

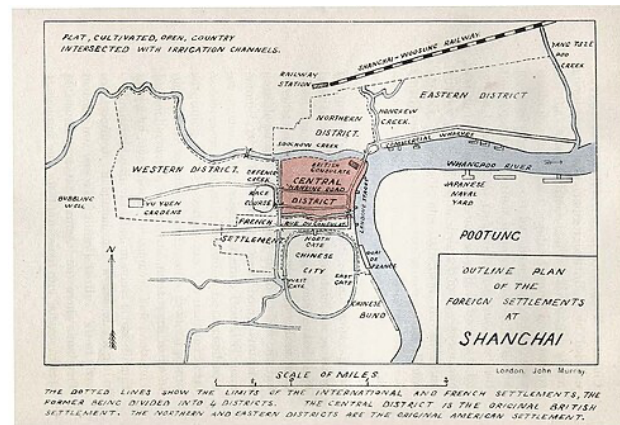
三十八

Peace Hotel, Peoples Park
to the west, old Shanghai
Pudong, growing out
building up to the sky
Xiaolongbao at Nan Xiang
fusion food Xintiandi
bicycles replaced
by the new MRT



Chapter 38 – Shanghai - Lion’s Head and 1,000 Year Old Eggs

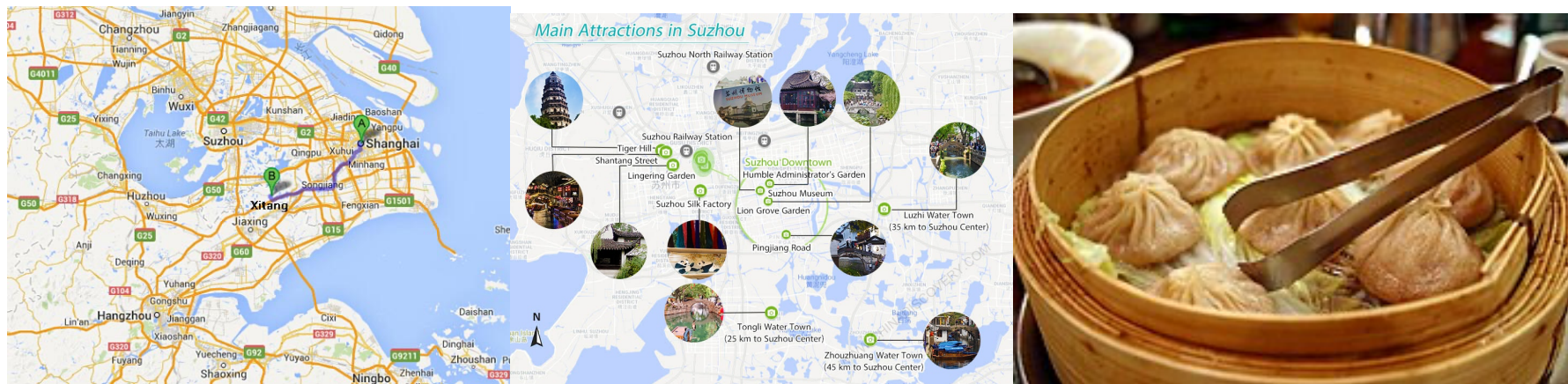
Shanghai’s history is rich, but, as a cosmopolitan city, relatively short. Before the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, following the 1st Opium War, Shanghai was little more than a fishing village. All that changed when the British named Shanghai as a treaty port. As Shanghai grew, it was not as a single entity, but rather as a conglomeration of “concessions” to foreign powers. A concession was an area of land leased to a country by China, which, because of the extraterritoriality agreements, these countries were able to totally control. They often had their own police and fire departments, churches, hospitals, restaurants, and hotels. In some parts of these settlements, Chinese were not allowed. The French, British, Americans and Japanese had major “concessions” in Shanghai. The British and the American concessions ultimately merged into what was called the “International Settlement.” There was an interesting mixture of architecture and industry, Chinese and Western cultures that both blended and clashed. By 1943, the Japanese were largely in control, and by the end of the 1940’s most foreigners had cut and run, leaving Shanghai as the heart of the new guard, from whence the Cultural Revolution received guidance from Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, one-quarter of the Gang of Four.



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Shànghǎi 上海 literally means “on the sea.” Aside from its proximity to the ocean, it is also within a few hours of a large number of some of China’s more popular and populous places. The Yangtze River Delta (長江三角洲 Chángjiāng Sānjiǎozhōu) is a bulging Megalopolis, 88 million strong. Hángzhōu 杭州 is 100 km to the southwest. Sūzhōu 苏州 is 100 km due west. And Wúxī 无锡 and

Tai Lake (太湖 Tàihú) are about 100 km to the northwest. The cities of Níngbō 宁波 and Nánjīng 南京 are 160 km south and 240 km west respectively. “Water towns” like Tónglǐ 同里, Zhūjiājiǎo 朱家角 and Wūzhèn 乌镇, and hillside resort villages like Moganshan (莫干山 Mògànshān) are all only a few hours from Shanghai.



Shanghai was at the right place at the right time for its rapid emergence into the new China. Because of its patchwork history and its spider web like delta geography, it's hard to associate a particular cuisine with Shanghai. That said, there are certainly dishes which connoisseurs of Chinese food do pair with Shanghai.

Foremost among these has got to be Xiǎolóngbāo (小笼包). Like other Chinese dishes, the English translation, “steamed dumplings” just doesn't do this tasty treat justice. A thin flour pastry is wrapped around a filling of pork, sesame oil, ginger, soy sauce, and Shaoxing wine. Handling and then eating these slippery balls of steamy soup and ‘filling’ with chopsticks so that they don't burst from the time they leave the bamboo steamer, pass through the small ceramic dipping plate filled with Zhenjiang vinegar (镇江香醋 Zhènjiāng xiāng cù) and fresh ginger, and then into your mouth without spilling, takes practice, but it's well worth the effort.

And then there's 皮蛋豆腐 Pídàn Dòufu. When it came onto my plate the first time, it was already minced up and I didn't really pay attention to the black and brown specks stirred into a white, cold, cottage cheese like mass. All I knew was that I really liked it. When I was then shown my 皮蛋 pídàn (often translated as "thousand year old egg" or "century egg"), my first thought was "no way am I going to eat that." Think of peeling a hard-boiled egg, but instead of the outside of the egg being white, it is amber black with a texture like a hard-boiled egg. When cut open, the yolk is greenish blue grey. It's actually an egg that has been preserved by being treated with ash and alkaline, wrapped in clay and buried for 6-8 weeks. It is not, nor was it ever, soaked in horse urine – as I was first led to believe. Pidan can be made with a duck egg or a chicken egg. My favorite way to eat it is in the Shanghai style cold dish, Pidan Doufu. Combined with fresh silky doufu, finely chopped cilantro, diced fresh ginger, soy sauce, sesame oil, and often accompanied by pork floss, its pleasing taste is second only to its presentation. Really a delightful way to start a Shanghainese meal. Another largely unknown dish outside of China is, Típáng (红烧蹄膀 Hóngshāo Típáng). Appearing like a pork roast covered in fat with a thin layer of skin covering the entire thing, in actuality, it is a pork shank or a pork shoulder that is stewed for hours on the top of a stove in a combination of soy sauce, water, garlic, shaoxing wine, green onions, rock sugar, and star anise until it emerges from the wok ready to eat. Cooked well, it is unbelievably tender and is easily picked off the bone with chopsticks. Not only is the meat delicious, many people believe that the fat and the rind are really the tastiest portions of Tipang. Not sure where it had its beginning, but it's a popular winter dish in Shanghai and surrounding areas.



Another fun winter food with Zhejiang origins is called “Lion’s Head” 狮子头 Shīzitóu. It’s really just a large stewed meatball made out of pork and cabbage. It’s large size and it’s shape are probably the reasons for the name. Like most dishes, there are variations of Shīzitóu. Color varies from white to red. Usually made with pork (can be beef or even vegetarian), Chinese cabbage, diced mushrooms, doufu, and diced bamboo shoots can all be found in Shizitou.

Last, but not least, is 炒年糕 Chǎo Niángāo – The name means fried (new) years cake. I always associated the name niangao with a sweet fried treat we eat during the Chinese New Year. In Shanghai, however, chao niangao is eaten all year round and it often takes the form of a wide, thick noodle. Sometimes, it takes other shapes. Rectangles, ovals, and circles (representing coins) are all common. During Chinese New Year, another common form of niangao one sees is that of a pair of fish. The New Years saying “年年有餘 nián nián yǒu yú” means that you should have surplus and abundance at the end of every year. The word yú “surplus” is a homonym for another word yú which means “fish”.

The dishes I’ve mentioned are all favorites of mine in the Yangtze River Delta Region. Other travelers might mentioned Hairy Crab, Beggar’s Chicken, and Drunken Shrimp which are also fun and tasty. Shanghai produces some of the best traditional and modern Chinese, International, and fusion foods in all of China.

