meats include dog meat, rat meat, quail, and wild duck.

Drinks are mainly two categories of wine and tea. Xu Xiake drank more wine on his travels, sometimes as medicine, and also as a cultural support on some traditional festivals, such as realgar wine when he was in Guangxi. Mostly, he drank wine when he was entertaining guests in monasteries or close friends. He also often bought wine to drink. Tea was another common drink during Xu Xiake's journey, and tea was drunk in two ways: brewed and boiled. In addition, there are rich varieties of poor, Xu Xiake saw Wuyishan black tea, Longjing tea and other varieties.

Food items such as tofu and eggs are also mentioned in *Xu Xiake's Travels*. Additionally, condiments including ginger, green onion, caraway oil, salt, honey, sesame, ghee, and vinegar are noted. As well as herbs such as *Cuscuta chinensis*, *Croton tiglium*, croton, *Pleuropterus multiflorus* poria.

In addition, the Ming Dynasty was the peak of China's smallholder economy, which brought about a change in the dietary structure, and with it, the prosperity of food culture (Rui Tao, 2022). A large number of foreign crops were introduced into China, such as sweet potatoes, potatoes, tomatoes and so on. And Xu Xiake was exposed to betel nut and cigarettes during his journey.

According to *Xu Xiake's Travels*, the Ming Dynasty had a rich variety of food. Most of Xu Xiake's food and drink during his travels were purchased at the market, so the food market was well developed in the Ming Dynasty.

2. A high degree of marketization

In the process of the development of dietary customs in the Ming Dynasty, there appeared in the city some famous dietary stores, as well as some markets and store houses that bought and sold vegetables, fish, meat, and fruits (Bao-liang Chen, 2004). This is related to the economic development of the market in the Ming Dynasty, as Zhang Xianqing points out, "In the late Ming Dynasty, the outstanding feature of the development of the agricultural economy was the development of commercial agriculture at an unprecedented scale and speed (Xianqing Zhang, 2004)." Existing studies have concluded that the commercialization of agriculture and handicrafts, while promoting changes in society, also led to the growth of merchant groups and accelerated the process of urbanization, and the growth of merchant groups and further urbanization. Large cities such as Beijing, Suzhou, Huzhou and Shaoxing were formed, as well as many small towns, which contributed to the development of the late Ming economy. The development of the late Ming economy was reflected in the high degree of marketization in the food sector.

Xu Xiake often purchased food during his travels, including grains, vegetables, meat, and so on. He bought rice for cooking while in Hubei (Xu Xiake, 2015). Yunnan produces rice, and Xu Xiake recorded that rice was the cheapest, costing only three or four wen for a liter (Xu Xiake, 2015). In addition to rice, he also eats wheat products, but rarely buys flour, but rather finished products. For example, he buys buns, noodles, etc. in Guangxi. Vegetables and meat were also obtained through purchases, and he sent his entourage to the market in every town to buy the vegetables and meat he needed, for example, in Guangxi a monk bought fish and wine from the market in order to entertain Xu Xiake, and in Yunnan he went to the market to buy mushrooms and so on. Xu Xiake had no fixed place to stay during his journey, but he could solve three meals a day with relative ease, which also confirms the high degree of commercialization in the Ming Dynasty from the side.

In addition, there are other historical materials can also be corroborated that the Ming Dynasty food marketization is high. In the Ming Dynasty Kaifeng city, is also a tavern, restaurant scales everywhere, food and drink of all kinds, everywhere is a hotel, restaurant, but also bakery, vegetarian noodle store and so on. In the restaurant, there is a kind of wine, good food, and there are singing prostitutes serving (anonymous author, 1984). In the city, there is also a specialized talent market that provides cooks, who are waiting to be hired by people who need to hold banquets (anonymous author, 1984).

Xu Hairong believes that: although the Ming Dynasty is a vast area, nearly three hundred years, but in some major areas and in the political stability and the annual success of the normal situation, the market price of various foodstuffs still fluctuates little. Secondly, the direct and indirect factors affecting the price of food materials are admittedly many, but the main three: one is the level of development of the productive forces of society; the second is the variety of products and the quality of the same variety of high and low; the third is the exchange of supply and demand in the market (Xu Hairong, 1990).

3. Local characteristics are more pronounced

Due to the differences in geographic environment and human history, different regions of China have formed a self-contained system of local dishes and dietary flavors, and with the passage of time, the food culture of each region has gradually been infiltrated and influenced by natural, social and human factors (Tao Xu et al., 2023). Chinese food has significant regional characteristics, which are closely related to geography, climate, history and culture.

The Chinese diet is generally based on wheat and its products in the north and rice and its products in the south. Xu Xiake traveled in the south for many years, and most of his staple food was rice, which could be steamed and eaten as rice, or boiled and eaten as porridge. With the staple vegetables better reflect the regional characteristics, Xu Xiake often eat bamboo shoots on the trip, bamboo shoots like warm and humid climate, in the deep soil, the soil is slightly acidic or neutral river banks, riverbanks, as well as in the foothills of the hills at an altitude of less than 500 meters can grow. Secondly, the vegetables that appear more are various mushrooms, especially in Yunnan, which are either picked in nature or purchased in the market. Fruits are mostly citrus, citrus more born along rivers and lakes or plains, hills, low mountains, like high temperature and humidity of the subtropical climate, not cold, a little shade, in the light, deep soil, good aeration performance of sandy loam grow well.

The meat Xu Xiake ate on his journey also has regional characteristics, he most often ate meat is fish, the southern region is rich in water resources, suitable for the growth of fish, resulting in the price of Yukoku cheap, as a result of which he ate the most fish. In addition, when Xu Xiake was in Guangxi, he saw dog meat in the market (Xu Xiake, 2015). The people of Guangxi also eat rats, and wild ducks in Yunnan. There are also venison and duck meat, all

with distinct local characteristics.

The regional characteristics of Chinese food culture are deeply influenced by geography, climatic conditions and historical traditions, and Xu Xiake embodied distinct regional and seasonal utilization of ingredients, as well as unique flavor preferences and eating habits in his travelogue.

4. Conclusion

The *Xu Xiake's Travels* is not only a detailed record of geographic investigation, but also a vivid testimony to the changes in food culture during the Ming Dynasty. Through an in-depth analysis of Xu Xiake's dietary habits during his travels, we are able to get a glimpse of the diversity of food culture in the Ming Dynasty. From staple food to side dishes, from fruits and vegetables to meat, and then to all kinds of drinks and other foods, the richness and diversity of Ming food shows the highly developed social economy and culture at that time. The high degree of marketization of food in the Ming Dynasty was due to the commercialization of agriculture and handicrafts, and the prosperity of the urban food industry mapped out the active social economy. The purchase and consumption of food during Xu Xiake's journey intuitively reflects the maturity of the food market and the circulation of commodities, which side by side proves the prosperity of the town economy and the penetration of the commodity economy in the Ming Dynasty. Local characteristics occupy an important position in the food culture of the Ming Dynasty, and the natural conditions, ethnic customs and historical inheritance of different regions jointly nurtured unique food habits and preferences.

In short, diet is created by humans and it in turn creates humans, and is indispensable for humans to be able to survive and thrive in the first place (Ning Wang, 2021). Although *Xu Xiake's Travels* recorded little about the Ming people's diet, the study shows the richness of food types, the circulation of the food market and the diversity of food culture in the Ming Dynasty.

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