

Ancient and Modern Foods from the Tarim Basin

BY E. N.
ANDERSON

WALKING THROUGH THE exhibition *Secrets of the Silk Road*, one is amazed at the well-preserved mummies and colorful textiles. But perhaps the objects that we can identify with most are the food items that may

have been meant to nourish the dead in the afterlife. Is that a spring roll? A wonton? Yes, and they are remarkably similar to what one would purchase in China today.

The extremely dry climate in the Tarim Basin preserved this food. Few areas of the world can support populations in such an arid environment, so finds of actual food products—excavated more commonly in places like Egypt—are rare. Scholars that study ancient food must generally rely on mentions in ancient texts, animal bones or seeds, or, at best, food that was thrown into a bog where the airless, acidic environment preserves organic remains.

Secrets of the Silk Road includes six small food items, all based on wheat. A fried twist of short spaghetti-like dough strands is dated to the 5th to 3rd century BCE. Such food can be found in northwest China today. One might assume that other noodle dishes, particularly soups, were regular fare dur-



This twisted fried dough, over 2,000 years old, was found in a tomb on a red lacquer table. It was made from flour and twisted by hand.

ing antiquity, as they have been for a long time in the area. From the Tang Dynasty (7th to 9th century CE), we have part of a spring roll and wonton, both virtually identical to modern versions of the same food. Although we do not know exactly what is in each one, both were stuffed with a filling. A similar type of wonton, called a *chuchure*, is known as a traditional food in present-day East Central Asia.

From both early and late periods, we have strikingly lovely modeled flowers: a chrysanthemum, a plum blossom, and a seven-petaled flower. These flowers were probably more ornamental than edible, since they were likely made from a stiff dough of wheat and water, and baked into rocky hardness. They may have served as religious offerings, since similar ornamental offering-pastries are produced in China today. Tang earthenware figurines also offer insight into food preparation in ancient East Central Asia. Women are depicted performing chores such as churning, baking or steaming, and rolling out dough.

From earliest times until today, food in many areas of Central Asia was based on a classic Middle Eastern crop roster: wheat, barley, and sheep products, with cattle, horses, goats, camels, and other livestock playing important roles. Wheat was a staple, and barley was also heavily used. Barley does not



Left, the dough in this spring roll was rolled out, wrapped around a filling, then fried. Right, a wonton is made of rolled dough that is wrapped around a filling and boiled. Wontons are often found in soups.



This flour dough dessert, in the shape of a plum blossom, originally contained fruit in its center. Some flowers like this may have been ornamental and not meant to be eaten.

bake well, but it does produce a good crop under conditions so dry or salty that nothing else will grow. Dairy products were probably far more important than meat, as in other traditional Central Asian societies. Grapes and other fruits are well known from historic sources.

Two species of millets also came from China and were used for porridge. In Central Asia, however, they were always a minor crop, since they do not produce good baking material for bread, a staple that linked the region to the Western world. Rice, now a staple in the Tarim Basin, is not attested from early times. Judging by what is preserved, the diet in this region likely resembled that found in the most remote parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan up until a few decades ago: bread, a little yogurt, fruit, and some herbs to accompany the meal. On a rare festive occasion, meat, cheese, and butter might have also been eaten. Wine and beer were probably available. The rivers afforded some fish, known as *laks* or *lakse* in the Tocharian languages.

Dumplings of all kinds remain important in this area. They are usually called by some variant of the word *mantu*, but they

are *ashak* in Afghanistan and *momo* in Tibet. Dumplings are of uncertain origin and span across Eurasia from quite an early period. The small dumpling would have been called *mantou* (or *mantu*) in China during this time, while today its name is *jiaozi*.

A Persian-style flat bread—often sprinkled with sesame seeds and baked by sticking it to an oven wall—was probably the staple food in Central Asia. Its modern Farsi name, *nan*, is derived from the familiar *pan*. This bread reached China by the Tang Dynasty, brought by Iranian refugees and traders. Its descendants survive today as the *shaobing*, which is traditionally baked on a heated pot wall, and the huge sesame breads of northwest China, which are now steamed rather than baked. No one seems to know when the huge *tandur*-style oven was developed, but it is certainly very old in the region.

With further discoveries of intact burials in the Tarim Basin, we will likely find more preserved food. Perhaps we will develop a greater understanding of how food traditions traveled along the many routes that made up the Silk Road. 🏠

E. N. ANDERSON is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Riverside.

For Further Reading

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Painted ceramic figurines depict female servants in various stages of food preparation.

