



The Recipe for Chinese Cuisine's Popularity in Japan

Sato Takako

Sato Takako, the editor-in-chief of *80C*, a popular Japanese website on Chinese food, is a food critic who specializes in Chinese cuisine. She has written on the cuisine of Sichuan, the southwestern Chinese Province famed for its hot and spicy food, for a leading hotel industry magazine in Japan and contributes to other Japanese and Chinese publications such as the Japanese Airlines' in-flight magazine *Skyward*, and *Go Chengdu*, an online portal about Chengdu, capital of Sichuan. Sato, a frequent flier to China to explore food and ingredients and learn traditional food preparation techniques, founded Roundtable, a Chinese food and travel website, in 2019.

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Sato Takako has a theory about why food brings such enjoyment to people, creating an additional pleasure besides appealing to the taste buds. Over the centuries, various food cultures have merged with one another and learned from one another, giving rise to new foods and flavors. It is this long tradition, history and integration that makes any dish much more than food, a part of culture.

CNS: What was your early impression of Chinese cuisine? Has that changed over the decades? How is Chinese cuisine in China different from Chinese cuisine in Japan?

Sato Takako: Chinese restaurants in Japan often offer two types of cuisine, “Japanese-Chinese” and “Chinese.” The latter mainly serve authentic Chinese food. In the early days, most Chinese restaurants were run by overseas Chinese, and they mainly served high-end Cantonese food (the cuisine of southern Chinese city Guangzhou, earlier known as Canton). Such restaurants hire highly-paid Chinese chefs to ensure they are serving authentic Chinese food.

Japanese-Chinese restaurants, on the other hand, serve localized Chinese food. These are mainly street food stalls where customers can taste dishes from different regions of China under one roof. The Japanese generation born in the 1970s grew up with Japanese-Chinese cuisine. When I was young, it was regarded as affordable, and the cuisine was synonymous with the common dishes people made at home, such as mapo tofu and dry-fried shrimp.

The two styles of Chinese cuisine emerged in Japan primarily because of the ingredients and the historical and cultural differences. When

Chinese cuisine was first introduced in Japan, it was difficult to buy authentic Chinese seasonings. For example, in 1957, Chen Kenmin, the founder of a prominent restaurant in Tokyo, introduced “stir-fried pork and cabbage with sauce” during a cooking show on Japanese TV channel NHK. It was the first time that Japanese viewers learned how to cook Sichuan-style stir-fried pork, which then became a popular dish in Japan. However, bean paste, an ingredient of that dish, was not available in Japan at that time, so Chen improvised by adding his own version, a brand of Japanese miso (a paste of fermented soybean and an essential ingredient of Japanese food). This makes Japanese stir-fried pork sweet and full of flavors, very different from the salty and spicy Sichuan-style stir-fried pork.

In addition, the Japanese use raw pork when cooking stir-fried pork because they think it is too much work to boil the meat first and then cut it into slices. But the original Sichuan-style stir-fried pork is called “twice-cooked pork” in Chinese and a Chinese folktale explains why it is cooked twice. The ancient Chinese did not like to make offerings of raw meat during their traditional religious rituals, so they offered boiled meat instead, which would be cooked again with other ingredients after the ritual was over.

Today, the Chinese restaurants in Japan are becoming much more diversified. With more people-to-people exchanges with China, more and more Japanese chefs are heading to China to learn how to cook authentic Chinese dishes. Besides the big cities like Chengdu and Hangzhou, which are famous for their cuisine, some Japanese chefs also travel to remote mountainous areas or regions where the Chinese ethnic groups live to learn local cuisines. In recent years, Tokyo has seen new restaurants specializing in regional Chinese cuisine such as the food of northeastern China, Yunnan in southeastern China, and Guangxi in the south. We can see that Japanese-Chinese cuisine has begun to take on the characteristics of regional Chinese cuisine. The chef of a Chinese restaurant in Tokyo, Yoshiki Igeta, learned to cook Sichuan dishes at a legendary traditional Sichuan cuisine restaurant in Chengdu. His repertoire includes stir-fried pork with seasonal vegetables, making the authentic Sichuan dish available in Tokyo.

Some Japanese-Chinese restaurants are transforming into upscale ones. For example, in Ginza, a district in Tokyo, there are some restaurants where the average bill can come up to 30,000 to 50,000 yen (around \$200–350) per customer.

CNS: According to Japanese market research data, Chinese food is one of the most popular cuisines among the Japanese, whether they are eating at home or eating out. Akutagawa Ryunosuke (1892–1927), regarded as the father of the short story in Japan, and poet-lyricist Aiyū Kobayashi (1881–1945) both praised Chinese cuisine and a large number of Chinese dishes feature in popular Japanese animes such as *Cooking Master Boy*, *Doraemon* and *Solitary Gourmet*. How did Chinese cuisine become so popular in Japan, especially the spicy Sichuan cuisine?

Sato Takako: Curiosity is a major reason the Japanese are interested in Chinese cuisine. Some Japanese writers or celebrities have detailed descriptions of Chinese food in their writings, and many popular animes and comics also depict Chinese cuisine and its charms, whetting people's appetite for it.

For example, mapo tofu often features in Japanese films and animes, and some variety shows have produced mind-blowing creative adaptations of the dish. The manga *Iron Wok Jan* about a teenager's ambition to be the best chef has influenced a generation of Chinese cuisine chefs. Many Chinese cuisine chefs in Japan, who are in their 40s today, began to take an interest in Chinese dishes after reading the manga.

Whether a cuisine is accepted and adored depends not only on restaurants but also on whether it can be cooked at home. Japanese seasoning companies have played a key role in bringing Chinese cuisine into Japanese families. In order to make cooking Chinese food at home easy, Japanese companies have introduced "Chinese seasonings" and adapted the flavor to local taste. We even have ready-to-eat versions of some dishes that people can buy at supermarkets and convenience stores, then just heat up them at home and tuck into them.

The popularity of Sichuan cuisine especially has fueled the popularity of Chinese cuisine in Japan, making it a popular food culture. Chen Kenmin deserves additional mention as the "father of Japanese Sichuan cuisine." In the 1960s, he began to appear on the NHK cooking show, teaching Japanese how to cook classic Sichuan dishes at home.

The Japanese began to grow fond of the spicy Sichuan cuisine because the spicy food creates a sense of stimulation that can relieve the pressure of the fast pace of life and heavy work pressure, and also because they now have fewer children, which means they don't have to cook additional non-spicy food for the children. In 2013, Japanese gourmet Masamichi Nakagawa, who studied in Chengdu, started a website to

introduce Sichuan cuisine to the Japanese. Then he founded an organization that ran a Sichuan food festival in Tokyo from 2017. Once the Sichuan Food Festival attracted 100,000 visitors in just two days and was covered by more than 300 Japanese media. In addition, the organization often conducts trips for Chinese cuisine fans in Japan to Chengdu to taste authentic Sichuan food.

CNS: Chinese cuisine has become a part of Japanese lives today. Japan is even making innovations on Chinese food, such as strawberry mapo tofu, boiled *xiao long bao* (Chinese steamed buns), bubble tea dumplings (in which tapioca balls are used as the dumpling filler), mapo tofu with stir-fried noodles and mapo tofu burgers. What do you think of these recreations?

Sato Takako: I've only heard of strawberry mapo tofu and boiled *xiao long bao*, and they may have been produced by one or two restaurants or cook shows merely to get attention. I dislike such innovations because every Chinese dish has its own history and flavor. The unique flavor of mapo tofu is its numbing spiciness, so adding strawberries changes its taste.

The people of Sichuan often eat mapo tofu with animal brains and spinal cords. The Japanese chefs transformed this dish into shirako mapo tofu instead, using shirako, the seminal fluid of fish or mollusks, in place of brain and spinal cord, which the Japanese do not eat. In this way, the dish not only maintains its original flavor, but has also been accepted by the Japanese. This is what a good recreation should be. Foods such as Japanese hamburger patties and crab balls made with cream and crab meat are Japanese recreations of Western food which have become classic dishes at the Western cuisine restaurants in Japan.

In fact, Japan often borrows good things from other countries and integrates them with local conditions and culture to create a product with Japanese characteristics. After ramen (wheat noodles served in broth) was introduced in Japan from China, Japanese chefs, with their well-known creative spirit, conjured up a variety of ramens, some with a strong pork bone flavor, and others with a very light flavor. You can see that when a food is introduced in Japan, different flavors of the dish will emerge, and this is related to Japan's national character.

In Tokyo, there is a Chinese restaurant which recently got three Michelin stars. It showcases the concept of "Japanese spirit with Chinese talent." It has a specialty, Yunbai pork, which is made of eggplant and

pork belly slices. In addition to the special ingredients, every step, from steaming the meat and heating the utensils to serving the dish at the table, is completed within a fixed time calculated to the second. This reflects Japan's deep respect for the Chinese food culture.

CNS: As a signature dish of Japanese cuisine, Japanese ramen is popular all over the world. The oily and salty meat soup, coming from China, was once considered different from other traditional Japanese dishes. Is the food culture evolution the result of exchange of ideas? What impact does Western food have on Japan?

Sato Takako: From raw ingredients to cooking methods and dining styles, Chinese food culture has influenced Japanese food culture in many ways. Rice came to Japan from the south of the Yangtze River in China more than 2,500 years ago, and a large number of Chinese vegetables, fruits and cooking methods were introduced in Japan from the period between the Sui Dynasty (581–618) and the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912).

The most important stage in the food and cultural exchange between China and Japan was during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). At that time, the Japanese “envoys” to the Tang court included “students” who specialized in various kinds of cooking skills. The Chinese monk Jianzhen also brought a lot of Chinese food with him when he traveled to Japan finally in 753 after many failed attempts, during one of which he became blind. During this period, books about Chinese food also made their way to Japan, such as Lu Yu's *The Classic of Tea*, the first known monograph on tea written between 760–762, which had a profound impact on the Japanese tea ceremony later. The Japanese *kaiseki* meal, a multi-course traditional dinner, derived from the tea ceremony.

The cuisine of Europe and the United States also had a huge influence on the Japanese diet. In 675, Emperor Tenmu introduced a meat ban, and subsequently, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, the fifth shogun or military leader of the Tokugawa shogunate, a military government of Japan, issued a ban on killing animals. Consequently, the Japanese almost no longer ate beef for a long time. Then in 1853 the “Black Ships” arrived at the Uruga Harbor under the command of United States Commodore Matthew Perry and marked the reopening of Japan to political dialogue after more than two hundred years of self-imposed isolation. Subsequently, Japan's first beef restaurant opened in Yokohama for the foreigners living there. Gradually, Western food culture was introduced in Japan, and the Japanese began to have not only beef and milk, but also Western pastries and drinks such

as beer, coffee and wine. Today, *sukiyaki*, Japanese hot pot that usually contains sliced beef which is slowly cooked or simmered, beef with rice and other Western dishes have become the best known Japanese dishes.

Food has no boundaries. Exchange, collision and fusion between different foods are happening not only in Japan, but throughout the East and West. Tea went to Britain from China, but today tea is undeniably an important part of the classic English breakfast, like baked beans and fried eggs and bacon. Then there are restaurants in Sichuan making sushi with animal brains, and office workers drink coffee with Japanese rice balls for breakfast. Such scenes occur every day everywhere in today's era of food globalization.

For thousands of years, various food cultures have integrated with one another and learned from one other, so that new food and flavors are served on tables thanks to breakthroughs in recipes and ingredients, expanding people's understanding of food. That is the classic enjoyment that food offers us.

(Interviewed by Shan Peng and He Shaoqing)

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