

Top of the Food Chain

by Connie Zheng '10

It was two in the afternoon, and we were famished. While we hadn't engaged in any particularly strenuous exercise that morning, the exhilaration of gazing upon mountains that nudged the sky and of listening to the hoarse echoes of cranes in the misty valleys had left us inexplicably hungry. As we assembled about the enormous circular dining table, ten, twelve, thirteen of us, I sensed the riotous protest in my stomach, rumbling and howling with want. I didn't care if the waiters served us steak, noodles, or monkey-I had to ingest something, if only to appease the belligerent cries of my stomach. I would've willingly ripped apart a well-roasted snake-I'd done it before, and had actually enjoyed it.

As my teenaged cousin, Shengyi, and his friend Liang watched the Chinese dub of *Osmosis Jones* on the sleek television set nearby, I entertained myself with fantasies of airily whipped cucumber juice floating above a glutinous layer of honey, skewered Goliath shrimp marinated in rice wine, and curly peppers deep-fried in a palette of spices. My paternal grandfather, aunt, and Liang's mother ringed one half of our table; ringing the other half and flanking me were my maternal grandparents and aunt, all of whom my father's family had invited along on the three-day vacation into China's tourist-friendly *Wuyi* mountain range. Occupying the miscellaneous spaces in between were my paternal uncle's colleagues-our personal driver and various company associates. I wasn't sure if I was embarrassed or selfishly pleased by the fact that these sun-baked, beer-bellied men were all government employees or tobacco company managers who never hesitated to use their authority to wrangle us ahead of queues or into our personal buses. Their banter filled the private dining room-the largest in our glassy hotel-with a comfortable purr that pawed invitingly, beckoning me to join in whenever any of my relatives mentioned that I would be attending an American university in a few months' time.

Without fail, my uncle's associates would mechanically turn to me and ask the inevitable question: "so what do you think you want to study?" I preferred my epicurean reveries-even though they only made me hungrier as I waited-to the questions that dogged me every time I was introduced to a stranger. Still, I couldn't ignore them forever, and, every now and then, I would elaborate on my monosyllabic responses with some awkwardly-formed monologue on my plans for the future, or on the state of American education today. Both, I'd discovered, were popular topics among parents living in China.

"So tell us how much your tuition costs?" The man to my left, a whiplash-thin fellow with an Adam's apple the size of a baby carrot, suddenly asked. As he spoke, I could see through the gauzy scarves of smoke floating from his thinly-lipped mouth to his teeth, glazed syrup-yellow by nicotine. His eyes were kindly, though, soft and crinkled at the corners like cultured leather, and warmly brown.

I responded, between barely suppressed coughs-*just because you have emphysema doesn't mean you need to give it to me too*-with the largest plausible number I could concoct, to maybe dazzle them a little. Although not everyone to whom I spoke in China accepted my outlandish estimates without questions, for the most part I spoke the truth, and even the most mundane figures-the cost of a round-trip ticket from Boston to Shanghai, the price of a pound of apples-staggered my audience, hungry as they were for Western exoticism.

"Wah! So expensive!" Heads turned, tongues wagged.

"Well, her parents also make a lot," my grandparents-all three of them-chimed in. This was a gross exaggeration. Sure, they were filthy rich-by the standards of the average Chinese. But so is half of the American populace. My parents and I lived in a modest, three-bedroom split-level with peeling paint in woody suburbia; most Communist Party members drove nicer cars than we did.

"How much?" And all heads would turn to me, except for Shengyi's and Liang's. *Osmosis Jones* was battling intergalactic super-villains, and they couldn't have cared less how much my parents earned a year. Ten thousand, a hundred thousand, eight billion? When *Osmosis Jones* was deep-frying his enemies with a ray gun, they wouldn't have cared if my parents were Bill and Melinda Gates.

The salary question was the one I always hated the most-and the one people always asked me without fail. I grew to avoid speaking with adult strangers, once they'd discovered, whether by accident or if my grandparents felt comfortable enough around them to reveal a detail they were usually so cautious to conceal, that I lived in the United States. Half the time, I felt like a human import, a strange denizen of faraway lands whose sole purpose was to inject some novelty into a social atmosphere permeated with boredom and cynicism. Even teenagers couldn't resist asking the salary question every once in a while, which infuriated me more than if their parents had asked. As large figures, made even larger after the exchange rate, tumbled uneasily from my mouth, the proclamations that sometimes followed-"America is so rich!"; "and all of that money, for what?"; "imagine what I could do with that dough!"-never failed to embarrass me. The temporary, chauvinistic sense of superiority it initially conferred me always melted into simple awkwardness, and maybe shame-whether at them for their behavior, or at myself for feeling proud in the first place, I never knew.

"Do you not know? Your parents don't tell you how much they make?" A portly man from across the table, one of my uncle's trusted employees, leaned back into his chair and pressed his fleshy back into its tall mahogany frame as he took an instinctive draw from his cigarette.

"I...uh, um, oh, I don't know," I supplied the evasive response I always gave in answer to the salary question. It never felt right lying about income, and even when I did have a vague inkling as to how much my parents earned annually, I preferred to feign complete ignorance. Fortunately, I was spared from further inquisitiveness-however well-intentioned it may have been-when a small coterie of waitresses in vermilion cheongsams entered the room bearing fragrant, glorious food. Now thoroughly distracted from Osmosis Jones, Shengyi and Liang turned from the television toward the Lazy Susan waiting patiently in the center of the table to bear our meal.

In a gesture of commencement, two waitresses immediately placed voluptuous pitchers of freshly squeezed cucumber, watermelon, and taro juice on the Lazy Susan. I nearly wept as I dripped fragrant honey in great golden dollops into my glass goblet, and could barely contain the joyous cries of my stomach as I, shaking, poured cucumber juice into its waiting grail. No sooner had I finished my drink had a waitress arrived bearing a gargantuan ceramic bowl nearly spilling with soup, its ladle peeking out in merriment as smoky curls of steam wove leisurely, like hazy incense, in the artificially chilled air. Once the waitress behind me had finished the interminable process of spooning soup into a thickset porcelain bowl that seemed too small for its burden, I picked up my soup-spoon and feverishly scooped up the meat and soup resting invitingly beneath my nose. I held the spoon to my lips-and suddenly noticed that I was looking at a four-inch long leg that terminated in a webbed foot. As I stared down at the disembodied frog legs bobbing in my bowl, small sausages of hardened muscle wrapped in peeling gray skin, I wondered if even my appetite would get me through this one.

To tell the truth, I've eaten frogs before-and liked them. However, those were fried, tiny, limbless packages of tender white meat wrapped in a crunchy envelope of skin; had I not been warned, I would have assumed that the animal I was ferociously ripping apart was chicken. Unfortunately, I could recognize the animal from which the floating, disembodied limbs originated-a mountain frog the size of my palm. Each hind leg was muscular and athletic; mottled skin resembling the bottom of a stony stream and feeling of decaying chrysanthemum petals clung earnestly to the exposed muscle and bone. Every time I picked at the paper-like skin with my chopsticks, the skin would peel away a little more, like tissue gift-wrap that had grown old and unnecessary: the meat was practically sliding off the bones.

After much urging from the others at the table-"it's rude to reject such a precious gift!"-I finally ate the frog in one fell swallow. It wasn't the most bizarre creature I'd ever eaten. However, consuming unconventional local dishes in China-provided that the venue did not appear to be a stronghold of salmonella-provided me with a mission and a method for me to prove myself as someone more than just a tourist, a foreigner who samples westernized versions of local cuisine and who never dares to set foot into its wild interior. I doubt I'll ever be considered a "true" Chinese, in all senses of the word, even if I have popped whole octopi (ink sacs still intact) into my mouth and have gnawed on marinated snake ribs roughly the size of my hand. Still, how many people can say that they've sliced up gelatinous sea cucumbers drooling with sauce, or dug out periwinkle meat from its curvaceous shell?

Sometimes, I wonder if these self-proclaimed achievements are a bit shallow, if maybe my equating gastronomic bravado with cultural authenticity is an ill-concealed attempt to pass myself off as less "foreign" than I actually am in the eyes of the "true" Chinese around me. Yet, exotic, unnamable delicacies comprise one very crucial aspect of Chinese culture; among other things, food *is* Chinese culture. As a child, I was an annoyingly picky eater, a frustration to my parents and an irritant at dinner gatherings. I used to eat only French Fries and hamburgers, fudge pudding and potato salad; I squirmed rebelliously whenever my parents spooned onto my plate watery slices of yellowed tofu, thick like wet cardboard, or soft carp, whose pupils were whitened and glassy from a steamy death. Year after year, when my parents sighed in exasperated despondency, "you'll never be a true Chinese unless you eat these chicken feet," I dismissed their words as typical lamentations against the whitewashing of my generation of Chinese-American youth. I still don't like chicken feet very much, but now, my ingestion of creepy and seemingly inedible foods is my proudest and most incontestable claim to Chinese-ness, even if I do hold my chopsticks like a peasant.

Later that afternoon, while touring one of *Wuyi* mountain's numerous natural history museums, on a poster I spied a familiar friend. And, in that one brief moment of both exhilaration and horror, I realized that the frog I'd just eaten was, in fact, endangered.