Why UNESCO Should Turn Its Nose Up at Chinese Food

In recent years, Chinese food-lovers have grown increasingly vocal in demanding that UNESCO add some of the country’s native cuisine to the “Intangible Cultural Heritage” list. After all, the argument goes, if the French and the Mexicans are listed — not to mention traditional Turkish keşkek, spicy South Korean gimjang, and mouthwatering Japanese washoku — why not the country that gave the world Sichuan peppercorn soup, imperial Peking duck, and — erm — chicken feet?

There have already been several attempts to win recognition for China’s culinary culture. In 2011, the China Cuisine Association (CCA) applied for the country’s food to be given “Intangible Cultural Heritage” status, but the request was denied. In July 2014, the association announced that it would apply to UNESCO again the following year, but that attempt also came to nothing.

One possible reason for the exclusion of Chinese cuisine from the UNESCO list may be our misunderstanding of the legacy of our culinary culture. When it comes to food currently recognized as “intangible cultural heritage,” the international community has historically placed value on preserving the customs and ceremonies that go along with a nation’s food culture. Gimjang — the process of pickling and preserving vegetables to make kimchi, the national dish of South Korea — made the list not because of the subtlety of its preparation, but because life on the Korean Peninsula has revolved around such seasonal pickling techniques for centuries. Kimchi has enabled cultural exchange across the peninsula and beyond, and has profoundly altered the Koreans’ way of life.

In contrast, much of the Chinese understanding of culinary cultural heritage revolves around the skills involved in making a certain dish. This might mean the cooking techniques of regional cuisines or the processes behind the creation of different teas, liquors, and sauces. This contradicts one of the principles behind inclusion on UNESCO’s list, which requires the country’s general population to have inherited the unique culinary culture. China’s 2011 application, however, defined those who have benefitted most from Chinese cuisine merely as “the chefs of China.”

Looking at the scope of the UNESCO application process — which includes selecting the foods, undertaking the relevant research, instituting conservation programs, and completing the extensive submission procedures — it is clear that Chinese cuisine only has a slim chance, if any, of gaining admission onto the list in the next five years.

Take my hometown of Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang province in eastern China. Both the city and the province are known for their rich culinary heritage, and Hangzhou’s cuisine is still centered on cooking techniques, such as our methods of frying tofu, pickling locally grown mustard greens, or brewing West Lake Longjing tea.

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- Zhou Hongcheng, assistant professor

However, the cultural value of these foods — what binds them to the lives of the people of Hangzhou — remains shamefully unexplored. And what of Zhejiang’s regional rice-growing culture, fishing culture, seasonings, snack foods, fermentation processes, sauces, vinegars, or ethnic minority cuisine? Local people grow up eating the fruits of all this knowledge, and the culture that has developed around these foods informs the city’s collective memory of its cuisine. Yet there is a dire paucity of recorded literature on these local staples, and official organizations continually fail to recognize their importance.
A further concern is that China’s culinary heritage applications only ever include candidates with strong market demand, overlooking culinary traditions that hold more prominence in the lives of ordinary people. While it is of course necessary to preserve the preparation techniques of the likes of mao tai liquor and West Lake Longjing tea, these are already reputable brands that enjoy high prestige and marketability. They are therefore less in need of protection than China’s other, more endangered culinary traditions that nonetheless rarely receive consideration.

China’s current system for preserving “intangible cultural heritage” requires urgent change. Rather than simply promoting marketable cuisines, applications should ensure that the chosen foods’ cultural value passes UNESCO’s standards for inclusion. At present, however, the authorities only emphasize commercial value at the expense of proper protection and research — a trend that needs to be curbed.

The issue is compounded by the fact that the Ministry of Culture, which oversees the selection committee in charge of “intangible cultural heritage” applications, frequently neglects culinary culture in favor of philosophy and the arts. The most recent Chinese additions to the list were the tradition of shadow puppetry; zhushuan, or abacus calculation; and the 24 solar terms, a traditional way of recording months and seasons. For officials, the altogether less erudite concept of cooking hardly seems worthy of serious consideration.

The Ministry of Culture’s role in the application process is to submit the final list of candidates for “intangible cultural heritage” status from across China. Its selection committee, however, undertakes targeted cultural protection work at the regional and local levels. It has the power to examine culinary cultures, consider how endangered they are, and whether it is necessary to apply early to ensure their protection.

Meanwhile, the CCA has the power to suggest nominees for the selection committee to consider. Yet the CCA’s attitude echoes that of the Ministry of Culture in that it views the inclusion of culinary culture on the heritage list as the exception rather than the rule. Until this mindset changes, the prospect of winning international recognition for Chinese food culture will remain bleak.

Officials will not spontaneously change their current approach, however. It falls to the general public to recognize the value of their own food culture and understand why certain traditions are to be treasured and protected. If Chinese people do not show passion for national dishes in the same way as their French, Japanese, or Mexican counterparts, then even if Chinese cuisine is granted world heritage status, we will still be unable to keep the nation’s storied food traditions and ceremonial procedures from fading away in the face of social developments and changes in dietary habits.

We need to stop treating the world heritage application as a publicity stunt and must instead embark on a more rigorous study of our shared culinary legacy. Only by linking this work to achievable goals — both with and without UNESCO support — can we strengthen cultural conservation across China, protect the heritage passed down from our ancestors, and ensure that traditional food culture lives on to be enjoyed by generations to come.

(Header image: A chef uses a pole to hang Beijing roasted ducks, Beijing, Feb. 28, 2013. VCG)