At first I was disgruntled to find the food tales so formulaic, with their repetitious phrases and their well-worn plot twists, but eventually, I began to see these patterns as beloved conventions. After all, demanding originality of a folksy anecdote is like asking fairy tales not to begin with “Once upon a time…” Who am I to deny the teller—or the listener—the ritualistic thrill of sliding through a well-oiled story?

Indulge me now, as I feed you several of these tales.

1. I’ll be pointing out several key elements that show up repeatedly—and significantly—in these emperor stories. Some are, I think, very culturally specific; they reveal the values that both storyteller and listeners would have taken for granted. Other elements are more universal. Taken as a whole, these stories constitute a larger parable about how, if hunger didn’t exist, man would have to invent it.

Rice-steamed pork (fenzhenrou) probably originated during the late Ming dynasty in Henan Province—to be specific, at the Ding Family Restaurant. There’s an interesting tale as evidence. The Ming emperor Zongzhen, disguised as a commoner, was surveying the countryside around Zhenghan; by the time he came to Fenghou Peak, the sky was darkening and he was famished. Because the town was far away, he sought lodging at the home of a peasant family named Ding. The kind housewife prepared a meal for their guest, using some pork they’d been saving for New Year’s dinner. After a few bites, Zongzhen was greatly delighted and asked what he was eating. She replied that it was her family’s traditional rice-steamed pork recipe. The next morning, as he prepared to set off again, Zongzhen said to his hostess: “To come to Zhenghan without viewing Fenghou Peak would be a pity. But it would have been a greater pity not to taste your fenzhenrou!” After saying this, he revealed his identity. He appointed the peasant woman to the post of imperial chef and brought her back to the capital to serve at court. And thus was Ding-style rice-steamed pork passed down through the generations to us today.

2. We know that: Hungry + Delay = Angry

—from a takeout menu for Family Fortune Restaurant, San Francisco, touting their delivery service

I never intended to become an expert on food fables. I simply wanted to know why there was such a dearth of good writing about Chinese culinary culture. I had scoured every translated article I could get my hands on, and most of them read like taxonomy—gravely earnest definitions of the Eight Major Cuisines of China, in which ingredients, flavors, cooking methods, food preservation techniques, and knife skills were carefully and exhaustively catalogued. They left a chalky encyclopedic aftertaste.

Where was the human interest? Where was the delight? If béchamel sauce and pancetta could be discussed with wit, poignancy, and verve—why not wok hei and water bamboo? I dove into Chinese-language sources, hoping to find a Shanghainese M.F.K. Fisher or a Qing dynasty Brillat-Savarin. I haven’t found them yet. This is not to say that they don’t exist. It simply means that I got sidetracked along the way by the origin stories of Chinese dishes. These silly little food fables were everywhere, inescapable—and the more I read, the more I wondered at their striking similarity to each other. These stories all centered on discovery, loss, and a fateful reunion. In fact, they all had the boiled-down narrative arc of a folk tale—with strong overtones of a romantic comedy: Boy and dish meet cute. Boy loses dish. Boy faces obstacles in seeking his one true dish.

As it happens, the boy in question is the emperor of China. Several emperors, actually, from various dynasties—yet practically interchangeable. All of them are manifestations of a single archetype: the man so powerful that no one dares look him in the eye. These are stories about celebrity—the fame and immortality bestowed upon objects touched by the diva, the rock star, the semi-divine on the dragon throne. They are stories about restlessness. In each tale, a dish of peasant food awakens a powerful hunger.

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Element #1: The Comfort Phrases.

These Chinese food origin tales tend to start with the phrase 历史悠久 lishi youjiu (“a history lost in time…”). They usually include a description of the food as being 难忘 nanwang (“hard to forget”). And they end with some variation of 广为传开 guang wei chuankai (“And it became popular throughout the land”). The typical Chinese listener would hear those phrases and feel deeply, subconsciously reassured of certain truths:

- Age confers legitimacy.
- Names do matter.
- And if foreigners knew more about China, they’d eat it up.

Element #2: The Moment of Acute Hunger.

The emperor’s belly growls something fierce because he hasn’t eaten in days. He’s lost. Either there’s a war going on or somebody gave him bad directions.

Element #3: The Emperor Incognito.

Going plainclothes gives the emperor the opportunity to shed the stifling robes of responsibility and escape the stuffy palace. Anonymity also allows him to taste peasant dishes as they were prepared in the humblest kitchens. Like Ruth Reichl in a wig, the unrecognized emperor could be the ultimate make-or-break food reviewer.

Element #4: The Impeccable Hospitality of the Scrappy Commoner.

The emperor visits the home of a commoner with uncommon wok skills. The family’s been fattening the pig for a holiday feast, but they offer it to their hungry guest without hesitation. The gift is freely given, not compelled by duty. The emperor is oddly touched.

Element #5: The Wondrous Taste-Test and the Elevation to the Imperial Kitchen.

Like Buttercup, the future Princess Bride, or young Lana Turner sipping her Coke at Schwab’s Drugstore, our humble village cook is “discovered” and whisked off to court. There, all trace of muck will be scrubbed from her, her eyebrows will be carefully plucked, she will be coached in elocution; in short, she will be provided everything she needs for her full potential to bloom. How beneficent the king, how fabulous the resolution, how infinitely merciful his generosity! Isn’t this the happy ending that every village girl dreams of—to have her singular beauty recognized and exalted by an urbane connoisseur? To be saved from the indignity of anonymity, or pig-slopping, or whatever!
But try not to forget whom the real love story is about. Think of the cook as the goose that lays the gourmet egg—she is but the conduit through which scrumptiousness manifests itself. The individual is rescued from her penury expressly so that the dish itself can enjoy the "happily ever after" celebrity of being inscribed in the imperial recipe books. Once crowned with the official imprimatur of "yum," it can then spread in popularity, achieve brand recognition and market saturation.

Yes, this brings us back to 广为传播 guangwei chuankai, the Chinese equivalent of "The End," except that it's the exact opposite of an end. You could argue that 广为传播 guangwei chuankai could also be translated as: "And the dish replicated itself happily ever after."

So how exactly—you may wonder—does a dish become popular throughout the land?

It is a two-part process: 1) word spreads, and 2) the recipe follows. Remember, the highest fate that can befall a dish is to be declared not "fragrant" or "delicious" but "hard to forget." Why, that's dish nirvana. To be 难忘 nanwang—to linger like a catchy tune in the mind of an individual with influence, preferably somebody who likes to write things down—is the very definition of immortality. Nothing could be finer in a culture that prizes longevity. The悠久 youjiu age-old history is testament to a dish's viral intelligence—the number of generations it has succeeded in staying alive and relevant. You’ve heard that old saw about a chicken being an egg’s way of making another egg? Well, maybe cooks and connoisseurs are the double helix of a recipe’s strategy for perpetuating itself. Ambition alone isn’t enough to achieve lasting fame. For that, you need a publicist and a producer.

Note the elements that repeat in another food story from the same region:

In the waning days of the Western Han dynasty, the usurper Wang Mang seized power; in order to keep the House of Han from being restored to the throne, he persecuted all members of the clan. One of them, Liu Xiu, was pursued by Wang Mang’s troops to the Li River in Zhenghan (now Xinzhuang City). Famished, exhausted and freezing, Liu Xiu was fortunate enough to stumble upon an old healer woman who agreed to hide him. Not long afterwards, his pursuers rode past the village.

In the chaos of wartime, all the village’s crops had failed or been neglected, leaving every household hungry. The healer woman only had one small hen, but readily slaughtered it in order to feed her guest. She stewed the hen in an ancient cooking vessel with sage, ginseng, wolfberry and other herbs, then soaked bread in this broth and served it to Liu Xiu. Under her care, he was able to regain his strength within a few days. After he crossed the Pear River, he mustered up soldiers and horses, engaged Wang Mang in battle, and restored Han to the throne.

Several years later, when Liu Xiu established his capital in Luoyang, he sampled the most sublime foods on a daily basis, but nothing seemed to compare to the flavors of the soaked-bread stew he had tasted during his exile. Liu Xiu ordered his royal chef to recreate the dish, but several unsuccessful attempts raised his ire and the chef was sent to cook for the underworld. The emperor’s craving only grew stronger. A courtier named Deng Yu noticed, and sent a messenger to Zhenghan on the fastest steed he could find. The old healer woman was entreated to return to Luoyang, and great expense and effort was expended to find the exact cooking vessel in which the original stew had been cooked. Liu Xiu was so overjoyed by the meal that he invited Deng Yu to share his repast; he subsequently held a banquet for officials of all ranks, who also praised the dish. By royal decree, the recipe for herbal stew with soaked bread was printed in one of the earliest Chinese cooking manuals, and after several wars, found its way back to the people.


With his inexhaustible treasury, an emperor had the wherewithal to be the ultimate connoisseur; with his jaded palate, he had the motivation to become the ultimate foodie. One of the reasons he sneaks out of the palace is because his stomach wants to give the slip to the usual courtier foods, those fawning delicacies. Nothing requires chewing. Fish is steamed until it’s as tender as jelly. Meats are braised until you can cut them with a ladle. Rich foods don’t sate him now. They mock him. He might as well be on a liquid diet. He wants roughage.
The Qing emperor Kangxi must have felt this most keenly. Among Chinese emperors, he was especially famous for his habit of slipping out of the Forbidden City to slum it with the masses.

Kangxi, an emperor in the great Qing Dynasty, liked to visit corners of his kingdom unnoticed.

One day, he came to a village with few peasants and fewer hearthfires. Several days of trekking had left him tired and nearly starving, so he approached a house to beg for food. This family was poorer than dirt; usually they didn’t know where their next meal would come from. However, on this particular morning, the mother had steamed a mess of cornmeal wowotou in preparation for a holiday. Just as she lifted the lid of the steamer, the stranger approached and asked for food. She gave him one of the conical bread rolls. After swallowing it, Kangxi asked for another, then another, until he’d wolfed down nearly a dozen. With gusto, he exclaimed: “How sweet! How marvelously sweet! Delectable!”

Even after returning to the palace, Kangxi kept thinking about that divine sweetness, and so ordered the head imperial chef to prepare a batch. “Your Majesty,” inquired the chef, “what was the name of this rare foodstuff?”

Not knowing its name, Kangxi offered a description instead: “As yellow as gold and of incomparable sweetness was the bread prepared by the peasant woman.”

The chef analyzed and made inquiries. Upon determining that it was made of cornmeal, he whipped up a batch and had it brought to the emperor. After one bite, Kangxi exploded in wrath: “Knave who dares serve me this bitter, coarse thing! Knowest thou the punishment?” To make a public example of what happened to subjects who didn’t sweet, and they were executed. Panic began to spread among the masses.

Before long, Kangxi himself sent courtiers to bring the peasant woman to his court. Addressing him, she said, “Your Majesty, please refrain from eating for three days, and then allow this worthless servant to serve you her wowotou.”

Kangxi had grown tired of palace cuisine, and he desperately wanted a fresh eating experience. He agreed to undergo the hardship she had named. After he had fasted for three days, the peasant woman brought out a plate of wowotou. When Kangxi realized that they were leftovers from the batch made by the previous imperial chef, he was furious, but too weak from hunger to resist. He crammed two into his mouth.

“So sweet!” he couldn’t help murmuring.

The peasant woman fell to her knees and gave thanks.

Element #7: Think Twice Before Accepting a Job Offer from the Emperor.

The job of imperial chef may not be such a plum assignment after all.

These stories ask us to sympathize with the poor emperor who’s always coming home to find that his hired help aren’t up to snuff. “What do I pay you guys for?” this hapless employer complains. “Do you think I like summoning the executioner? What does a Son of Heaven have to do to get some decent service around here?”

By now you’ll no doubt have noticed a dark side to the emperor’s culinary passion. These rulers will spare no cost to re-create the moment of pleasure—and human life is cheap. These emperors are junkies, addicted to the memory of a peak experience. Their intense nostalgia is expressed as a desperate craving. In fact, that craving is rooted in the experience of deprivation, and to feed it properly, their handlers must re-create the moment of distress. The quality of the “high” apparently depends on the quality of the jonesing.

The extent to which you can excuse the emperor for his moody outbursts probably depends on your own relationship to adrenaline. Haven’t you ever pushed yourself to the brink just so that you could rescue yourself (or be thrillingly rescued) at the last minute? Notice that in these stories, the Moment of Acute Hunger often comes about because the emperor always seems to be underestimating the reach of his empire, the distances between places, his own stamina.

Don’t we all know people who sabotage good opportunities? Drama queens who choose a lifestyle of dissatisfaction? Why do we do this?

We make ourselves unhappy so that we can discover happiness again. Or to assure ourselves that we’re still alive. We misplace things of value because nothing compares to the pleasure of recovering something you’d given up for lost. Hide and seek. Peek and boo. How far into the wasteland do we have to venture before we can properly appreciate the small miracles contained in a chunk of stale bread, a gulp of flat water, a simple breath?

Is hunger an essential part of any truly satisfying meal?

The emperor might think so, but the thought makes his palace staff shudder. Can you imagine the dread that rolled over them whenever the emperor announced his
latest coarse-food infatuation? Some stories even turn the emperor’s violent sense of entitlement into a joke. Here’s one where a few of the familiar story elements have been bent into the shape of a set-up and a punchline.

The Qing emperor Qianlong traveled south, incognito, to Jiangnan. One day, while he was eating at a small tavern, the innkeeper brought out a huge ceramic platter. In the center lay two long strips of golden fried tofu cubes. On both sides of the tofu stood two gleaming green stalks of water spinach. On the tips of the leaves was stuck a crooked, dark red chili pepper. The colors were lustrous and bright. The dish practically glowed. And it tasted as good as it looked. Qianlong was delighted. “Pray tell me the name of this dish,” he asked.

The innkeeper sang out: “It is known as ‘Scarlet-Beaked Green Parrot in a White Jade Basket with Gold Inlay.’”

When Qianlong returned to his palace, he gave instructions to the imperial kitchen to concoct this very dish. The royal chef was flummoxed. He scoured his cookbooks and his memory for such a dish. After exerting intense effort, he finally presented “Scarlet-Beaked Green Parrot” at the imperial table.

Qianlong took one look at the dish and his face flushed red with rage. “Insolent knave! You dare to mock me? What kind of Scarlet-Beaked Green Parrot is this?”

Terrified, the chef dropped to his knees and began to kowtow. His forehead clattered on the floor like a cleaver mincing garlic. “Your Highness, please forgive me! Your unworthy servant ventured into the mountain forests and caught this red-beaked parrot with his very own hands. Before I plucked it, all of its feathers were pure green, I swear it.”

Element #8: The Mutual Incomprehension of the Haves and Have-Nots.

If you choose to read the stories as social commentary on the symbiotic relationship twist king and kingdom, you’ll find that these tales can be read in two ways. You may also discover a sly tension that keeps either of the two interpretations from tipping the scale decisively in its own favor.

On the one hand, these origin stories showcase the values of the proletariat: their love-hate relationship with the emperor and the celebration of folk skill. Think about it: The tales may be told from the royal’s point of view, but the moral of the story is always anti-elitist: Peasant Knows Best.

The commoners in this pack of stories are keepers of a grand yet humble recipe. They’ve inherited something very plain and nourishing and refined it into its highest form. They are producing the culinary equivalent of a Shaker chair.

And truly, ‘tis a gift to be simple when simplicity is sublime.

In fact, because the peasants’ craft is so pure and unpretentious, maybe we’re meant to worry a little for them as they start working in the imperial kitchen. After all, who hasn’t heard about the corrupting influence of the court? Put yourself in their shoes. Only last month, you and your family routinely flipped a coin to determine who got to eat dinner that day. Now, menials and drudges scurry about to chop vegetables and bring you firewood. You get soft—perhaps a little overconfident. When you cook dinner for the guy who sits at the center of the civilized world, maybe you start to think there’s nothing you can’t whip up.

After a while, will your friends even recognize you? “He doesn’t even talk the same way anymore,” they whisper behind your back. Everybody knows how those palace chefs go in for frippery and metaphor. And to be honest, you’re starting to agree that it’s best to draw a certain line between classes.

Think about it: The parrot story illustrates the perils of class-mixing. See what happens when commoners like the innkeeper try to get fancy? Why, disaster ensues. The royal employees, so well versed in courtly language, fail to recognize their own florid language and they turn peasant-literal in the confusion. Who wants to bet that the birdcatching royal chef might have had a fighting chance of decoding “Scarlet-Beaked Green Parrot in a White Jade Basket with Gold Inlay” if he’d been told—for instance—that Qianlong had sampled it during a visit to Duke Chu’s estate. Surely then the chef would have recognized the argot of a fellow master chef—a brother-in-arms as skilled at cooking words as ingredients.

“Cut the crap. Sometimes fried tofu with spinach is just fried tofu with spinach,” grumble your relatives, perching on impossibly small bamboo stools as your dusty nephews chase the pig around the living room. “The further a man gets from the land, the less sense he has. When you know how to coax a green plant from a seed, you don’t need to call it jade to praise it. Your sweat is your praise. And your crops thank you with honest flavor. People in the palace have got it backwards. They think there’s nothing more valuable than gold and jade. If a dish tastes good to them, if it looks pretty, they say it looks like jewelry. But they should be naming their precious metals ‘millet’ and calling their shiny stones ‘leek’ and ‘soybean’!”

Maybe your bumpkin kinfolk have a point. No wonder the palace chefs keep losing their heads—they’re no match for the plain-spoken, commonsensical commoner. (You’ve seen his spiritual descendant: the grizzled line cook at the Chinese takeout joint, the one wearing a buzz cut and a Ramones T-shirt, whose cigarette dangles ash as he clatters woks. Go ahead, ask him about Jade Parrots or Golden Frogs Looking at Moon. His flat, glinty stare will make you quail.)
At the very least, the grass-roots interpretation is poking fun at the decadence of the court and implicitly praising the deep wisdom of the vernacular.

Not everybody would agree, of course. One can imagine the royal courtiers scoffing at this version.

“Are the stories implying that every peasant cooks so well?” the nobles sniff disdainfully. “Clearly, the point of these fables,” they say, “is about pure dumb luck. After all, the emperor doesn’t even look for the Best Cook in Town—he just knocks on the door of the first shack he can stagger to. What further proof do you need that we’re talking about accidents of timing and place? Shall we be completely ridiculous and declare that the match-up of cook and connoisseur was somehow fated—that talent and scout were drawn together by an invisible red thread?”

“Or is the point,” they say while leaning in with jabbing fingers, “that when you’re hungry, you’ll eat anything and like it? Maybe even lavish rhapsodic praise and signing bonuses on the person who fed you?”

When you look at it that way, the recurring theme of hunger as the ultimate flavor enhancer slyly deconstructs the notion of the peasant’s folk skill. After all, any reasonable reader must concede that the emperor wasn’t in his right mind—er, stomach—when he formed that high opinion. That voyage story implies that it wasn’t the recipe but the emperor’s state of mind—and an altered one it was—that was so tasty.

Isn’t this fun? Don’t the farmers and the courtiers look like they’re about to come to blows? With practice, you too can turn this bifocal lens on any story. For example, at first glance, Beggar’s Chicken would seem like another simple folk food that magically rejuvenates the deadened appetite.

A beggar in Zhejiang came into possession of a chicken, but he had no pot to cook it in and nothing to season it with. In the end, he decided to wrap the chicken in leaves, coat the leaves with mud and bake the whole thing over coals. Hours later, just as the chicken was finally ready to eat, who should happen along but Emperor Qianlong, disguised as a commoner. His stomach was rumbling so loudly with hunger that the beggar offered to split the chicken with him. Qianlong found the meat to be wondrously fragrant. In this way, “beggar’s chicken” spread throughout the land.

“But a cynic would ask: How does folk culinary wisdom come into play when the beggar isn’t even a cook? He was just a starving guy who had to wait several hours for his stolen chicken to cook all the way through. What’s talent got to do with it?”

“Chew on this,” other courtiers chime in. “Being brought to the palace doesn’t mean you’re special. Do you know how many cooks we have here? Hundreds. Don’t flatter yourself that you’re anything more than just a number. The emperor will forget you really quickly. You’ll get warehoused. You’ll cook for bitchy dowager concubines.”

They smile blandly. “But serving third-string concubines—or even their handmaidens—is better than slopping pigs out in the sticks, n’est-ce pas?”

Maybe not.

Does every wide-eyed young talent get co-opted by the system? Wouldn’t it be nice to think that a handful of indie artists are resolute enough to resist the glamour of the corporate machine? That’s why I end with this final story, which offers a bit of a reversal. For one, it comes to life where the other stories end (i.e., the arrival of the chef in the palace kitchen). And halfway through, strikingly, it switches to the commoner’s point of view, which allows a twist ending.

Once upon a time there was an emperor who neglected the governing of his empire for the pleasures of debauchery. Flatterers were rewarded and the virtuous punished. His excesses depleted the treasury, and the grumblings of the commoners began to be heard in the streets.

One day, a knave named Fan Sushui sought an audience with the emperor. Kowtowing, he said he had wondrous news—that he knew of a way to attain eternal youth! Delighted, the emperor bade him elaborate. Fan explained: “One need only eat one hundred different meals consecutively to gain the longevity of an immortal. My liege could issue a proclamation to recruit a master chef to produce three novel meals a day. Would this not fulfill the requirement?” The emperor nodded excitedly and issued the order. Not long after, noted cooks and chefs from every corner of the kingdom were brought to the capital and their skills were put to the test. In the end, one particularly expert chef named Su Qiaosheng was chosen.
Did Su Qiaosheng get lucky with his improvised dumplings, or was he remarkably skilled? Was he a dab hand with the spices, or was the emperor just craving a bite of primitive unfussiness?

What pleases me about this story is that Su Qiaosheng saw through the hype. He kept it real.

But the real happy ending is that we’re still talking about these dishes today. The playboy emperor may not have eaten his way to everlasting life, but these dishes triumphantly used him, used Su Qiaosheng—look, they’ve just finished using me—to reproduce themselves yet again.

Lessons: First impressions count. Be hospitable to strangers. Never let your guard down around emperors. Keep ‘em waiting—not enough to make them angry…just enough to let the best sauce thicken.

Notes
1. These stories were sourced from the Internet and published anthologies. All translations are my own.