

## Thinking Food in Poetry

### Research on Lu You's food philosophy

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**ABSTRACT** | Lu You is the Chinese poet with most extant poems. Many of his over 9,000 poems are in some way related to food, thus representing a significant source for the research on food culture and philosophy in the Song Dynasty. This paper analyses Lu You's poetic remarks on food, and summarizes their gist, which can be categorized into four precepts: control food and avoid gluttony, choose vegetables over meat, eat lightly, and use food to keep fit. In this way, the paper contributes to our understanding of Lu You's poetry, which in turn reflects the viewpoints on food of the literati and officialdom class in the Song Dynasty.

**KEYWORDS** | Lu You; Poetry; Food Philosophy

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## 1 Introduction

During the Song Dynasty, the ethnic fusion of the North and the South, the emergence of the public class and the prosperity of the business culture all greatly contributed to the development of Chinese food culture. Meanwhile, the literati and officialdom class showed an unprecedented interest in food. Almost every poet of this period talks about it. Apart from describing food and culinary techniques, they also focus on personal feelings, suggesting in their poems deep emotional responses to food, and thus elevating food into a sort of philosophy. Lu You is a typical example. Born around the fall of the Northern Song Dynasty, the upright poet's persistence in fighting against the Jin Dynasty resulted in an unsuccessful career. Lacking opportunities to serve the country, he had to spend lengthy time at home. His verses are imbued with ardent patriotism, while real life is also a central topic. Food is a recurring motif, thanks to his unique insight in this field. Among the over 9,000 poems preserved today, nearly 400 pieces are directly on food, and as many as over 3,000, or one-third, contain references to food. These works tremendously facilitate our understanding of food culture in the Song Dynasty, while revealing the food philosophy of the literati and officialdom class at that time.

## 2 Eat Simply and Frugally, Avoid Gluttony

Food was Lu You's lifelong passion. The decades-long official service in Fujian, Sichuan and Hangzhou allowed him to savor tasty dishes in various regions. Nevertheless, he always kept in mind to avoid hedonism and act frugally. In his article *Ju Shi Ji* 居室记, Lu You writes: "Don't consume more than you can at each meal. You don't have to finish all the dishes on the table. Just stop eating when you are slightly full." (Lu 1976) He thereby echoes Confucius's "A gentleman is not a greedy eater." In the poem *Zong Bi* 纵笔, he announces that "I don't have anything on my mind. There are always books in my eyes. Half full is sufficient. Excess food or clothing should not be expected." (Lu 2005) In these lines, Lu You articulates the idea that a well-fed and well-clothed life is not what he aims to accomplish. Indeed, his actions speak louder than words. The food poetry displays his preference for vegetables over expensive alternatives, and that he constantly made himself aware of the importance of enduring hunger and abstaining from greed. The writer compares food to a formidable adversary and warns himself not to allow free rein to the pleasure of eating: "The emotions and desires might be harmful, but that's because you are obsessed with them. I would say food is a strong opponent in daily life. The troubles induced by spoons and chopsticks could be more severe

than the affairs. It is wrong for a six-feet tall man to be enslaved by the satisfaction from food.” (Shu Jing 书警, from (Lu 2005)) In *Xi Yong Xiang Li Shi Wu Shi Lin Qu* 戏咏乡里食物示邻曲 (Lu 2005), another poem that portrays the gourmet food from his hometown Shanyin, he lists Euryale ferox seed, red bayberry, fiddlehead fern, jelly ear fungus, sweet potato, etc., while still reminding himself at the end that “I am feeling less capable in my senior years. I deserve the ridicule when I already have one but greedily expect ten. I will get rid of the obsession, live a simple life and be content with poverty, just like Yan Hui 颜回.” (Lu 2005)

“The sound of laundry can be heard in the remote village at night. Sweet potato porridge is being cooked on my shabby stove. Dwelling in poverty is not something I purposely want, yet a scholar is supposed to feel comfortable in any cold and hungry conditions.” (*Dong Ye* 冬夜, from (Lu 2005)). From his perspective, thrift and abstinence from greed are the self-consciousness of a scholar. These virtues not only assist one to build a strong will and set a high standard of morality, but also help to avoid misfortune and keep fit. According to *Shu Zhong Bei Chuang Zhou Wo You Zuo* 暑中北窗昼卧有作 (Lu 2005), “I was a sickly child and nearly died many times. This might be a test and a warning from the God. I start to limit desires and avoid indulgence in sensual pleasures in my middle age, and control food in my senior years ... Although life and death are pre-destined, there is something one can do. In a kaleidoscopic world, all the disasters are originated from greed.” By saying this, he expresses confidence that a pure heart, few desires, and moderation in eating once one reaches midlife, contribute to longevity. In the second piece of *Bing Zhong You Shu Er Shou Ge Wu Yun* 病中有述二首各五韵 (Lu 2005), he explains that “our generation should learn how to stay healthy. Self-control is necessary on all matters. Most entertainments are not suitable for the elderly. The sole thing needs attention is food. You may inscribe some texts on the tableware to remind yourself that any food is your enemy.” The feeling gets deeper as he grows older: “Ancient people always say the patient should eat less. If one fails to do it, even panacea could not help. Now I have experienced a lot as an old man, I definitely agree with it.” (*Za Gan* 杂感, from (Lu 2005)). Thrift and abstinence from greed are the family tradition he wished to pass to the future generations. In the first piece of *Dui Shi Xi Zuo Er Shou* 对食戏作二首 (Lu 2005), he writes: “The lettuce, water shield and other vegetables are soon consumed after the red millet and the fragrant Japonica rice from Taizhou are steamed. I spend thriftily not because I am no longer an official, but because it is a family tradition.” Furthermore, he clearly instructs the descendants in *Fang Weng Jia Xun* 放翁家训 (Lu 1985) that “You just need enough food to fill your stomach. Offer a bit cleaner and exquisite food for guests. It would be childish to seek precious and rare food just to show off. Do bear in mind and stay alert!”

### 3 Choose Vegetables over Meat

Apart from tea, wine and alcohol, the most frequently depicted items in Lu You's food poetry are vegetables. More than 40 vegetable types are referred to in *Jian Nan Shi Gao* 剑南诗稿, covering almost all the regular choices in the Song Dynasty and heavily outnumbering meat, staples or other categories. Calling himself an advocate for vegetables, the comparison and praise are widely found in his poetry. For example, "A mouthful of mountain vegetables beats eight delicacies" (*Chun Jin* 春近, from (Lu 2005); "A plain garment is as warm as a fox fur. The winter vegetables are as crisp and sweet as the bear's paw." (*You Ju* 幽居, from (Lu 2005)); "The pigweed and amaranth in the wooden plate are so savory that I feel like eating from a jade plate." (*Dui Shi* 对食, from (Lu 2005)); "The raw fish fillet neatly place in the jade plate is not as delicious as the mild boiled cabbage." (*Zhuo Kuai* 斫脍, from (Lu 2005)); "The aroma of the regular Japonica rice is identical to the pricey rice. The chives taste better than the roasted lamb." (*The second piece of Xin Liang Er Shou* 新凉二首其二, from (Lu 2005)); "I don't mind the simple food offered by villagers at all. I just love how fresh and delicious the wild vegetables are." (*Ji Meng* 记梦, from (Lu 2005)). Meanwhile, many vegetable-themed poems (e.g. *Shi Ji Shi Yun* 食荠十韵, *Yi Yi* 薏苡, *Cai Geng* 采羹, *Shu Shi* 蔬食, *Su Fan* 素饭, *Shu Shi Xi Shu* 蔬食戏书, *Shan Zhong Zuo* 山中作, *Zi Shan Zhong* 自山中, *You Ju* 幽居, *Qiu Qing Mei Zhi Yuan Zhong Zhe Di Mu Xi Shi Er Zi* 秋晴每至园中辄抵暮戏示儿子, *Gui Tang Dong Chuang Xi Nong Bi Mo Ou De Jue Ju* 龟堂东窗戏弄笔墨偶得绝句, *Xi Zuo Pin Shi* 戏作贫诗, *Shi Ji Shen Shen Mei Gai Shu Ren Suo Wei Dong Po Geng Ye* 食荠糝甚美盖蜀人所谓东坡羹也) record his favorite varieties (e.g. coarse dishes, taro soup, fiddlehead, wild rice stem, wild vegetable soup, okra, water shield, legumes, bamboo shoot, Job's tears) and convince us that Lu You enjoyed vegetarian food from the heart. However, he was not blindly prejudiced against meat. His view on meat is well-expressed in *Za Gan* 杂感, "There is an ancient saying that meat is playing a part in the elder's health. Nevertheless, why get obsessed with the pleasure of eating after the self-cultivation for decades? Isn't it nice to have mountain vegetables as breakfast and wash with spring water at noon? A seven-feet tall man should not just seek the satisfaction to the mouth." He admits that meat is also good for health, especially for the elders, but one must not indulge, and vegetables should be a priority in the dietary structure.

Lu You's advocacy in vegetables is not only a personal choice, but also a trend of his time. His poor and humble life experience, the concern and compassion for the nation and the people, as well as the willingness to suffer poverty and embrace whatever life throws at him, all naturally match with the refreshing vegetables. These are the reasons behind his vivid portrayal of fruits and vegetables.

For example, “The vegetables in the garden are fresh and digestible, the taste is not inferior to the pork or the lamb, too.” (*Xue Ye* 雪夜, from (Lu 2005)); “The host does not have to buy wine. The arrow-like bamboo shoot and the tender fiddle-head are as sweet as honey. No dish could beat that.” (*Tao Shan Yu Xue Jue Lin Qian An Zhu Jian Zhao Bu Guo Wang* 陶山遇雪觉林迁庵主见招不果往, from (Lu 2005)). The appearance of these vegetables and fruits are exceptionally inviting, too. “The wild vegetable soup and the bamboo shoot are as beautiful as jade.” (*Chun You Zhi Fan Jiang Xi Shi Zuo Ke* 春游至樊江戏示坐客, from (Lu 2005)). The analogy between jade and two growing plants in the springtime highlights how mellow and clean they are.

It is worth noting that Lu You’s advocacy of vegetables over meat is influenced by the food culture of the literati and officialdom class. The Buddhist vegetarian culture and the neo-Confucianism shifted from the meat-oriented trend of the Tang Dynasty to a vegetable-oriented tendency in the Song Dynasty. At this time, vegetarian restaurants and recipe books started to get popular. For instance, although few literati or officials were strictly vegetarian, almost everyone praised vegetarianism, since it embodies the willingness to suffer poverty and the pursuit of otherworldly ideals.

The example of Yan Yuan 颜渊, a student of Confucius, is indicative of this philosophical attitude toward vegetarianism. Neo-Confucianists of the Song Dynasty highly praised Yan Yuan, and regarded him as a sage second only to Confucius. Yan Yuan’s diet was famously very simple, consisting almost entirely of vegetables, and yet he still enjoyed it. This ascetic spirit was highly praised by people. Many literati and scholars in the Song Dynasty also imitated Yan Yuan and believed that drinking and eating meat was a way of indulging in material enjoyment and a form of degeneration. The experience of compressing material needs to the extreme by eating vegetables and drinking only water helped them understand life and find real happiness. For example, Yun Xingzong 员兴宗 claims: “I regard vegetables as the king of food, not because of their taste, but because of their virtue.” Vegetables represent the virtue of noble morality, which was widely recognized in the Song Dynasty. Zhang Lei 张耒 also wrote in one of his poems that, after a vegetarian meal, “I stretch and feel that my whole body and mind have been released.” Finding pleasure in simple vegetable food became one of the pursuits of scholars in the Song Dynasty. Sima Guang 司马光, Huang Tingjian 黄庭坚, Su Shi 苏轼, and other leading writers of the time eulogized vegetarian food in a great deal of masterpieces. Lu You, in particular, adopted vegetarianism to keep fit and refrained from meat or fish in his later years. Such a choice is the expression of a philosophy, rather than being a mere physiological pursuit.

“The Song people get not only health benefits, but also transcendental expe-

riences. By versifying the vegetarian food and mild taste, scholars express their deep thoughts on the politics, gains, losses and life meanings, and illustrate their transition in attitude, purpose, ideal and aesthetics.” (Liu 2016) Of course, there is still a big difference between this and strict vegetarianism. People in the Song Dynasty regarded eating vegetables as the symbol and pursuit of personal noble morality, but they did not preclude themselves entirely from eating meat. In fact, except for religious reasons (Buddhism and Taoism), most people only paid more attention to vegetable food as an expression of a general set of values, rather than because of a strict commitment to vegetarianism.

#### 4 Prefer Mild Flavors and Be Skilled at Seasoning

“There is nobody who does not eat and drink, but there are few who truly savor the taste.” (Zisi 2016) The possession of a discriminating taste is one of the highest praises to an epicure since ancient times. As *Cao Pi* 曹丕 states, “Only the aristocratic family that has passed three generations knows how to dress, and only the aristocratic family that has passed five generations knows how to eat.” (*Yu Qun Chen Lun Bei Fu Shu* 与群臣论被服书). In this remark, the difficulty of developing a discriminating taste is emphasized. The process requires solid financial strength, decent political status and good cultural literacy. Although Lu You practiced frugality, and did not consider the enjoyment of food a life goal, his cultural literacy and noble morality helped him develop a unique appreciative style. His appetite was on the mild side, as suggested by many of his poems. For example, “Frosted vegetables are mild and sweet. The new green shoots unfold as spring is around the corner. Simply boiling in water and adding no condiment, the taste is amazing.” (*Dui Shi Xi Zuo* 对食戏作, from (Lu 2005)); “I did not buy salt and cheese in town. The bland vegetable soup is delicious enough.” (*The first piece of Lao Shen Zi Yong Er Shou* 老甚自咏二首其一, from (Lu 2005)); “Meat and rice are yummy, but the light food calms my soul.” (*Qiu Ye Guan Yue* 秋夜观月, from (Lu 2005)); “Drinking is delightful, while eating mild food is satisfactory.” (*Dui Shi You Gan* 对食有感, from (Lu 2005)). When using seasoning, “A bit of salt and vinegar boost the flavor. A dash of ginger and cinnamon lift the spirit.” (*The third piece of Shi Ji San Shou* 食荠三首其三, from (Lu 2005)); “Enjoy the big taro baked in high heat with a pinch of salt.” (*Bing Gao Zhong Yu Feng Xue Zuo Chang Ge Pai Men* 病告中遇风雪作长歌排闷, from (Lu 2005)). The ancient Chinese political and philosophical text *Guanzi* 管子 holds that “it is the mild flavor that enables the five flavors to co-exist.” The pursuit of a mild flavor is actually a tribute to original taste of the food. Likewise, Lu You’s poetry is plain, unpretentious, free of rhetoric, and yet emotional, vigorous and

touching.

Without doubt, Lu You clearly realized that the mild flavor does not fit all occasions. His food poetry demonstrates that the foodie usually prefers mild flavor in the vegetarian dishes. Lu You has tricks for meat that needs complicated seasoning. In *Fan Ba Xi Zuo* 饭罢戏作 (Lu 2005) he elaborates: “Buy pork rib at the East Gate, then season it with vinegar, sweet paste, zest and scallion.” Pork rib is quite common, usually baked, stewed or roasted, whereas Lu You is the only one to be found that cooks it with sour sauce prepared with zest and scallion, featuring the writer’s unique aesthetics in food. According to *Xi Yong Xiang Li Shi Wu Shi Lin Qu* 戏咏乡里食物示邻曲 (Lu 2005), the terminal bud of the palm tree is edible and tastes a bit bitter. After steaming or boiling, eat it with condiments made from vinegar and soy sauce. The taste is terrific, and it helps to activate blood and dissolve stasis. In the poem *Su Fan* 素饭 (Lu 2005), he chooses jade-white premium-level plump rice, cooks by pine twigs and Osmanthus shrubs slowly to induce the fragrant smell, steams the fresh and tender eggplants, and later adds refined vinegar and soy sauce. The silver and white crystal-like eggplants are tempting. This recipe is identical to the Shaoxing modern cuisine “rice steamed with eggplants 饭捂茄子” today, where the well-steamed eggplants are tender and succulent, and taste fabulously paired with the rice aroma when served with vinegar and soy sauce.

In addition, Lu You was an expert in preparing all kinds of sauce or paste as condiments. He “snaps lotus seeds to brew vinegar and picks broad bean to make sauce.” (*Cun She Za Shu* 村舍杂书, from (Lu 2005)). He describes how “the green pickled cucumber is nicely put in the plate”, where he slices the cucumber, and then marinates it with salt and soy sauce. To date, his hometown fellows are used to have porridge or rice soaked in soup or water with pickled cucumber for breakfast.

## 5 Use Food as Therapy and Keep Fit

Food regimens are the most common way to keep healthy in ancient China. Food is utilized to adjust the body functions so that people can prevent or cure diseases and stay healthy. In other words, people take care of the body by eating. The theory of “homology of medicine and food” is recurs in traditional Chinese medicine. Many foods are also medicines, and there is no absolute dividing line between the two. Ancient Chinese herbalists apply the “four properties and five flavors” theory to food, and hold that each food carries medicinal value and belongs to a traditional Chinese medicine kind. In the book *Huangdi Neijing* 黄帝内经 of the Tang Dynasty, it was stated that “the same thing is food for hungry peo-

ple, and medicine for people who are sick". The so-called "four properties" refer to the four different properties of medicine: cold, hot, warm, and cool, reflecting the tendency of medicines to affect the internal Yin and Yang and the change of cold and heat of the human body. For instance, if the disease is cold, such those that induce cold limbs and pale complexion, it should be treated with warm and hot drugs, which can improve the *Yang Qi* 阳气 in the human body and enhance human function. The five flavors refer to the five medicinal flavors of sour, bitter, sweet, pungent, and salty, which correspond to the five internal organs of the human body: liver, heart, spleen, lung, and kidney. The taste of the food itself, as well as that of the condiments, affects the five internal organs. Although five-flavored foods have their own benefits, excessive or improper consumption can also have negative effects. They should be eaten according to one's individual constitution. If you eat too much spicy food and your constitution is dry and hot, you will have sore throat and acne. In practice, food with given therapeutic characteristics can be cooked properly into a "food therapy", depending on the individual constitution or illness.

People started to notice food's effects on longevity since the pre-Qin periods. Health experts since the Han and Jin Dynasties invented numerous food regimens. This trend gained strength during the Song Dynasty, a period when lots of food therapies and lifestyle tips became available, and several food therapy books were written. Food therapy became a common practice, particularly among literati and officials.

Deeply troubled by illness in his teens, and believing himself to show signs of premature senility, Lu You attaches great importance to the maintenance of his health. A set of food regimens are summarized and practiced in his 85 years long life, such as avoiding gluttony, and choosing vegetables over meat. Moreover, he thoroughly understood the medicinal value of food and frequently used food therapy for health benefits.

Lu You claims to be familiar with *Chinese Materia Medica* 本草<sup>1</sup> since childhood. Being an expert in the most common medicines, he gathered medicinal materials now and then, and planted some medicinal herbs in his garden. His expertise in *Materia Medica* 本草 is proven in the poem *Shan Cun Jing Xing Yin Shi Yao* 山村经行因施药. While taking a break in a lodge to feed his donkey, he was approached by several old farmers and expected to tell the growth status of medicinal plants and the seedlings. More than happy to help, he showed the illiterate farmers how to identify seedlings just broken through the soil. He states several times that his

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<sup>1</sup> *Materia Medica* 本草 is the first Pharmacopoeia issued in the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-907). The original book has been lost in the Chinese Song Dynasty (960 – 1279), and only some contents have been handed down into other Chinese literatures.



food routine is guided by Chinese herbology, for example: “My everyday recipe follows the Chinese herbology. It is such a gastronomic delight that I can’t put down the chopsticks.” (*Dong Ye Zuo Duan Ge* 冬夜作短歌, from (Lu 2005)); “I look at Chinese Materia Medica when I eat, the wisdom of this book is incredible.” (*Ming Zuo* 铭座, from (Lu 2005)). Hence, many healthy food categories appear in his works, of which the most typical one is porridge. He shares its advantages from time to time throughout the poetry: “Everyone wants to live a long life, but not aware that the secret is under their nose. I learn from the poet Zhang Lei (alias Mr. Wan Qiu)’s simple regimen that porridge alone will make you immortal.” (*Shi Zhou* 食粥, from (Lu 2005)). He also advises the elderly that gruel is good for digestion, absorption and longevity: “I am not starved now that my senile body is fueled by porridge” (*Bo Zhou* 薄粥, from (Lu 2005)). Besides, there are verses such as: “I love the pigweed porridge as I grow older, and brewed millet sour soup when I am sick.” (*Cun Ju* 村居, from (Lu 2005)); “A bowl of pigweed soup is sweeter than honey.” (*Wu Fan* 午饭, from (Lu 2005)). Inspired by this theory, Lu You put various medicinal materials (Chinese yam, wolfberry, beans, and vegetables) into the porridge, which are digestible and nutritious. Wolfberry porridge is a wonderful option for breakfast since it improves the eyesight and nourishes the lung, liver and kidney, “The bell rings in the thatched cottage after the snow stopped, I have a wolfberry soup after getting up.” (*Yu Ji Zhai Shu Shi* 玉笈斋书事, from (Lu 2005)). Chinese yam porridge is ideal for the evening, “Chinese yam porridge beats other delicacies in a famished long autumn night” (*Qiu Ye Du Shu Mei Yi Er Gu Jin Wei Jie* 秋夜读书每以二鼓尽为节, from (Lu 2005)), it is an effective food therapy because it invigorates the spleen, nourishes the stomach and lung and promotes bodily fluids.

## 6 Conclusion

Food is a special subject in the history of Chinese poetry, for it is present in secular life as well as in poetic life. A concern for the topic of food is evident throughout Lu You’s writing. The massive quantity of extant poems, as well as the broad range of food kinds discussed, make Lu You’s poetry a treasure for the study of ancient Chinese food culture. Endowed with philosophical thinking, he records traditional food inheritance, articulates insights and reflections on the vicissitudes of life, and to an extent leads the development of food aesthetics and thought in the Southern Song Dynasty. Undoubtedly, this is a grand legacy in the evolution of China’s food philosophy.

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