I eat it away from home. For that reason, I am happily engaged in researching the hundreds of wonderful restaurants which are available in New York City. And if I feel like a meal at home, I telephone one or another neighborhood restaurant and contentedly eat what they send me. And when the children come over, which they do albeit not often enough to suit me, I offer them my basket full of menus and they choose whatever they would like to eat.

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- from *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Writers Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*, ed. Arlene Avakian (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997)

Boiled Chicken Feet and Hundred-Year-Old Eggs: Poor Chinese Feasting

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

You mustn't eat chicken feet until you are a married woman! my aunts warned me. "Otherwise you will grow up to run away from your husband."

They sat around the dining table, an unstable jointure of old planks stained by years of soy sauce drips and scorched by the ashy embers that always fell out of the small coal oven under the metal hot-pot which was fetched out once a year for Chinese New Year family feasts. They chewed on gold-brown chicken feet that had been boiled with ginger, garlic, sugar, and black soy. The feet looked like skinny elegant batons with starred horny toes at one end, their speckled skins glossy with caramelized color, but chicken feet all the same. My aunts and stepmother gnawed at the small bones, grinding the jellied cartilage of the ligaments audibly, and the bone splinters piled up beside their plates.

I would not stay to watch them. I had seen hens and roosters pick their feet through fungal monsoon mud, stepping on duck and dog and their own shit.

My stepmother raised poultry on our leftovers and on chopped swamp vegetation which sprouted lavishly in the greenish slimy wasteland behind our house, and on festival days she slaughtered at least two fat chickens for us—her five step-children, two sons, and cherished husband. Chicken was a luxury we tasted only on these days, on Chinese New Year, Ch'ing Ming, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and the Feast of the Hungry
Ghost. And then, as my aunts told us was the practice even when they were children, the chickens were divided according to gender, the father receiving the white breast meat, the sons the dark drumsticks, and the daughters the skinny backs, while the women ate the feet and wings.

As the only daughter in a family (then) of seven boys, I was excused from such discrimination and took my turn equally with the drumsticks, the favorite meat for all of us. Chicken was always sold whole and freshly slaughtered, and no one imagined then that one could make a dish solely of drumsticks or of chicken breasts. Such mass marketing was possible only with the advent of refrigeration, and although coffee shops in town held large industrial-sized refrigerators for serving shaved iced concoctions and cold sodas, popular refreshments among Malaysians to fend off the humid equatorial temperatures, Chinese Malaysians, like most Asians in the 1950s, would eat only fresh food. We thought of frozen meat as rotten, all firm warm scented goodness of the freshly killed and gathered gone, and in its place the monochromatic bland mush of thawed stuff fit only for the garbage pail.

Still, while no one sold chicken parts separately, fresh chicken feet were always available in the wet market; you could buy them by the kilos, a delicacy to be enjoyed, according to my elders, only by married women. Well, let my aunts and stepmother suck on those splinter bones. I was never comfortable at the table when those feet appeared, when the women waved me away from them. My mother had run away from her husband. A bad woman, a runaway wife, a lost mother. A young girl, I was not to be trusted with those chicken feet, not when I had my mother’s history in my blood, my mother’s face on my face, still recognizable to my aunts, my father’s brothers’ wives, good wives and mothers, even though it had been five, six, seven years since she ran away.

I could not face the leathery skin, tightly bound to the long femurs after hours of simmering. And the soft padded soles that my aunts delighted in chewing—it was here that the chicken came closest to the human anatomy: pads like the fat feet of my stepmother’s babies. Even now, now that I have grown to become a wife and mother like my aunts and stepmother, like my runaway mother, I will not eat chicken feet, no matter how much wine, cardamom, cumin, honey, or ginger has steeped them. I remember the tiny bones, the crunch of skin and cartilage. I remember my mother.

Almost forty years later, living in the United States, I am constantly reminded of how “Chinese” has become a fetish for Americans looking for a transcending experience of difference and otherness. Ranging from white models with stark black eyeliners and chopsticks in their chignons to “happy” dressing gowns that copy karate-type uniforms, things associated with Chinese culture pervade mainstream American imagination, suggesting, through the fixed acquirement of a traditional middle-class taste—for blue willow-pattern china, for instance, or take-out shrimp in lobster sauce—that Americans are omnivorous consumers rather than Eurocentric ideologues.

Purveyors of such U.S. “multiculturalism,” however, usually disguise the material sources of their goods. Difference has to be softened, transformed, before it can be assimilated into Middle America. So also with Chinese food, which, before Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, was sold in thousands of small restaurants outside of Chinatowns as egg rolls, egg foo yung, chow mein, and fortune cookies, none of which was recognizable to me who had grown up eating home-cooked Chinese food in Malaysia. Influenced by the increase in Asian immigration to the United States after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, and thirty years after Mao Tse-tung intoxicated the Nixon presidential party.
with maotai and exotic ten-course banquets, many Americans have learned to dine on "authentic" Chinese food across a number of regional cuisines, from the mild, flavorful fresh steamed dishes of Canton, to the salty fiery peppers of Szechwan and Hunan and the rich elaborate food of the Shanghainese. But mid-Manhattan restaurants and Chinese cookbooks never note the particular dishes peculiar to Old One-Hundred-Name, what the Chinese call the man in the street. These dishes have been the ordinary fare for billions of poor Chinese through the centuries, and for myself as a hungry child in a family of too many children and never enough money.

While the chicken feet my aunts feasted on was forbidden to me, I was repeatedly coaxed to taste pei ta-an, the only other dish in my famished childhood that I could not eat. These duck eggs, imported from China, had been selected for their large size, covered with a mix of mud and straw, then stored in a darkened space for at least a month, covered with cloth that had been impregnated with sodium carbonate. You had to knock the dried grey mantle of mud gently off, wash the eggs in cold water, then crack and peel the bluish-white shells. What emerged was a clear glistening gelatinous black oval enclosing a purple-green-black yolk, and a sharp reek of sulfuric vapor, a dense collection of chemicals from decaying things, like the air-borne chemical traces that trigger the salivary glands of scavenging wolves or turkey buzzards.

Father was especially fond of pei ta-an, what the expensive restaurants called hundred-year-old eggs, which my stepmother always served sliced thin in sections of eightths accompanied by shredded pinky young ginger pickled in sugared vinegar. He believed it was poth, full of medicinal properties that stimulated blood circulation, cleansed the liver and kidneys, sharpened the eyesight and hearing, and elevated the male libido, and my step-

mother, a generation younger than he, diligently served it as a cold relish to accompany steaming rice porridge, or alone, as a late-night snack.

Occasionally Father shared this delicacy with us. My brothers hungrily over him, waiting for their one-eighth sliver of slippery shining jet-black egg, which was served draped with a vinegary-moist ginger shred. Approaching pei ta-an for the first time, I thought its glistening black carapace and iridescent green-black yolk beautiful, a magical gem cut open for inspection. But then its acrid stench shot up my olfactory glands, opening passageways more powerfully than a tongueful of green mustard, and I gagged, as close to vomiting over food as I would ever get. Unlike boiled chicken feet which I could ignore by resolutely leaving the table, pei ta-an pursued me out of the kitchen, out of the living area, and out of the house, a smell of pollution I feared each time Father called out for us to come and eat some hundred-year-old egg.

At some point in my childhood, however, drawn by my brothers' lust for pei ta-an, I pinched my nostrils closed and opened my mouth for the sliver. Its flavor and texture was like nothing I had ever tasted, the combination of the jelled whiteturned-to-black and the tightly packed purple-black heart igniting on my taste buds as an intricate instantaneous sensation of bitter and sweet, rawly and densely meaty, yet as delicate as airspun cotton-candy, primitively chemical and ineffably original. I was hooked. But pei ta-an, although not expensive, was what my stepmother bought for Father alone: for his health, his pleasure, his libido. A morsel would always be our share of this pleasure.

Late on the evening that I first tasted pei ta-an I walked out to the Chinese grocery store at the corner of the main road and spent some of my cache of coins hoarded from the dollars that my mother far away in another country mailed me once or twice a
year. I bought two eggs jacketed in mud and straw. While my brothers were playing Monopoly in the front room, I sneaked into the kitchen, broke open the armor, carefully crazy-cracked the shells, peeled the pair, all the time marveling at the scent that had set my saliva flowing, and ate them slowly, reveling in the gentle chewy texture of the albumin and the heavy metallic yolk overload. My stepmother was right. Eating pei ta-an was a libidinous experience.

I have grown accustomed to the absence of strong flavor and scent in food, living in the United States. Many Americans appear to prefer their meals as antiseptic as their bathrooms. The movement toward "health foods" seems to me to be yet another progression toward banning the reek, bloodiness, and decay of our scavenging past and installing a technologically controlled and scientifically scrutinized diet. In some future time, humans may live to a hundred and fifty years, dining on a mass-produced nutritious cuisine of "natural foods" based on grains, vegetables, and roots. Boiled chicken feet and chemically preserved eggs will become gross memories from a horrible history of animal abuse and carcinogenic poisoning. But in the meantime, millions of Asians are still eating dishes in search of, if not, as my poor father who died young of throat cancer believed, health and longevity, at least a diverse diet that can keep them body and soul.

Thus my eldest brother, by now middle-aged and middle-class prospering, promised me a memorable breakfast when I visited him in Malacca in 1989. It was Sunday, as in the West, a day for leisurely gatherings and perhaps some family feasting. We drove to the center of town, up through a narrow side-lane, and parked by an open ditch. Under a galvanized tin roof, crowding with other families, we sat on low stools around a small round wooden table, as scarred and stained as the table around which we ate in our childhood. The hawker, a Chinese Malaysian, was busy stirring an enormous blackened iron pot from which clouds of steam puffed up. Smaller pots containing various dark and green mashies sat on smaller grills, all fueled by propane tank. Pouring the boiling liquid from the teapot, Elder Brother rinsed the bowls, cups, spoons, and chopsticks set before us. Then a woman—the hawkers wife? daughter?—filled the bowls with plain white rice porridge, watery, the grains soft but still separate rather than broken down into a glutinous mass. From the many pots she brought different bowls—salted cabbage cooked to a dark-green slush with slabs of pork fat edged with a little lean; salted pickled cucumber crunchy and sweet; hard-cooked and browned bean curd less chewy than the meat it was processed to imitate; salted dried anchovies smaller than my little finger, fried crisp with their heads on. Nothing was fresh, everything was freshly cooked.

A light in my head flashed and lit something I had always known but never understood. How poor the masses of ordinary Chinese have been for millennia and how inventive hunger has made them. How from the scraps, offal, detritus, and leftovers saved from the imperial maw, from dynastic overlords who taxed away almost everything, peasant Chinese have created a fragrant and mouth-watering survival: dried lily buds and lotus roots, tree cloud fungus and fermented bean mash, dried lichen and salted black beans, pickled leeks and seaweed dessert; fish maw and chicken feet; intestines and preserved eggs. No wonder as a child I was taught to greet my elders politely, "Have you eaten yet, Elder Auntie? Have you eaten rice, Third Uncle?" Speaking in our dialect, my stepmother still greets me, newly arrived from rich America, thus, "Have you eaten?"

The cook himself approached our table bearing two dishes especially ordered by my brother for me: soy-boiled chicken feet chopped into bite-sized pieces, and pei ta-an cut in eighths with a mound of pickled ginger on the side. My eldest brother had
figured me out; that, even after decades of American fast foods and the rich diet of the middle class, my deprived childhood had indelibly fixed as gastronomic fantasies those dishes impoverished Chinese had produced out of the paltry ingredients they could afford. This is perhaps the instruction to an increasingly consuming and consumed planet that the cuisine from China offers: to eat is to live. And we multiplicitious billions will all have to learn to eat well in poverty, turning scarcity and parsimony to triumphant feasting. Facing my morning's breakfast of preserved vegetables and hundred-year-old eggs, boiled chicken feet, and rice gruel, I knew my brother was offering me the best of our childhood together.

Soy-Boiled Chicken Feet*

10 pairs of chicken feet
1 teaspoon salt
1 1/2 teaspoon pepper
one knob ginger as big as a large walnut
4 cloves garlic
1/4 cup sherry
1 tablespoon sesame oil
2 teaspoons sugar
1 cup soy sauce
5 star-anise or 1 teaspoon five-spice powder (optional)

*The same recipe can be used for chicken drumsticks, substituting eight drumsticks for the feet, and skipping the initial boiling.

1. Wash chicken feet well, making sure that claws are clipped off and any small feathers plucked with tweezers. Strip the yellow outer epidermis off legs.
2. Fill a large pot with water and set it on high heat. When water boils, place chicken feet in the pot and cook for about 15 minutes, then drain.
3. Peel brown skin off ginger and slice thin in rounds. Peel garlic and crush lightly.
4. Put soy sauce, sherry, ginger, garlic, salt, pepper, sugar, star-anise or five-spice powder, sesame oil, and chicken feet in a large flat saucepan. Bring to a light simmer and leave simmering for about 30 minutes, by which time meat should be falling off the bones.
5. Cool, then chop into bite-sized pieces.

Serves 4 to 6.