

THE CHOW CHOW AS FOOD

©By Judith-Ann Robertson 2009

For years, I have been coming across the mention of Chow Chows in particular as a source of food in Asia. Coming from an academic environment in which all research must be substantiated, I have been searching for the source of this common belief for several decades.

In my search into the history of food in Asia, particularly in China, I learned that there is actually an academic discipline called “Nutritional Anthropology” which does in-depth study of nutrition and the history of food in a variety of areas of the world, including ancient food consumption patterns. Much of what is set out below comes from Dr. Louis Grivetti at the University of California, Davis.

In many places, particularly in Asian countries, peoples’ culture is defined by what they eat, when they eat it, why it is consumed, where they eat, how their food is prepared, and the intricate relationships among these and other variables.

If you take a look at the history of food in China, you quickly learn that since some 2500 years BCE (this dateline is somewhat controversial, but at least as far back as 200 yrs BCE), nutrition was dictated by what is now known as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and is written in the *Nei Ching*, considered to be among the most important and interesting medical-dietary texts to survive from antiquity. These writings have been influenced by TCM, Indo-Chinese Ayurvedic medicine and the philosophies of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.

Chinese medical practitioners as early as the 2nd century B.C identified differences in weather and climate, soil fertility, and terrain and noted that such geographical considerations effected health and disease. Generalized geographical conditions and basic health complaints were identified for five regions of China which included the North, South, East, West and Centre.

Also, these ancient medical practitioners identified four broad “nourishing” food categories that each had five foods listed as especially nourishing to the body and particularly useful when treating diseases and ailments. As well, some of the food prohibitions were unique (and both the nourishing and prohibited foods are still recommended to eat/avoid today).

The four nourishing food groups are:

- GRAINS: beans (large varieties), millet (yellow glutinous), peas (small varieties), rice (non-glutinous), and wheat;
- FRUITS: almonds/apricots, chestnuts, dates, peaches, and plums;
- VEGETABLES: greens (coarse varieties), leeks, mallows, onions, and scallions; and
- DOMESTICATED ANIMALS: chicken, dog, lamb, pig, and ox.

Other foods that were considered nutritious and recommended included soy products, fish, fish eggs, chicken eggs, duck eggs, goose eggs, goat, rabbit, turtle, sparrow, deer, bear, bullfrog, and so on.

The Chinese medical practitioners were of the opinion that good food and varied food types helped to keep the human body robust and healthy and less susceptible to external diseases.

If we look briefly at the history of animal husbandry in China, starting as early as the Shang Dynasty (aka Yin Dynasty), circa 21st century BCE, we find that the Chinese civilization was based in the northern central portion of the continent. This civilization lasted over 1500 years and was a period of rapid development (this is when a system of writing was developed) – much of the civilization was based on agriculture, augmented by hunting, followed by some animal husbandry. The two animals raised as primary food sources, as evidenced by burial mounds and use of bones as tools were pig and ox. Dogs were also raised at this time, but mostly as guarding/working animals and to some extent companions, although the further south one goes, the more evident it becomes that dog also figured into the human food chain more and more.

If we look forward to the Han Dynasty (3rd century BCE) during which time a significant amount of international trade was being undertaken along the Silk Road, between China and the Middle East & down into India, there has been an estimated number of some 400 different domesticated animals, including camels, pigs, goats, ox, etc. that were exchanged in and out of China. Most dogs were actually either caravan guardian dogs or being taken to as a precious gift to a noble of some sort.

So, if we consider then that according to archaeological and historical evidence that

- (1) yes, dog was eaten, but not in preference to pig or ox;
- (2) that less dog was eaten the further north in China one looks (this is true even today);
- (3) that the Chow as a breed is considered to be a northern breed and probably originally developed in Mongolia;
- (4) the Chow was considered to be a royal dog owned by nobility and warlords, not the general public.

The logical conclusion is that claims that Chows were a primary source of protein are unsubstantiated at best. However, one could postulate that some Chows, sometimes, may have been eaten.

Furthermore, the ancient medical practitioners also made recommendations regarding health of animals and amongst the recommendations are records about the rotation of herds of pigs and ox to feed on different grasses and grains – such is not so for dogs (or Chows). In fact, in Chinese medicine, the recommendation for dog health is a steady diet of meats and bones with some other foods that nourish the system, depending on the particular dog's needs.