

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## ASIA'S UBIQUITOUS STREET FOODS

### Are They Nutritious? Are They Safe?

Street vendors hawking food in Asia are an essential part of the continent's economic and social structure — Asians eat more street food than the rest of the world combined. While many vendors offer tempting and often delicious food, few regulations are in place or enforced to ensure safety and hygiene. Here is a report on the implications of the street food phenomenon by Peyton Johnson who was until recently a Press Officer with the FAO in Bangkok.

FIRST time visitors to any part of Asia often get the impression that "all Asians eat in the streets." From Beijing to Bombay, from Singapore to Seoul, so ubiquitous are the stalls, hawkers and vendors of street snacks that the outlander may be forgiven if he or she concludes that Asian home cooking is either a thing of the past or simply has no place in Asian domestic traditions.

Such a conclusion is dead wrong, of course. Yet it is true that Asians eat more street food than any other people, more in fact than all the rest of the world combined. But what exactly is "street food?" What makes it different from food prepared at home or consumed in a restaurant? Here is the definition of an international expert: "It is food and drink ready to be consumed on the spot, prepared by the vendors and hawkers themselves and sold in the streets and other public places."

So says Dr. Rahmat Qureshi, Senior Nutrition Officer with the Regional Office in Bangkok for Asia and the Pacific of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Dr. Qureshi was one of the principal contributors to an in-depth FAO study on street foods throughout the region.

Among the many street food offerings, a majority in the so-called "chop sticks" cultures, a plethora are based on rice: boiled or fried; topped with vegetables or meat or both; noodles of a dozen different kinds; glutinous, or "sticky," rice in salads or sweetened with coconut milk and fruit as a desert. Non-Asians have little idea of the incredible diversity of the dishes that can be made from rice.

Among the Muslim populations of Asia, lamb, mutton and even goat are popular in kebabs or as stuffings for rice and wheat dishes, dumplings, soups, or chopped fish and rolled into wheat-based North Indian chapattis or their local equivalent. Nor neglected are fish, curries, chicken, duck, eggs, beef, pigeon, vegetables and fruit concoctions, and seafood of every conceivable kind. Though there is seldom, if ever, a menu in Street Food stalls just choosing from the confusing glut of foods displayed is sometimes a difficult decision. "Arguably, you get a wider choice of exotic preparations in Asian street foods than you find in fancy European restaurants," says Dr. Qureshi. "There is something for every taste."

The FAO study shows that Asia's myriad food hawkers work from medium sized to tiny stalls, either fixed or portable, down to a single man or woman selling sweets or sausages or what-have-you, so long as it is edible, from two baskets balancing each other on the opposite ends of a carrying pole. Or the lone hawker may offer his wares from a three-wheeled bicycle with a food box on one end and the peddler, no pun intended, on

the other. The variety is endless.

The study also notes that all the vendors are following an ancient Asian tradition.

"There has never been a time in Asia when there were no food hawkers," says Dr. Qureshi. "They are mentioned in the classical literature of both India and China as far back as the Ramayana and the pre-Confucian classics. Can anyone imagine a public festival in Asia without an overnight forest of food stalls?"

"Asians do not eat more than other peoples, but they cer-

tainly eat more often. Asians are in fact the world's original and most dedicated snackers. The street food trade is big business in Asia."

Here's how the FAO study describes it: "Street foods in Asia can easily be regarded as a huge but scattered industry employing literally millions of people. Collectively the financial turnover amounts to many tens of millions of baht a day in Bangkok alone. For all Asia the sums are so great as to be beyond calculation."

In Thailand, FAO estimates that as many as half a million

people are engaged in the street food business, full or part time. In Malaysia, with a much smaller population, there are at least 100,000 full time street vendors. In China the numbers involved are well above a million, though no one knows just how many regularly ply the street food trade throughout that vast and most populous of all the world's nations.

The type of food sold of course varies greatly from one country to another and even from region to region within individual countries. But all the

If you want that sort of cuisine you must search out an anti-septic establishment specializing in, say, British Rail-type cooking. If you can find such you can at least be sure of getting a table without waiting. The restaurant will not be crowded.

The second thing the small Asian street food businesses have in common is that they are overwhelmingly family affairs. According to its size, a typical street food enterprise may have mother and father and sons and daughters, uncles, aunts and cousins

involved, but with few exceptions those in the business will all be members of the same family.

The FAO study reports that the number of persons per establishment ranged from 1.5 to two in Indonesia and Bangladesh to 2.9 in the Philippines. For Southeast Asia, China proper, and Indonesia the average number engaged would be closer to the Filipino figure. For the rest of Asia it is closer to the Indonesian and Bangladeshi figures. No one, of course, not even United Nations agencies or governments, can verify these estimates with anything approaching impeccable accuracy. Yet no one could argue that the number of workers, like the money generated, is colossal. Asia, after all, houses about 57 per cent of all humanity.

If the vendors are so numerous, how much more numerous must be their cus-

tomers? At the very least one third of all Asians eat one or more of their daily meals in the streets. Practically all low and medium income workers in Thailand, among other Asian nations, eat most of their meals at street stalls. This quickly mounts up to an enormous total. Again the FAO study gives some hints.

In Singapore, more than a million meals are sold in the streets every day of the year. In both Malaysia and Indonesia and average of 25 per cent of all household food expenditure goes for street foods. In the nations of the teeming Indian subcontinent, the percentage is at least that and perhaps even higher. Indian and Pakistani workers also normally take their work-day meals in the streets.

The street food industries of the various Asian nations also have another significant characteristic in common: nowhere do they show the slightest sign of diminishing, impressive economic progress in many nations notwithstanding.

"On the contrary," says Dr. Qureshi, "our evidence indicates that the industry is growing. That's why it is so important to determine whether the food sold and consumed in the streets is both safe and nutritious. This is a far more important question than most Asians, even governments, seem to realize."

"We are talking about the health and well being of not millions but billions of human beings. The food in most street stalls, Dr. Qureshi continues, is both clean and nutritious. Anyone can eat it without too much fear of instant food poisoning. Diarrhea, if you are unaccustomed to spicy Asian foods, may be another matter. Yet the accent here must be on "most," not "all" without exception. Some vendors have little, if any, concept of food hygiene and basic sanitation. The cleanliness of the plates, cups, saucers, knives, forks, spoons or chop sticks used sometimes leaves much to be desired. And though rare, it is occasionally possible to be served street food that is really bad, disgusting enough to turn the stomach of a hungry Hottentot. It is highly advisable to make use of your senses of sight and smell, to look and smell the place over, before you uncritically partake of its offerings.

"In picking the place and the food you order, as with

everything else in life," Dr. Qureshi says, "there is no substitute for common sense."

Aside from possible threats to human health, the Asian street food industry presents other problems for national and local administrations. One is the additional congestion piled on to already over-

crowded city streets. Here is how the FAO report puts it: "Street foods and food vending are often and eyesore and a nuisance creating greater traffic problems. This could be solved with discipline, but little discipline in this trade exist, except in Singapore, in most part of Asia."

Major General Chamlong Srimuang, governor of Bangkok and one of the most respected men in Thailand, perhaps because his absolute and uncompromising honesty as a politician is considered something of a miracle, has for years waged a long and largely unsuccessful war against the more glaring abuses of the street food trade.

The good and beloved General Chamlong does not want to deprive food vendors of their livelihood nor deny the average Thai the right to nutritious, convenient and inexpensive meals. He simply wants to bring some order and safety to the trade. In Bangkok, one of the oldest

and most congested sections of Bangkok, for instance, food vendors and food stalls, usually tiny, are so thick that it is difficult, often outright impossible, to make your way through the struggling throngs of sweaty, frustrated humanity.

And all too many vendors, many of them peasant-farmers from the provinces, or "up country" as the Thais say, once their work day is done, fail to properly dispose of their garbage and simply dump it into the less than spotless streets. It is practices such as these to which General Chamlong takes determined and highly vocal exception. So far red tape, bureaucratic lethargy and the sheer weight of tradition have defeated his ceaseless efforts for reform. The same is true of most other Asian cities.

Yet in the long run Thailand's General Chamlong and other Asians like him, will probably win. Such men never quit. They do not know how to stop fighting for what they think is right.

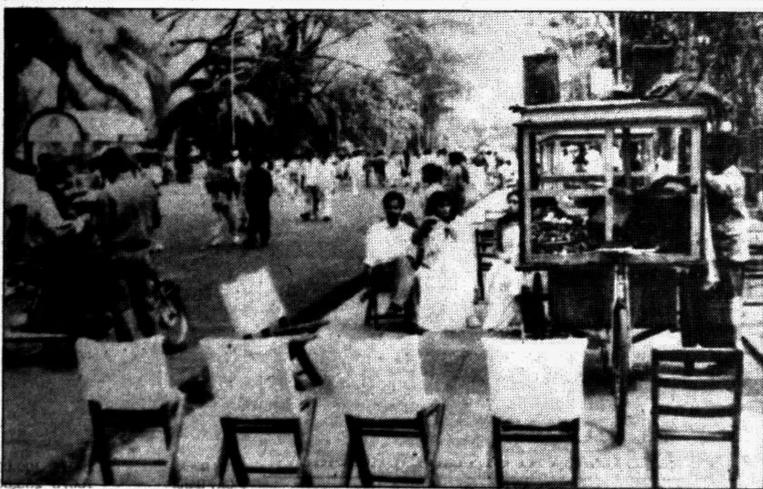
It is the considerations of safety and nutritiousness that interest international aid agencies such as FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO), and literally all Third World governments, in the huge street food business. Street foods, not only in Asia but throughout the world's developing nations, represent a gigantic investment in finance, internal trade and human health. The subject is vast and has been far too little studied.

So seriously does FAO view this problem that it will be on the agenda of the worldwide International Nutrition Conference to be held at the Organization's headquarters in Rome in December, 1992. Among the Asian countries, individual studies will be presented from Thailand, Indonesia and India, the world's second most populous nation.

"No one is suggesting for a minute that the street food business be done away with," says Dr. Qureshi. "That is clearly impossible. Nor is it desirable. The street food tradition is far too ancient and too solidly established. All the armies of Asia could not put it down for 24 hours."

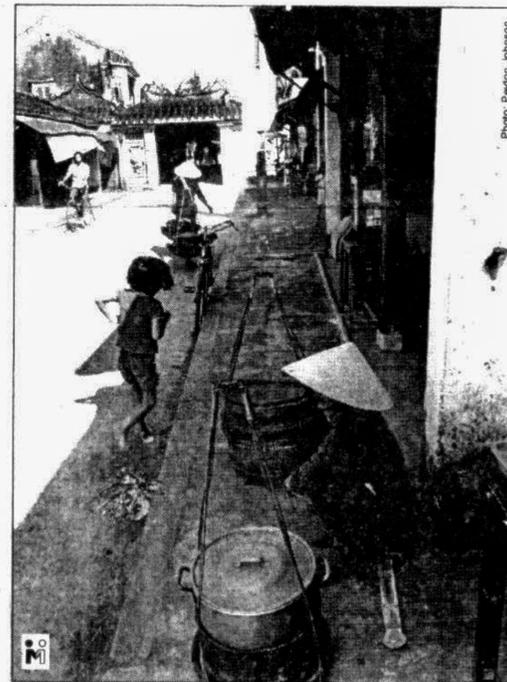
"Our objective is to make street foods safer and more nutritious. It is a gigantic job and getting it done must begin with the governments. We would like to see a special department charged with overseeing all aspects of street foods set up within every Asian country's Ministry of Public Health, or even as a separate agency with enough clout and teeth to back up sensible rules and regulations."

So far in all Asia, physically the largest as well as the most populous of the world's continents, only tiny Singapore has such an agency. In Singapore all street food hawkers and vendors must work out of specious and super-clean areas set aside by the government for just this purpose. Food stall



A street food vendor in Dhaka, in front of Shishu Park.

—Photo: Chapal Bashar



A street food vendor on the outskirts of Hue, ancient capital of Vietnam

Photo: Peyton Johnson

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## The Women's Secret Writings

A secret script used by Chinese women to send messages to each other is revealing a wealth of knowledge about gender ties in ancient China.

The script, known as *nushu*, was invented 1,000 years ago in Central China's Hunan Province and was known only to women.

The coded alphabets were passed on from one generation to another as women kept in touch to share their suffering, strengthen friendship, exchange poetry and to show their literary skills.

*Nushu* was re-discovered in the 1950's by researcher Zhou Shuyi who sent several samples of the script to a Beijing linguistics journal. But before the article could be published, both he and the editor were denounced as rightists and banned.

*Nushu* research did not resume until 30 years later and this May, retired linguistics professor Chen Giguang has finally published a compilation of 400 of the 600 known *nushu* texts. The collection is regarded as the most comprehensive volume of *nushu* studies published to date.

added or omitted certain strokes of *kaishu*, which is the basis for modern Chinese characters, and then wrote it in a more angular style."

The main difference between *nushu* and standard written Chinese is that *nushu* follows the local dialect and is based entirely on the pronunciation of words. Unlike written Chinese, which uses various characters for words with the same sound but have different meanings, *nushu* uses only one character for all.

Another theory is that the language was invented by a lonely local girl who had been sent as concubine to the emperor's palace during the Song dynasty. The girl is said to have invented the script to keep in touch with her family and evade the emperor's censors.

Other experts say *nushu* used to be the secret language for peasant groups that often rose in rebellion. Banned and forbidden to men, the language was taken over by women.

Whatever its origin, *nushu* was kept alive for thousands of years by generations of women. But it began to disappear after the revolution in 1949 when women's role in Chinese society expanded and girls began to go to school.

care for a person in her old age, or indignation at the treatment of women in traditional society.

In old China, women were not allowed to go past the main gate nor cross the threshold of the inner courtyard. Lack of learning was regarded as a great virtue in a woman.

But *nushu* and the social organisation in which it is rooted broke through these barriers like a proto-feminist *samtzat*.

Sisterhood societies grew where women of the same age met several times a year and had an informal sharing of such everyday tasks as grinding corn, weaving and sewing. In their meetings, women read autobiographical poems and stories and voted for the best one.

Many stories were recorded in cloth-bound books. Other writings on paper fans and handkerchiefs were exchanged as gifts or sometimes displayed in temples during religious holidays.

Women would exchange *nushu* on the third day after a wedding, when friends would gather to present the bride their writings. Many were poems which praised the bride's virtue, beauty and intelligence.

Others deplored the hard life of women in feudal times. Women had to leave their homes upon marriage to become near-servants in the husband's household. Most writings nostalgically recalled the happy days when girls were together before marriage.

The origins of *nushu*, which characters looked like long legged mosquitoes, are unknown. Some researchers say it may be 4,000 years old since its characters resemble the earliest known Chinese writing — the 'oracle bone' inscriptions of the 17th to 11th centuries B.C.

They say when the Emperor Qin Shihuang unified the country's writing system in the third century B.C., men adopted the new script because of its contact with the outside world. The old method was preserved as the special language of women.

But Professor Chen disagrees. "I think the history of *nushu* couldn't be more than one thousand years old," he says. "Most of its characters are variations of the *kaishu*, a regular script developed in the Tang dynasty about 1,200 years ago."

He continues: "The inventor

THE afternoon drifted on and on, in silence.

At one point of time in the interminable stretch of his meditation, Mr B woke up with a start, for an insect, anonymous, like one of his phantasmic women often visiting him in dreams, found its way inside his punjabi-milk-white. Yes, Mr B got disturbed, his cariboes shivered, and he began to pace like the jerky images occurring in a Futurist poem of the Italian poet Marinetti. The question that Mr B confronts now and then in the style of a tragic hero once again haunted him:

Who is it? No, he did not make any instantaneous discovery. It took quite sometime for him to reach that grand moment of recognition which Aristotle calls 'anagnorisis': he found that it was an insect which got into his meditation, disturbing the spell of floating, spicy, sacred silence which he thinks appropriate for a person intending to meditate on the future of a nation fast moving towards a kind of apocalypse — environmental, economic and social.

The other day, Mr B, with his characteristic zeal for life and enthusiasm for experience, had been to a seminar where professors, journalists, writers, painters, singers etc. came together to discuss various problems that are gobbling up the poor nation, the poor Bengalees. Mr B's auditory organ, as he himself believes, works marvelously and does not miss a single syllable even uttered infinitely whisperingly. Even when he does not hear, he hears! He calls it

## The Journey of Mr. B

by Azfar Hussain

"metamagical sense of hearing", a terminology of his own making now-a-days doled out unstintingly among the radical poetry critics who lavishly bestow this particular 'power' upon those poets incessantly experimenting with life and lines. With hair and beard.

Be that as it may — Mr B exercised that power as he began to listen to a professor who was also a poet. Lanky and also jerky like a creeper, the professor put on a yellow, black-dotted T-shirt which was dangling to and fro in the wind that blew. His nose was slightly angular, giving one the impression that Euclid was joking. His eyes went inward in a fashion that one would call them two blobs inside a half-broken bottle. He spoke with sounds tellingly nasal, with syllables catching feminine whispers.

Mr B heard that the professor was expressing his worries about the imminent fall of the nation; no, not the imminent fall, but the fall. Embarking on the epic scheme of emulating the Sartrean nausea which he rather stole from the pages of a Sartre translated into Bangla, he began to say that everything in Bangladesh had gone wrong; everything had been out of joints from educational institutions down to the behaviour of the wild-life species. He cried over the fact that the prover-

bial land of gold, that Bangladesh once was, now presented a land of barren tracts stretched miles after miles, replacing the unbroken stretch of the lyrical green which stimulated his fertile poetic imagination. The poet also made the observation that everything he came across was rotten that could only be portrayed in eschatological images; yes, according to him, everything was rotten: nouns, pronouns, verbs; Sundays, Mondays, Wednesdays; books, banks, bricks, bridges, bras, brackets, budgets and what not. The professor then shot a sigh which, in fact, was louder than his flamboyant whispers. He sighed, for he realised that the West was progressing, while the East was not.

Then, Mr B, who believes in the classical aesthetic creed of balance and proportion, found that the professor began to unleash an unbridled stream of abuses on everyone living in the unlivable, rotten society of Bangladesh, finally clinching the point that even the language — idioms and phrases, images and metaphors — used in the Parliament had been unspeakably filthy. Mr B got nervous, though he wanted to be impressed by the bubbling energy with which the professor desired to communicate the encyclopaedic range of rottenness eating into the fabric of society, but the professor's language replete with abuses

hurled up in harmony with his characteristic verbal diarrhoea not only made him nervous, but also hurt his aesthetic sense and sensibility which, in fact, deserves polished, soothing, sober turns of expression. At one point of time, Mr B stood up and asked the professor, "May I ask you a question, Sir?" The professor quickly replied, "A rotten question!" Mr B's enthusiasm and courage, along with that sense of protest brewing within, flagged down. He only kept seated, silent, while the professor continued showering the volleys of abuses uninhibitedly.

Suddenly, a woman, 27, stood up, and in an instant of moment, the professor paused, and warmly welcomed her to ask questions. No, the woman stood up not to ask a question, but to leave. The woman left, perhaps annoyed, and the professor now made his more emphatic observation that the time was out of joints and that he was born to set it right. Mr B found that round the lips of the professor, an angular smile of shining complacency came into contact with saliva densely formed into thin froth-lines, hanging 'whitely' near the corners of his lips.

And on coming back home, Mr B began to meditate on the grim future of the nation which, of course, did not exclude the professor who was so eloquent on the subject of rotting! But it was the goddamn insect that crept in! "O, in every good work, an insect creeps in, but one should not pause," realised Mr B.