

# *Kuai* and *Sheng* — the Raw Fish and Meat Dishes in Chinese History

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In the *Book of Rites* edited by Dai De and in the chapter “Wang Zhi” of the *Book of Rites*, “cooked foods” as opposed to “raw foods” were used as a criterion to distinguish the Chinese from their neighbouring ethnic groups. The Chinese ate cooked foods while other ethnic groups ate raw foods. However, since the invention of ‘cooked foods’, have the Chinese had the custom of eating raw fish and meat at all? As this article will show, they certainly have. Then, what have they eaten? How were they prepared? How important were these fish and meat dishes in the life of the Chinese in historic times? What was the geographical distribution of this eating custom? Did people have some particular views concerning eating raw fish and meat? Why are the average Chinese today no longer aware of this custom? This article will explore the questions concerning the custom of *kuai* and *sheng*—or catching for immediate slaughter and preparing for immediate consumption instead of having the raw fish and meat processed by drying in the air, pickling, soaking in sauce or wine, brewing, etc. It will also try to give tentative answers to these questions.

The eggs of *Clonorchis sinensis* (liver fluke) have been found in ancient corpses at archaeological sites dating from the Warring States Period to the Ming dynasty. This proves that the eating of raw fish was a tradition that existed in China for a very long period of time.

Documents since the Shang dynasty oracle bone inscriptions have called these raw fish and raw meat prepared for immediate consumption *kuai* and *sheng*, or *kuai sheng*. *Sheng* refers to raw fish and raw meat and *kuai* refers to finely cut raw fish and raw meat. A great many of animal species were eaten this way, including wild animals like David’s deer (麋), deer, river deer, bear, wild boar, hare, fox, civet cat (香狸), bamboo rats; domestic animals like ox, cow, sheep, goat, pig, dog and horse (for meat, and in the case of pig, sheep and goat also for liver and stomach); fowls like cock, hen, duck, goose and wild pigeon; sea and fresh water fish like carp, crucian carp (鯽), fresh water bream, trout, mullet, hilsa herring, bass, grass carp, black carp (青魚), brown croaker (鮓魚), butterfish, yellow croaker, catfish (塘虱), long-tailed anchovy (鱗), and snakehead fish (鱧);

shellfish and other aquatic animals like crab, shrimp, oyster, blood cockle (蚶子), clam, pen shell (江瑤), mussel (淡菜); as well as jellyfish, etc.

Generally speaking, *kuai sheng* were not daily or regularly consumed by the Chinese. During historic times *kuai sheng* had very high status in the Chinese cuisine. According to the feudal system of ceremonial forms of ancient China, only hereditary aristocrats could enjoy them. And later they were often the delicacies enjoyed only by emperors, aristocrats and wealthy families. The emperors bestowed them to their courtiers and the courtiers offered them to the emperors. They were also served at banquets and cherished by people as rare and first class delicacies. To eat them was also considered a romantic event for intellectuals which smacked refined taste and elegant style. It was a pleasurable occasion.

Regions south of the Huai River abound in rivers, streams, irrigation canals, lakes and ponds. And to their southeast is the vast sea. Various species of fish, shell, shrimp, and crab are easily available naturally or through artificial cultivation. Therefore, the custom of eating the *kuai sheng* of aquatic animals was more prevalent in these regions than in north China. Since the time of the Northern and Southern dynasties, southerners often considered raw fish a kind of special homeland cuisine. Most of the 'lands of fish *kuai sheng*' celebrated by the Chinese were located to the south of the Huai River, especially the lower Yangtze Delta. Many residents here enjoyed eating raw fish.

In order to prepare *kuai sheng*, very fresh aquatic animal and land animal meats were needed. Special sizes were sometimes required for the fish. These animals had to be processed first, and only appropriate and selected portions of them would be used for *kuai sheng*. For instance, the skin, bone, head and tail of fish were discarded first; only chicken breast was used; the crab shell was discarded also; sands and dirt in cowrie and conch had to be washed away and their meat taken out. There were a number of ways to cut the fish and meat: making thin slices was called *xuan* or *fen*, shredding the slices was called *kuai*. At least since the Jin dynasty, ground raw fish and meat were called *sao* or *sao zi*. As a rule, the thinner and finer the cut the better. Since the Eastern Han dynasty, the cut fish could be described as 'very fine threads', 'fine hair', or 'the awns of barley'. During the Tang and the Song dynasties, the City of Wuxing was especially famous for its knife skills. After cutting, paper was generally used to absorb blood and water. But by the late Ming

dynasty, fish was sliced only and no longer shredded. And water was used to wash away the remaining blood.

Fancy seasonings were required for the preparation of *kuai sheng*. Mustard seed sauce had been used since ancient times. The famous 'ba he ji' or the mixed condiment of eight mashed ingredients was developed during the Northern and Southern dynasties. At least since the Sui dynasty, leafy greens like coriander (芫荽), mosla herb (香薷) and Chinese radish had been used to cover the *kuai sheng*. The presentation of the dish was especially stressed. The colors of the fish, meat, seasonings, and herbal greens combined to produce a brilliant effect. At Wuxing, chefs even arranged the threads of fish and meat into poems or other special fancy patterns.

The Chinese believed in the nourishing and healing power of many kinds of *kuai sheng*. But raw fish and meat could sometimes be poisonous. And diseases could occur if the quality was dubious, the season or time for consumption was inappropriate, too much was eaten; it was combined with certain kinds of food like dairy products; or eaten by the elderly, pregnant women or sick or feeble individuals. Seasonings and herbs that accompanied *kuai sheng*, such as garlic, gingerroot, tangerine peel, plum, cinnamon, coriander, water pepper (蔞), prickly ash (蜀椒), pepper, Chinese radish and vinegar generally could prevent these diseases.

*Kuai sheng* was not good for health. During the Tang and the Song dynasties, Sun Simiao and Lou Ju-zhong advised against them. But their efforts had little results.

Although people liked *kuai sheng*, this eating custom gradually declined. By the time of mid-Ming dynasty, chicken became the only fowl meat used in *kuai sheng*. And even chicken was generally cooked. In the meantime, cooked fish and meat *kuai sheng* dishes gained popularity. The geographical area of eating *kuai sheng* greatly shrank. It was confined to the regions south of The Five Mountain Passes. By the time of late Ming and early Qing, the recipes for raw animals in cookbooks actually referred to cooked meat.

This decline started from north China. At least since the ninth century, northerners (except the aristocrats, officials and very wealthy people), no longer ate raw fish. Between the sixteenth century and the seventeenth century, raw fish disappeared from the plates of the northern Chinese altogether. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the custom of eating raw fish was prevalent at Wuxing. But by the fifteenth century, even local residents of

蕭 璠

Wuxing no longer ate raw fish. By the time of late Ming, this tradition only lingered on in a very limited number of regions such as the south of The Five Mountain Passes and the Bay of Hangzhou.

The existence of *kuai sheng* in a culture characterized by cooked foods shows that the Chinese could, for a long period, maintain and develop a tradition contrary to the mainstream. The evolution of *kuai sheng* at different times and regions indicates that although there were basically similar styles and features in the traditional Chinese culture, many diverse regional styles and features actually coexisted.

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