

How the chilli pepper conquered China

Published 7 September 2020, with Brian Dott

Welcome to this first episode in the new season of Eat This Podcast. It's really good to be back here podcasting. I've got loads of interesting topics lined up for the next two episodes, starting with an in-depth look at the world's most popular spice in a country that's truly taken it to heart.

Brian Dott: The vast majority of Chinese really think of it as a domestic product. And it's fully, fully integrated into Chinese cuisine. Obviously there's huge differences in the use of it regionally, but pretty much everybody, you know, they don't really think of it as foreign. I mean, certainly more and more people are aware that it was introduced, but it's definitely treated as an everyday spice by many, many people in China.

Jeremy: That spice, I'm sure you've guessed, is the chili pepper. And my guest today is the author of the new book, *The Chile Pepper in China*, subtitled *A Cultural Biography*.

Brian Dott: So my name's Brian Dott and I'm an expert in Chinese history. I'm a professor in the history department at Whitman College, which is in Eastern Washington state in the US. The sort of goal for my researching and then writing this project was to explain how the Chinese started eating the chili pepper. So started eating something with a very, very strong and distinct flavour.

Jeremy: Were you into chilies before you decided to investigate chilies in China?

Brian Dott: I was, but I wouldn't call myself a chili head. So I have no desire to eat, you know, the reapers or the ghost peppers or something like that. I definitely enjoyed them. I've definitely developed an even stronger taste for them after, you know, while I was doing the research.

Jeremy: Sichuan cooking is chili peppers. I mean, that's just to me an outsider, Sichuan is chilies. Is that true for the Chinese as well?

Brian Dott: It is. I mean, obviously if you're from Sichuan, they had a lot more subtlety to it, and of course they have plenty of dishes that don't have chilies in them, but if you're a tourist or you're at a Sichuan restaurant somewhere outside of Sichuan, your expectation is that the dishes will all have chilies in them. And obviously that gets done, that catering happens for sure.

You know, there's rivalries between Hunan, and the Hunanese will say, "Oh, well, we eat spicy, but we also want to taste the flavour. So we don't put as many in as Sichuan because they are just not subtle enough". And so there's jibes back and forth, but, you know, the Sichuanese would also, in defence of their own food, would say, "no, no, no, we're often looking for flavour. It's not just about heat."

Jeremy: Have you been able to discover when and where chili peppers arrived in China?

Brian Dott: Roughly. And when I started the project, I was really hoping I could pin it down much more precisely, and then sort of track the chilli moving up river valleys, but the sources just aren't that detailed. So the earliest written source for China is 1591. And that almost certainly means the chili was there up to 10, maybe even more years before that. My guess is the 1570s is when it arrived.

Jeremy: And how is it arriving? Is it one arrival? Is it one person bringing chili pepper to China?

Brian Dott: Probably multiple arrivals. It's arriving from Southeast Asia and it's probably Chinese merchant ships, predominantly Fujianese, who are bringing it back. There's no evidence that they're bringing it back as a trade commodity. So I think they're probably bringing it back as a flavouring in their own food and then spreading it because they like it.

Chili gets to Southeast Asia from two directions. The Portuguese bring the chili into the Indian Ocean basin. And again, there's no evidence that they're trading it. They're probably members of the crews on ships that are eating it and they're just bringing it along. And then they're spreading it when they get to various ports. And then the other direction, the Spanish, once they start sailing across the Pacific from Mexico, they're

going predominantly to the Philippines, and again, crew members are bringing it in there for the flavouring of their own food.

It's not a trade commodity. And the main reason it's never a trade commodity in that time period is because it'll grow in temperate climates. That's a big difference between the chili pepper and the traditional spice trade spices, nutmeg, black pepper, cloves; they all require a tropical climate to grow and so they have to be continually imported into places like China and Europe. And so that's how you get that trade and those spices. But if all you need is a few seeds and you can grow them your own, that trade doesn't develop. And that's the case with the chili pepper.

Jeremy: And is that part of why they become so widely adopted, that people can just grow them?

Brian Dott: I really think so. The best things that I can find in terms of sources for China, the early use as a flavouring was predominantly initially as a substitute for other things, typically things that were more expensive, like salt or black pepper. And so I really think it really takes off because it becomes available. You can just grow it in your own garden, your kitchen garden, and you don't have to pay anybody for it.

Jeremy: You mentioned in the book that part of this substitution is how you track it down through the various names. So Taiwan, it's a substitute for ginger, and then you've got a route coming through Korea as well. So that goes into Northern China?

Brian Dott: Correct. I think there's three initial places of introduction. And again, it's probably not just one person bringing a whole bag of seeds and everybody takes off with it. It's going to be a little more gradual than that.

So up in the North from Korea into China, the initial name there is *Qinjiao*, and that means pepper from *Qin*, and that's an inland region or state, roughly modern day Shaanxi. And that is actually also a name for the native Sichuan pepper or flower pepper, which is in a completely different family from either black pepper or chili pepper. That was confusing for me in terms of research, because it was sometimes hard to tell if they were referring to the Sichuan pepper or the chili pepper. And

I think the reason they chose that name, one that already existed was because in that region near Korea, they typically used a different name for that pepper, for the Sichuan pepper. They called it flower pepper. And so they took an existing name for something with a strong flavour to label this new product.

I think it also shows that they weren't aware that it was from overseas. So they're not putting a name like foreign pepper, which is one of the other names when it arrives in the central coast, which the earliest place that arrives. It's called foreign pepper. And that's acknowledging the fact that it's coming from overseas. But that use of the term pepper, that character originally means that native Sichuan pepper. So both that Qin pepper name and the foreign pepper name, both imply that you can use it in way similar to that native pepper. And in that third place where it's introduced, again, the locals come up with their own name for it, it is basically foreign ginger. The implication there is they're using it in ways similar that they're using ginger, as a particular flavouring in dishes.

Jeremy: One of the things that comes across quite clearly is that China has this civil service, where people are reporting on what's going on, and you have the elite running the country. And the elite doesn't think much of chili peppers, or if it does, it says things like, "well, they cannot be put in the mouth". So you don't get writing about it. Was that because the taste was considered a bit in your face for a learned member of the elite scholastic classes? Or was it, because it was popular with the common people, was there a kind of snobbishness about it?

Brian Dott: I think almost certainly yes. And some of it comes through in the sources. One of my favourite sources is this guy talking about how the local people, the farmers, are planting a couple of different varieties of this food. And then he's like, "well, and then if you eat it, it makes you sweat and cry and tear up. And therefore the people who eat it are very few." Which again, that's that gap between the elite who are writing about it and the local lower class people who are eating it. You know, you're not going to be growing two different varieties of chili peppers if you're not eating them. At that point, I do think there's an element of snobbishness.

There's an element of the cuisine that really dominated the elite, particularly in the 18th century, was one that emphasized subtle flavouring. And obviously the chili pepper is not going to fit into that group. And so there'd be an element of "we're sophisticated. We can eat something with subtle flavours, we'll leave this really strong flavour to the lower class people who don't really understand cuisine." But there's also traditions of meditation and making sure your mind is clear. And those come out of Confucianism, as well as Buddhism and also Taoism, all of them have that trend. One of the things they tend to avoid either all the time, as in Buddhism, or at key points when they're needing to have a clear mind, is to avoid strong flavours. And so that again is a tradition. It's predominantly amongst religious followers, devotees, and then also amongst the elite who were instilled with that Confucian education.

Jeremy: And is that still a factor today? I mean, do the people who consider themselves elite in China today, do they look down on chilies?

Brian Dott: It depends. So, you know, if we go back to Mao Zedong, who was the paramount leader for quite some time, he's from Hunan and an avid, avid chili consumer. And so for him, it was sort of the inverse ... if you can't stand to eat chilies, then you're sort of a wimp.

Jeremy: But he's also a representative of the proletariat and he's identifying with them.

Brian Dott: Yes. He is absolutely identifying with them. And so when he's critiquing people who can't eat it, sometimes it's just because they're from the North and they don't eat spicy, but other times he's critiquing a class background. Absolutely.

If you look in contemporary China, there are certainly some people who would tend to avoid eating chilies. And it would be for similar reasons in terms of wanting to be able to taste the subtlety of flavouring and seeing that as sort of a better type of cuisine. But there's also ways in which particularly Sichuan cuisine has become quite fashionable all across China. And you see Chongqing, hot pot, everywhere. There's definitely a broadening of the palette. And that, I think, happened really very, very late 20th century and predominantly in the 21st century. And I have

Chinese friends who tell me they'll eat much, much spicier food than their parents.

Jeremy: And that Brian told me is quite a recent shift. It reflects changing access to restaurants as well as huge internal tourism in China. So people are being exposed to such Sichuan and Hunan cooking and looking for it back home. There's another side to the chilli in China, where the link between food and medicine is still much closer than it is for people in the West. So I wanted to know how quickly chili peppers found their way into Chinese medicine.

Brian Dott: Pretty quickly. They start observing the medical impacts and results, and the Chinese don't really distinguish between food and medicine. Anything that's taken into the body is going to impact health and therefore has to be taken into account in terms of treatment. And absolutely the chili pepper, I think one of the reasons it really takes off in China is because very early on it is integrated into traditional Chinese medical systems and they're able to understand how it will work in relationship or in comparison to other similarly pungent or spicy flavoured plants. They initially put it into and understand how it will work based on its flavour. And then subsequently they also observe other effects that it has on health, and you get a lot of listing of things that are outside of that sort of realm of theory, and more just observation from practice.

Jeremy: What are the kinds of properties, medicinal properties, that they're ascribing to chilies? Because, you know, you hear stuff about chilies are antibiotics and chilies preserve meat, and what have you. I'm not sure what the veracity of those is, but are the Chinese thinking about it in those terms.

Brian Dott: Yeah. So the initial earliest sources that are talking about health impacts, some of the things they really emphasize are it aids in digestion, it stimulates the appetite. And if you look at modern bio-medicine studies of the chili pepper, one of the things that capsaicin, which is the spicy element in chilies, one of the things it does is to increase salivation, and chewing is the first part of the digestive process. Once the chilies are in the stomach, it also activates stimulates gastric juices. So that also helps in aiding digestion. There seems to be a logic

that crosses over between that sort of modern understanding of how the body works and that traditional system.

Some of the anti-microbial or antiseptic value of chilies was also recognized pretty early on. And so, for example, I have a whole series of gazetteers — these are local histories — from Fujian. That's a South East coastal area where they eat a lot of seafood. And that whole series talks about the chili pepper being a treatment for fish poisoning, some sort of microbe that's coming into their system from eating fish. And again, there's modern studies where they put capsaicin in a Petri dish and add various bacteria, and it kills lots of them. So there's absolutely evidence that those things are true.

And then, you know, you also get some other treatments that maybe I wouldn't want to try. So there's supposed to be a treatment of chili peppers can be used for snake bites. The implication there is, it's not doing anything to the venom. It's instead acting as an analgesic, so it can help to dull the pain. It also can act as an anti-inflammatory, so you can chew it into a poultice and stick it on the snake bite to reduce swelling and pain.

And another of those other ones: there's a really important aspect of the chili pepper that carries over all the way to the present, is that in the traditional Chinese medicine, if you live in a really damp humid climate, which includes much of the southern interior, places where they really love chili peppers, like Sichuan and Hunan, it's super hot and humid in the summer, but it's also damp in the winter, in the traditional medicine system that's going to create excess fluid in the body. And therefore you need to be eating something that's going to help you expel that excess moisture. A really obvious example of how that's working is when the chili peppers make you sweat. That's seen as really, really important for people living in those areas. Obviously they were eating other pungent spices— spicy, spicy things — in the past that did that, but they determined that chili pepper was much, much more effective at it than any of the things they'd been eating before.

If we look at contemporary China, the use of the chili pepper as medicine is not that common in the sense of, if you go to a traditional medical doctor and they give you a prescription, it's almost certainly not

going to have chilies. Part of that is just the way modern traditional medicine has adapted over time. They see something like that as too potent, and it's going to overwhelm the other ingredients in the formula.

Jeremy: We, we talked briefly about, about Chairman Mao and his love for chillies and his belief that unless you could eat chilies, you couldn't fight either. That is, if you weren't a chili lover, you weren't going to be a good revolutionary. But I was surprised to read in your book (surprised by my own ignorance, really) that the gendering of chilies it's much more. Chilies are much more associated with women. I mean, there's an aspect of manliness in being able to eat chilies, but certain kinds of women express the characteristics of chili peppers. Tell me a bit about that.

Brian Dott: Sure. There's this term *la mai*, which means spicy girls or spicy young women, and it's a term often associated with women from Hunan. It's using metaphors of the spiciness of chilli to describe the women. So they're seen as feisty and independent and assertive, they'll go out on their own. There's implications that the men need to respect that feistiness. Obviously a strong stereotype is going into that, but it's a really interesting one. And it's one that's changed over time. Some of the earlier representations of it in literature, there's always a fairly strong negative aspect to it, that the women are crossing boundaries too far, and there's going to be some repercussions. But if you look at the modern versions of them, 20th and 21st century, they're overall very, very positive and it's shed that negative baggage. They're definitely seen as assertive and independent in a very positive way.

Jeremy: You talk about older and modern, but how far back does this idea go back?

Brian Dott: There's an opera from the 1590s where there's a very, very brief mention of chili peppers and it's associated with this strong female character. She basically is so assertive she's able to come back from the dead to be with her lover. A much more developed character is in the really famous 18th century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In that novel, there's a very strong female character who's in charge of the finances of the main family's very, very large extended household. And her feistiness is the reason she's chosen for that position because they

need someone who's willing to tighten the purse strings because they're starting to have some financial difficulties. But that's one where ultimately Confucian standards come in at the end of the novel and she's seen as having transgressed too many boundaries and the character is punished. And so that's where we have it, starting as soon as the chilies entered China (but not really), getting more fully developed in the 18th century, and then getting a more positive connotation by the 20th century.

Jeremy: And so today you would say that far from being punished spicy girls are actually desirable?

Brian Dott: Yeah, there's absolutely a bit of ... If the audience is a male audience, there's definitely a bit of fetishism in there, which obviously isn't always positive, but there is that an element of that. But there's this really fun, popular song that's actually called *la mai*, the spicy women. And in that one, it's a much more occasional line that's implied for the male audience. But there's also a lot of it I see as for a female audience and wanting to be able to also assert that independence. And it's actually a really popular song. One of the things in China you notice if you go to any public park, there's lots of retired people performing in a variety of ways and they're often gendered. So you'll see groups of older women performing together. And one of the songs that a lot of them really like to sing and dance to is that *la mai*, that spicy, spicy girl song.

Jeremy: I do find it interesting that chillies — partly because they will grow in temperate climates, I'm sure — they seem to be the most widely adopted flavouring globally. It's something you find almost everywhere. And I wonder whether you, as a result of your research, I wonder whether you have any ideas on whether the Chinese adoption or embrace of chillies is in any way different from the embrace of chili peppers in other cultures where they came in relatively late?

Brian Dott: Well, every place that adopts something new is also always adapting it. And so it always gets adapted to fit in with the previous, prior existing cuisine. In that sense, the Chinese are using it differently than the Mexicans or the Hungarians. But also, you can really see that just in terms of regional differences in China, even though they don't like spicy food and they're often teased by others about not liking

spicy food, the residents of Guangdong or Canton, Cantonese cuisine is really not very spicy, but they actually use a fair amount of chili peppers in some of their sauces and some of their dishes, they're just choosing to use either milder varieties or just not using as much of them. And so since you can see that regional difference across China, it's not surprising that you'd see differences in terms of the use of them across broader regions, across different cultures, different countries.