

Just Rice and Soy Sauce? Teaching about Chinese Culture through Food

Subjects: Social Studies

Suggested Grade Levels: 5–8

Time Frame: Variable

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Overview

This lesson is designed to help students see a connection between food and culture. Students will get insights into areas of Chinese culture by considering the cuisines of China. When they have completed this study, students may take a trip to Philadelphia’s Chinatown and a Chinese restaurant where they can compare what they have learned about authentic Chinese foods with those Chinese foods served in the city of Philadelphia. They can also observe some of the benefits that Chinese immigrants have brought to the United States. Students may also investigate the influence of American food in China.

Connection to Philadelphia World Heritage Tool Kit’s Goal

Philadelphia has a great deal to offer students learning about various cultures. For example, Chinatown, which lays in the shadow of Independence Hall, a World Heritage Site.

Core Curriculum Standards

- Students learn where people and places are located and why they are there. They examine the influence of physical systems, such as climate, weather and seasons, and natural resources, such as land and water, on human populations.
- Students consider how people interact with the environment and some of the consequences of those interactions.
- Students explore people, places, and environments in this country and in different regions of the world.
- Students produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- With some guidance and support from peers and adults, students develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.
- Students will use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas clearly and efficiently.
- Students will conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.
- Students will gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation. Students will draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- Students will present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Students will make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

Objectives

This lesson will introduce students to the foods of China and they will see the relationship between food and other aspects of one's culture.

Essential Question

What can we learn about the complex cultural role that food plays in our daily lives?

Materials Needed

Attached PowerPoint (located in the procedure), attached articles (located at end of lesson plan)

Procedure

Introduction to Chinese Food Unit: Food plays a complex role in our daily lives. According to K. C. Chang in an article entitled "Food in Chinese Culture," "The importance of food in understanding human culture lies precisely in its infinite variability– variability that is not essential for species survival. For survival needs, people everywhere could eat the same food, to be measured only in calories, fats, carbohydrates, proteins, and vitamins. But people of different backgrounds eat very differently. The basic stuffs from which food is prepared; the ways in which it is preserved, cut up, cooked (if at all); the amount and variety at each meal; the tastes that are liked and disliked; the customs of serving food; the utensils; the beliefs about the food's properties– these all vary. The number of such 'food variables' is great."

- <http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/food-chinese-culture?page=0,0>

In this lesson plan students will be investigating the foods that are used in the rich and diverse cuisines of China. We will be looking for connections between food (one aspect of culture) and its relationship to other aspects of Chinese culture as we move through our study. We will then consider how Chinese food became popular in the United States and make comparisons between what we learned about Chinese foods served in China and Chinese foods commonly served in Philadelphia by taking a trip to a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown. Additionally, the class might conclude our study by looking at the ways that the United States has recently affected foods eaten in China.

Step One: Ask the following questions and record answers for future reference:

1. How many of you have eaten Chinese foods?
2. Where have you gotten the food? (Prepared at home? Takeout? Sit down restaurant?)
3. How have you eaten the foods? (Chopsticks? Fork, knife, spoon? Fingers?)
4. What types of Chinese foods have you enjoyed the most?
5. What types of ingredients do you think are used in these dishes?

Step Two: Students are assigned to record the foods they eat for three days. Collect and keep these responses for later.

Step Three: Students can view the following informational video about Zhou and Shang bronze food vessels which give insights into the earlier history of food in China. Chapter 2 of this online course the "Clashing Cup" gives this information. Discuss these vessels as a way for us to have insight into early Chinese art.

- http://npm.nchc.org.tw/el_1_en.aspx

Step Four: Teacher can use the many internet resources to prepare for this unit. One excellent book is *Food Culture in China* by Jacqueline M. Newman (Greenwood Publishing Group, copyright 2004). A section of this book can be found online on Google Books.

An excerpt from *Food Culture in China*:

“The cuisine of China is widely considered to be one of the best because it meets the requirements of geo-geographic variety, inclusion of all types of foods, and a long-established and well-developed culinary tradition. The Chinese culture can be labeled a food culture for the interest and honor given to food and its rituals. *Food Culture in China* is loaded with information on the cuisine’s prominent role in Chinese culture. Students and other readers will learn about Chinese food history through the dynasties and Silk Road migrations up until today, ingredients, cooking implements and techniques, regional differences, table etiquette, cultural emphasis on food, specialty dishes for celebrations, and the role of diet and traditional Chinese medicine, among other topics. Americans typically are familiar with a narrow range of Americanized Chinese restaurants. This resource helps readers to see this ever-popular ethnic cuisine in a broader context.”

Step Five: Students form into at least eight research teams. If more groups are needed because of class size, additional groups can be assigned one of the lesser known cuisines listed below. Use the following CNN article to help with research.

- <http://travel.cnn.com/shanghai/eat/around-china-31-dishes-808639>

Eight Distinguished Regional Cuisines

- Sichuan Cuisine/Chuan Cuisine
- Shandong Cuisine/Lu Cuisine/Beijing
- Jiangsu Cuisine/Su Cuisine
- Anhui Cuisine/Hui Cuisine or Wan Cuisine
- Cantonese Cuisine/Yue Cuisine
- Fujian Cuisine/Min Cuisine
- Hunan Cuisine/Xiang Cuisine
- Zhejiang Cuisine/Zhe Cuisine

Other Chinese Regional Cuisines (if the teacher has enough students he/she can add more groups)

- Northern Food
- Mongolian Food
- Southern Minority Food
- Xinjiang Muslim Food
- Tibetan Food
- Taiwan Food

Students should present their findings with a PowerPoint. Each group should use at least five different resources to gather information for this project. Each group member should be prepared to authoritatively present the information (that does not mean read word for word what is written on the slides—know the information). The group should be able to answer any questions pertaining to its presentation. The PowerPoint presentation should be organized to include the requested information in the following manner:

1. In what geographic region would one find this cuisine? Show the region on a map.
2. Write a description of this geographic region. Include water sources, mountains, deserts, temperatures, and rainfall.
3. Write a general description of the assigned cuisine. (Is it hot and spicy, bland, lots of noodles etc.?) What foods might be used in the cuisine? (Who uses goat? Who uses lamb? Who uses chicken? Who uses seafood? Who uses pork? Who uses beef? Who uses vegetables? etc.)

4. Include the reasons that the geography affects the food available in the area. (Example: This could include factors like rice needs a wet climate in which to grow.)
5. Include any historical information the group might find on the development of its assigned cuisine.

Joe DiStefano, in reference to Cantonese Cooking:

“The Pearl River Delta area of Guangdong province, anchored by the city of Guangzhou, was the first region sanctioned by the Qing Dynasty imperial court to be opened for trade with the outside world in the 18th century. As foreign merchants arrived in the region, they established trading posts and brought along with them not only their merchandise, but their culinary customs as well. Thus Guangdong cooking became the first truly cosmopolitan cuisine of China. And as Guangdong residents were among the first in China to immigrate to America, their food has cemented itself as the default Chinese cooking in the States.”

6. Show pictures of eight examples of dishes that are prepared in the group’s assigned cuisine type. Include a general list of the ingredients of each dish.
7. Include the way/ways that the cuisine might usually be prepared or cooked. (For example: Are the ingredients cut into tiny pieces? Is a wok used for cooking?)
8. Include any information on the reasons that the food is prepared or cooked in the way that it is...such as a wok is often used because it requires less fuel than other methods.)
9. When is this cuisine eaten? (Everyday type of food or celebratory type of food?)
10. Is there a special order certain foods are served? Is there any way that the food is served that should be noted?
11. How is the cuisine eaten? (chopsticks, utensils, fingers)
12. What beverages are served with this cuisine?
13. Is cuisine affected by any religious ideas? If so, how?

Step Six: When research is completed and presentations have been prepared, begin class presentations as time allows. As students listen to each group presentation two students should be assigned to take notes on a poster size chart titled, “*Notes on the Eight Chinese Cuisines Presentations*” (See spreadsheet). Change student notetakers for each presentation or teacher may decide that each student should take individual notes.

Step Seven: After presentations have been given to the class, discuss the findings together. Compare what students recorded about their diets earlier to what they have learned about Chinese foods. A couple of major concepts should be noted:

- Chinese food uses few dairy products
- Chinese are adaptable with what is available adding or taking away from a dish based on affluence or lack of ingredients.
- Regional cuisine is based on what is available due to the geography.
- Food is preserved by smoking, salting, sugaring, steeping, pickling, drying, soaking in many kinds of soy sauces, and so forth, and the whole range of foodstuffs is involved - grains, meat, fruit, eggs, vegetables, and everything else. Again, with preserved food, the Chinese people were ever ready in the event of hardship or scarcity.
 - <http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/food-chinese-culture?page=0,0>
- The north and south rice and wheat divide (show on map on attached PowerPoint)

Kandice Hauf, “Using Food to Teach About Chinese Culture”

North-south geographical differences exist. As early as the Neolithic period, the first major northern crop was millet, then wheat was introduced from western Asia, while the south was warm and wet enough for rice cultivation. Though Chinese civilization began in north China, by the eleventh century CE, the majority of the population had shifted to the rice-cultivating south.

According to a 2014 study the Chinese north and south wheat and rice divide has been shown to be a cause for cultural differences in the area. “It’s easy to think of China as a single culture, but we found that China has very distinct northern and southern psychological cultures and that southern China’s history of rice farming can explain why people in southern China are more interdependent than people in the wheat-growing north,” said Thomas Talhelm, a University of Virginia Ph.D. student in cultural psychology and the study’s lead author. He calls it the “rice theory.” Talhelm and his co-authors at universities in China and Michigan propose that the methods of cooperative rice farming—common to southern China for generations—make the culture in that region interdependent, while people in the wheat-growing north are more individualistic, a reflection of the independent form of farming practiced there over hundreds of years. Talhelm noted that in the wheat-growing north of China there is more individualistic and analytic thought that is typically associated with the West. “People in the north seemed more direct, while people in the south were more concerned about harmony and avoiding conflict,” Talhelm said.

- These findings appear in the May 9, 2014 issue of the journal *Science*:
<http://phys.org/news/2014-05-rice-theory-north-south-china-cultural.html>

Step Eight: When presentations are completed, assign the article “Chinese Food Cultural Profile” by Author(s): Kathy Lin, Harborview Medical Center, Seattle WA, Reviewer(s): Nadine Chan, Editor: Fred Hutchinson Cancer Res Ctr, Seattle WA, authored November 01, 2000.

- https://ethnomed.org/clinical/nutrition/chinese_food_cultural_profile

Questions about the article to answer in writing or as a class when reading is completed:

1. What do Chinese people feel that eating good food can bring what?
2. Are the Chinese as concerned about nutrition as Americans?
3. What four items would be part of a good Chinese meal?
4. Chinese do not eat a lot of dairy products. What is used as a substitute?
5. What is often served as a dessert treat or an end of meal treat?
6. “Yi xing bu xing” -- what is meant by this?
7. Ethnic Chinese food does not involve a lot of cooking by what method, that is often seen in Chinese restaurants located in the United States?
8. What is the yin and yang as it applies to food?
9. According to the article, what portions are small?
10. Chinese often use what types of foods when they are ill to help them feel better? What is “gin bou” and “bo sheng?”

Discuss answers as a class.

Step Nine: Show the following film by a Peace Corp Volunteer which introduces students to some of the foods of China and the Chinese language of food. Students can hear the sound of the Chinese language and try some on their own.

- <http://www.peacecorps.gov/wvs/videos/taste-tongren/>

Step Ten: Divide the class and assign each group one of the following articles on chopsticks.

- <http://www.history.com/news/hungry-history/a-brief-history-of-chopsticks>
- http://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/cuisine_drink/cuisine/chopsticks.htm
- <http://chinesefood.about.com/od/restaurantdining/a/chopsticks.htm>
- Stronger Readers:
<http://www.cambridgeblog.org/2015/03/surprising-facts-about-the-history-of-chopsticks/>

After reading is completed make a bullet point list of information that students learned about the history of chopsticks in China.

Step Eleven: Students will then learn or practice using chopsticks. Hand out sets of wooden chopsticks (Kuaizi) obtained at a Chinese restaurant that will generously donate them to you. Watch the following video together with students:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mu05lnNyK0>

Give each student 3 large and 3 small marshmallows and let them try their hand at it. When they have mastered the skill they can eat the marshmallows.

Go over the following etiquette rules about chopsticks:

Chopstick Rules and Etiquette:

1. Do not stick chopsticks vertically into your food when not using them, especially not into rice, as this will make Chinese people think of funerals. At funerals joss sticks (sticks of incense) are stuck into the rice that is put onto the ancestor altar.
2. Do not wave your chopsticks around in the air or play with them.
3. Do not stab or skewer food with your chopsticks.
4. Pick food up by exerting sufficient inward pressure on the chopsticks to grasp the food securely and move it smoothly to your mouth or bowl. It is considered bad form to drop food, so ensure it is gripped securely before carrying it. Holding one's bowl close to the dish when serving oneself or close to the mouth when eating helps.
5. To separate a piece of food into two pieces, exert controlled pressure on the chopsticks while moving them apart from each other. This needs much practice.
6. Some consider it unhygienic to use the chopsticks that have been near (or in) one's mouth to pick food from the central dishes. Additional Chopsticks can be provided, and in this case you will need to remember to alternate between using the serving chopsticks to move food to your bowl and your personal chopsticks for transferring the food to your mouth. Some use the pointy end for personal use and the blunt end of the chopstick for serving.

Step Twelve: Students will write a creative persuasive paper using the following prompts:

- How does the use of chopsticks as the eating utensil of choice affect how people eat their food?
- What did you find out about the use of shark fins in Chinese cuisine? Should this use be discontinued, no matter what the circumstances or event? Why or why not?

Step Thirteen: View and discuss the accompanying PowerPoint

- <https://upenn.box.com/s/e7q20df7on5om2hf0sn8bhtvw66on8s2>

Students should prepare for trip to Chinatown in Philadelphia by reading article referenced in the Power Point.

- <http://philadelphia-chinatown.info/chinatown-history/>

Step Fourteen: Students take trip to Chinatown in Philadelphia and visit a restaurant for a meal. Teacher can make arrangements for chef to speak to students. One chef that will do a tour of Chinatown with students is *Joseph Poon Chef Kitchen* in Philadelphia Phone: (215) 928-9333. Joseph Poon does a “Wok N’ Walk Tour” which many say is excellent. Students may also visit some of the following:

- Authentic Chinese bakery products, including egg custard tarts, steamed buns, and breads at *Green Land Tea House & Bakery*: 210 N 9th St, Philadelphia
- See and taste fresh roasted whole duck, chicken and pork, butchered and prepared in-house, using traditional Chinese methods at *M Kee*: 1002 Race St, or *Sang Kee Peking Duck House*: 238 N 9th St.
- See fresh live lobsters, tilapia, clams, and more! Experience food markets featuring fresh and hard-to-find ingredients perfect for spicing up any meal at *King Market*: 140 N 10th St, Philadelphia
- See traditional Chinese toys, trinkets, jewelry and more at *Asia Crafts, (Sanrio)*: 124 N 10th St.
- Take a break under the pergolas of the 10th Street Plaza. It is Chinatown’s first dedicated public space, and provides a place for visitors and residents to sit and relax. Two 8-foot granite Foo dogs (Chinese guardian lions), shipped from China, symbolize the protection of Chinatown.
- Contact Yong H. Xu at *Arch Acupuncture and Health Center* to speak to students at Arch St & 10th St N, Philadelphia: (215) 627-8209. He is also an expert in Traditional Chinese Medicine.
- Visit *Long Life Chinese Natural Herbs* at 1011 Arch Street Philadelphia: (215) 625-9302
- Visit the *Lucky Chinese Cookie Factory* (but make sure you have had kids read the following articles as the origin of fortune cookies is debated): 55 N 9th St, Philadelphia, PA 19107. Call (215) 922-7288 to make sure it is in operation
 - <http://www.fancyfortunecookies.com/Articles.asp?ID=148> or
 - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/quora/fortune-cookie-history_b_6430962.html

At the completion of the trip, students should write about what they learned and the impressions they had of their trip and turn it in the following day.

Step Fifteen: Ask students the names and some of the holidays that are celebrated in the United States. Then ask which foods they associate with the holiday. Ask students if they know why those foods are associated with the holiday. Next, give each student in class a Chinese holiday or festival and have them conduct research to learn about the following:

1. What does the holiday or festival celebrate?
2. When is it celebrated?
3. How is the celebration conducted?
4. What foods are traditionally associated with the holiday or festival celebration?
5. Does the food have any symbolic meaning that is associated with the holiday or festival?
6. Find a picture of the food/foods associated with the holiday.

List of Chinese holidays and festivals:

- Cheung Chau Bun Festival
- Tomb Sweeping Day (Clear Brightness Festival or Taqing Festival)
- Moon Festival
- Kuan Yin's Birthday
- Hungry Ghost Festival
- Chung Yang Day
- Wedding Foods
- Chinese New Year
- Dragon Boat Festival
- Lantern Festival
- Chinese Valentine's Day - Qixi Festival
- Double 8th Day
- Foods to celebrate Births
- Birthday Foods
- Funeral Foods

Students share their results with the class.

Step Sixteen: Ask students for some examples of what manners or etiquette their families have taught them. Ask them if they always follow these and why or why not. Share the following video about Chinese rules of etiquette when eating.

- YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkyE2rPac3s>

Step Seventeen: Additional activities:

Show clips from the following films which can be found on YouTube or can be bought or rented. They have many interesting scenes involving food, and also show a great deal of Chinese culture during the particular historical setting.

- *The Last Emperor* (some parts not appropriate for middle school) has interesting scenes where Pu Yi, the last emperor of China, is being fed and the customs associated with this practice. Google lesson plans for *The Last Emperor* for a teacher's manual in pdf form on the web.
- *To Live* (middle school appropriate) shows many scenes involving food during the Cultural Revolution that include communal eating, a physician who is starving and what happens when he eats too many buns given to him for help, bring food to a grave site, issues of Mao's decisions about agricultural leading to a great deal of starvation, etc.

Additional Information from the Teacher's Guide to *To Live*:

"In 1958 Mao Zedong launched another program to advance China's industry and agricultural system. Known as the Great Leap Forward, the strategies eventually proved disastrous. Farms underwent collectivization and communes were established. Communities worked together to meet industrial and agricultural quotas. Communal kitchens and child care programs developed in order to economize on time so that women would be free to work toward these goals. The agricultural reforms included the implementation of quotas and planting programs that were not suitable in all areas of China. Drought complicated the picture in north China, and crop yields dropped. Nevertheless, model communes were created for show. Officials toured areas where harvests had been brought in from villages far away and where extravagant claims were made about the positive effects of the Great Leap programs. By the early 1960s, millions of Chinese had starved. Scholars estimate more than 20 million deaths resulted from starvation and related complications due to the failures of the Great Leap Forward campaign. This reform also aimed to move China into an industrial age. Local communities engaged in scrap metal drives and held competitions to determine which could gather and smelt the most metal in backyard furnaces. With this product China would build its new infrastructure. This program also did not meet its aims. Mao's Communists sought to form allegiances and to work with other Communist world powers."

- *Eat Drink Man Woman* – mature content but clips of the father’s cooking can be shown
- *A Bite of China* – Documentary on Chinese Cooking introducing the history and story behind various foods served in sixty locations throughout China
- Travel Films often show good examples of Chinese food today.
- Check out this website of Peter Menzel’s pictures from his book *Hungry Planet – Family Food Portraits*, which compares foods in household across the world. Compare China with other countries including the United States.
 - <http://menzelphoto.photoshelter.com/gallery/Hungry-Planet-Family-Food-Portraits/G0000zmgWvU6SiKM/C0000k7JgEHhEq0w>
 - http://menzelphoto.photoshelter.com/gallery/Hungry-Planet-China/G0000KQ2nFvvUv_8/C0000LinI3Zrbflo

Step Eighteen: An extra credit reading can be assigned.

- <http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/food-chinese-culture?page=0,0>

Outcome/Assessment

Students will have an appreciation for various Chinese cuisines, an understanding of the reasons these cuisines developed as they did, an understanding of how these cuisines may differ from American Chinese food with which they may be familiar. an understanding that foods are intertwined with other aspects of culture. Students can be assessed through writing assignments, PowerPoint projects, and class discussions.

Special Education and English Language Learners Accommodations

Videos / images provided, conferencing, collaborative writing.

Additional Resources

Web:

Information about the history of Philadelphia’s Chinatown:
<http://philadelphia-chinatown.info/chinatown-history/>

Joe DiStefano Cantonese Cooking Article:

<http://www.seriousseats.com/2014/10/introduction-what-is-cantonese-chinese-cuisine.html>

Print:

Education About Asia, Winter 2011 (Volume 16, Number 2)

Regional Cuisine Organizer

Name of Cuisine	
Geographic Region	
Region's Features	
Impact of Region on Food	
Features of the Cuisine	
Food Used in the Cuisine	
Dish Names with Major Ingredients	
Preparation and Cooking Method	
Reasons for Preparation & Cooking Method	
Celebratory or Everyday Dish?	
How Dish is Eaten?	