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Chapter 2

Amazing Thailand – Another Look at an Ever Changing Food Culture

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The Thai tourism authority promotes the country as Amazing Thailand and this slogan would repeatedly spring to mind as I travelled the country conducting field research. To me the openness to the new seemed quite amazing, the openness to new culinary influences in particular. According to the impression of many, Thais tend to approach the foreign in the playful adoption of influences and the creation of something inimitably unique, above all, with respect to foreign food and cuisine. Exemplary of this remarkable achievement are the way the country has approached the chili pepper and its table manners.

Thai cuisine is famed for its spiciness, and the chili (prik) has been adopted as the country's culinary emblem. When Columbus first brought the chili to Spain in 1493, he advertised it as a kind of "new pepper," hence initiating an enduring terminological confusion throughout the world. Europe, however, was at a loss about what to do with the unfamiliar pungent quality of the chili and simply passed it on to Africa and Asia. It was only there that Columbus' hope would bear fruit, namely, that people not only accept the chili as a new kind of pepper, but even consider it the superior variety thereof (1). The Thais even went on to consummate this change in their language. Initially designated as prik thet or

foreign pepper (cf. Thanes 1999: 2), chili nowadays is simply referred to as prik, whereas the long established pepper has come to be called prik thai. Hence, rather than seeing in the New World chili the pepper from foreign lands (as has been the fate of the tomato, called makuea thet, the "foreign eggplant"), the Thais declared their pepper to be "Thai chili" – which is how one would translate prik thai today.

The country's table manners amaze and, occasionally, even confuse its visitors, too. One way cultures distinguish themselves is by way of their table manners. The world's great civilizations may be grouped according to specific eating habits. In East Asia it is customary to eat with chopsticks, whereas in South Asia one eats with the hand, as is true of much of the Islamic world and all of Africa. The West, by contrast, is distinguished by the custom of eating with a knife and fork. Thailand, however, is probably the only food culture, which practices all three fundamental eating customs. Chopsticks are considered indispensable when eating certain dishes of Chinese origin, like noodle soup. Since the endeavors of "Siwilai" in the early twentieth century, whereby the Thais sought to persuade the colonial powers that they were already "civilized" (cf. Thongchai 2000), the spoon and fork have come to dominate the Thai table. Thus, the Thais also adopted

Western table manners, although the knife was felt to be superfluous and dispensed with. However, especially in the Northeastern provinces, inhabited by a third of the country's population, the preferred way to dine is still seated on mats placed on the floor and using the hand. It is this ancient etiquette that has since reappeared in some Bangkok restaurants. Thus, Thailand has adopted and indigenized new table manners (be they from the West or from China) without having altogether abandoned its time-honored dining traditions.

Regional Cuisines

Where other than in Thailand could one find such ideal conditions for studying culinary adoptions and adaptations? Situated to the south of China and to the east of India, it is here that from time immemorial trade routes have crisscrossed and cultural styles have mixed. The Kingdom of Thailand encompasses four regions which define present-day Thai cuisine. As in many other countries (in China and India, for example, or in France and Italy), historically evolved regions with their cuisines have been the mainstay of the country's culinary culture. Furthermore, there exists a culinary north-south divide. In the capital Bangkok and the surrounding Central province, and in the South, the staple food is "white"

rice, fish sauce is an indispensable condiment, coconut milk lends many dishes their distinctive taste, whereas glutinous rice is used exclusively in sweets. In the North and Northeast, by contrast, the staple is glutinous or sticky rice, and, alongside the ubiquitous fish sauce one cooks with plara (literally, rotten fish), an odorous and earthy-tasting variant of fish sauce, while coconut milk is used for sweets only (2). In addition, throughout the Northern provinces, some raw dishes (called laap) are much enjoyed, while in the Central and Southern regions, raw comestibles – whether these be fish or meat – are invariably shunned (3). However, there is one aspect that is at odds with this division: Only two out of the four regional cuisines stand out as being truly pungent, the cuisine of the South and that of the Northeast or Isan. Together with the Sri Lankan and southern Indian cuisines they probably count among the world's spiciest food cultures.

Beginnings and "Indianization"

About a thousand years ago when Tai-speaking groups gradually left southern China and migrated into Southeast Asia, their food customs must have undergone enormous changes. What might it have looked like at that time? The staple food would have been glutinous rice, eaten by hand. Along with coconut milk, many of today's familiar fresh herbs would have

been missing, and the technique of preparing a curry paste (krueang gaeng) from these herbs would have been acquired only gradually over the course of time. Fish sauce (nam pla) and shrimp paste (kapi) – those hallmark ingredients of food cultures throughout Southeast Asia, which distinguish Southeast Asian from East Asian cuisines – entered the emergent Thai cuisine (4). But from the earliest times on there already appears to have been a tendency towards pungent and spicy dishes, so the sustenance of the present-day Thai's ancestors was by no means bland without the chili pepper. At least this is what Marco Polo's description of a remarkable dish from China's southern Yunnan province suggests, which was prepared from chopped raw liver and other offal, a generous dash of pepper, along with plenty of garlic and herbs. In his description one can easily discern predecessors of today's laap dishes common to Thailand's North and Northeast (cf. Brennan 1981: 19–20; Van Esterik 1992: 178), which also feature in the culinary repertoires of many of the hill tribes. This raw laap (referred to as laap dip or goy) in its present-day Isan version, ranks among the region's signature dishes.

As can be seen, the characteristics of their erstwhile foodways have tended to endure more in the two northern rather than in the two southern regional cuisines. Culinarily speaking, the

Kingdom of Thailand is the sum of its four regional cuisines. However, when considering the "flavor principles" (cf. Rozin & Rozin 2005), the gulf running through the country runs even deeper. On the basis of the preferred herb and spice combinations, Northern or Chiang Mai cuisine (the cooking of the former Kingdom of Lanna) bears barely any semblance with that of Bangkok (5). By contrast, the flavor principles of Central Thai cuisine" (hereafter referred to simply as "Thai cuisine") are almost identical to those of neighboring Cambodia. The endless variations of sour fish soups or stews, along with the curries prepared with coconut milk (including the national dish amok), for example, will be familiar to anybody coming from Bangkok. One may well be surprised, though, to discover that Khmer cooks consider chili superfluous, like the liberal use of sugar, typical of modern Bangkok fare. The close culinary affinity becomes all the more apparent when contrasting the cuisine of Cambodia with that of Thailand's Northeast (and the related food of the Lao People's Democratic Republic). Their flavor principles have little in common indeed (6).

The reason for this affinity between Thai and Cambodian cuisine is most likely the pronounced, centuries-long contact between the empires of Angkor and Ayutthaya – however

peaceful or violent this history has been. Khmer cooks were brought back to the Ayutthaya court after the conquest of Angkor in 1431 (cf. Van Esterik 1992: 178). The Angkor Empire had been the prevailing "Indianized" civilization in the region for centuries, whereby Indianization was not limited to religion and mythology, statesmanship, architecture, writing and the fine arts, but included the culinary arts as well. One would be hard-pressed to overestimate the centrality of the Mon-Khmer to the "Indianization" of Thai cuisine. One of the most widespread clichés concerning Thai cuisine holds that it is a fusion of "Indian curry and Chinese noodles" (7). In point of fact, whereas the numerous Chinese influences and dishes that were to become stalwart elements of Bangkok cuisine after being introduced by migrants during the nineteenth century, are quite evident (8), a similar direct Indian influence is difficult to identify. Paradoxically, this may be owing to the fact that the Indian influence is, indeed, fundamental and remains inconceivable without the mediating role of Mon civilizations and the Khmer Empire. Rosemary Brissenden in her gorgeous book titled Southeast Asian Food recognized precisely this as well, noting: "The finest Southeast Asian dishes (...) are characterized by a blended subtlety of fragrance and flavor that, though unique in every case, displays an affinity with Indian food" (2003: 3).

Where's the Chili?

Since the Thais are so open to novelty, it is commonly assumed that chili – without which Thai cuisine would be barely conceivable – was immediately adopted with enthusiasm (9). While this seems plausible, it is not corroborated by historical sources. What may, indeed, be claimed with some degree of certainty is that Portuguese sailors introduced the chili to South Asia in the early sixteenth century. From Portuguese Goa the chili spread along indigenous trade routes and, thanks to indigenous merchants, all over East and Southeast Asia (cf. Andrews 1992). A century later, however, chili had not yet found entry into Thai cuisine. At least there was no mention of it either by the Dutchman Jeremias van Vliet in his Description of the Kingdom of Siam written in 1638 (Baker 2005), or by the two French chroniclers Nicolas Gervaise (1688) and Simon de la Loubère (1691), who provided detailed accounts on food in Ayutthaya. During the Bangkok period, on the other hand, foreign observers – whether the French Monsignore Pallegoix (1976: 64), British diplomat Sir John Bowring (1969: 108), or the first anthropologist ever to have travelled to Thailand, the German Adolf Bastian (1867: 68) – made frequent mention of spicy dishes. In all likelihood, the new "super spice" that was to become the symbol of Thai cuisine must have turned the Thais into chili enthusiasts not before the eighteenth century.

Streetfood

A quarter of a century ago Penny Van Esterik wrote From Marco Polo to McDonald's: Thai Cuisine in Transition (1992), which has since been recognized as a classic of Thai food studies. Many of her observations and conclusions, some of which I will discuss in greater detail, still hold. My very first trip to Bangkok was for a few days in the spring of 1992, and I found the city a fascinating, expansive "foodscape" (10). Even long before Thailand's capital acquired its reputation as being the world's capital of street food, it was possible to purchase ready prepared food in the markets. However, when first reading Van Esterik, I could not believe that prior to the 1960's there were hardly any restaurants in Bangkok at all. Back then, the few hotel kitchens and restaurants served only Chinese and Western food.

Around the close of the nineteenth century the Englishman Ernest Young described the city's lively mobile food culture. He spoke of "strolling restaurants," i. e. itinerant cooks and food vendors who would serve "curry and rice" or prepare dishes at lightning speed, as still is common in the "kao gaeng" and "dtam sang" foodstalls. Already back then, ice cream sellers would mill around schools during recess between classes; and in their tiny boats on the city's many canals native cooks

prepared an astonishing range of dishes (Young 1986: 7–10, 39 – 40). Cook shops and mobile food booths were to be found almost everywhere: like the Buddhist temples and the eye-catching spirit houses, they put their stamp on the cityscape and contributed to Bangkok's exotic image. Hence, alongside the four regional cuisines, this tradition of market food and street kitchens formed and still forms the backbone of the country's culinary culture.

International Exchanges

Who could imagine a Thai city today without an endless number of food stalls and restaurants? Without question, the cuisines of the world are to be found everywhere in Bangkok – actually each and every cuisine, as some residents will point out, except those of the neighboring countries. American fast food restaurants are a familiar sight. But until recently, William Klausner (2002: 100), a long-term American resident and close anthropological observer of the Kingdom, thought it would be impossible that the Thais ever develop a liking for such bland and relatively expensive food. In the 1980s, a Canadian exchange student residing in the North still observed that the locals were opposed to it: "People ... despise falang fast food chains in Bangkok" (Connelly 2001: 97). Today, no such aversion remains, since many young people and members of

the middle class have meanwhile become very fond of Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts. However, fast food is not considered a proper meal, only a snack. But at the same time, people appreciate the new culinary experience as well as the international flair of these fast food outlets. The ambiance and air conditioning of these restaurants invites the typically fast-eating Thais to spend more time there. Thus, in some way they have become places for slow food, as Van Esterik (1992: 183) already pointed out.

But the "international food exchanges" now, above all, no longer solely involve the West. Hundreds of Japanese restaurants have mushroomed in Bangkok alone. Most of them were established by local chefs whose careers began as kitchen assistants in major Japanese restaurants (Cookman Redux 2009). They cook – and this may well be an indication of their success – Japanese, but Thai-style, and among their most well-known creations is an adaptation of sukiyaki, which the Thais have adopted into their cuisine under the name su-gii. Sushi, by contrast, often fairly sweet and garnished with mayonnaise, is available as street food even in small towns. Thai sushi may include virtually everything from boiled quail eggs, a tempura-prawn, a piece of sausage of the bologna variety (a local adaptation of the American version of Italian mortadella). Only sushi prepared with raw fish is often missing.

"Thai Soul" - The Rise of Isan Foodways

Besides international exchanges, a further factor has impacted the transformation of Thai cuisine. This has been the hardly less remarkable expansion of one of the regional cuisines, which was already underway some thirty years ago (Van Esterik 1992: 182–183). Since the incorporation of Thailand's marginalized northeastern region into the Siamese Kingdom in the nineteenth century – a process sometimes aptly described as "internal colonialism" – its Lao-speaking inhabitants have been looked-down upon. Their food first entered Bangkok with the wave of migrants that has provided the capital with burgeoning, untrained workforce since the 1950s. Initially popular only among the immigrant community, ahan isan was soon to become a favorite among all groups and social classes. Today, one even finds Isan restaurants on Siam Square, Bangkok's commercial center. But only selected dishes were adopted from Isan's erstwhile "barbaric foodways" (Walker 1991: 191), only to be "Thai-ized," while others were frowned upon and rejected. Isan's signature dish laap, for example, has been regarded as both a good (i. e. cooked) and a bad (i. e. raw) dish. While the cooked laap rose to the rank of a Thai national dish, its raw variety became the target of national campaigns, since it was generally stamped a health hazard (cf. Lefferts 2005; Trenk 2012).

However, this could not forestall the triumph of this hitherto despised cuisine in general. Some Isan dishes, such as the papaya salad somtam, are loved throughout the country. Sticky rice – until recently the scorned regional staple – has emerged nation-wide as a practical snack. Moreover, it would seem that all Thailand has become addicted to the taste of Isan. There are laap-tasting potato chips; laap appears as a pizza topping; and there even is a sushi à la Isan, for which various laap-spiced meat and fish variations are served on glutinous rice. The omnipresent convenience store 7-Eleven offers an Isan-flavored sticky rice burger. And since raw dishes, such as carpaccio or sushi, have come to enjoy worldwide esteem, Bangkok's sophisticated restaurant and culinary scene has even rehabilitated laap in its raw version, be it with local oysters or imported tuna and salmon. Salmon-laap, albeit cooked, is meanwhile routinely served by the national airline Thai Airways. In view of the truly extraordinary success of Isan cuisine, the inevitable question is whether this will improve the status of the Kingdom's Lao-speaking inhabitants (11).

Current Trends and Transformations

Thai food ranks as a world cuisine; the tantalizing combination of lemongrass, kafir lime leaves, cilantro, coconut milk and chili

has become the favorite exotic taste throughout the Western world and beyond (cf. Trenk 2015: 124–154). By contrast, in recent decades the country has further opened itself to Western influences. Above all, the enormous popularity of milk products, bread and cakes as well as other snacks and sweets is conspicuous everywhere. How many Thais, for instance, prefer a quick breakfast of milky coffee, toast or cornflakes to rice soup? Youngsters like to congregate in milk bars, which serve milk drinks and thick slices of toasted and buttered bread with sweet sauces and custards. Does anyone recollect how milk was traditionally frowned upon? Today, ice-cream is considered to be typically Thai, and there is even a "traditional ice-cream" (ai-dtim bolan) that is now sold on the streets with flavors like durian or coconut. Creamy colored cakes imitating American flavors, called kanom cake, are on sale everywhere: although, for example, no German would recognize the taste of "Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte" when savoring the Thai street food version of a black forest cake. A significant proportion of the sales at 7-Eleven stores, which recently have become no less of a hallmark of Thai cities than the spirit houses, is made up of industrially processed snacks and soft drinks. Modern snack culture has even found its way to the most remote villages. Steak houses are to be found in many provincial cities and towns, while macaroni or hotdog sausages are served as

salads as a matter of course, whereas French fries and pizza have established themselves as street food. Cheese and tomatoes, however, do not feature as essential ingredients on a tasty Thai pizza. But ketchup and mayonnaise do, applied decoratively in the traditional laai thai ornamental style.

Yet, far more important than these rather impressionistic images that are ubiquitous in Thailand are other culinary transformations, that were barely visible a quarter of a century ago: fundamental is, firstly, the dissolution of the nutritional pattern based on rice; connected with this is, secondly, the increase in sugar consumption; thirdly, and somewhat astonishing, is the fact that a growing number of Thais have begun to turn away from their chili-spiced cuisine; and, finally, insect snacks are becoming increasingly popular, especially in Bangkok.

Less Rice

In Thai, eating is synonymous with eating rice (gin kao) – rice being the staple food of the country. However, although rice is integral to practically every meal and the traditional structure of a meal appears to have remained intact, the processes of its dissolution are evident. As Sidney Mintz (1985: 8–13; 2001) has shown in his ground-breaking study, a meal in traditional

agrarian societies consists of one staple food (typically a plant with a lot of "starch" in it, a cereal or a tuber, the so-called complex carbohydrates), which is consumed with one or several flavor-intensive side dishes. Mintz calls this the core-fringe model of human nutrition, as it has endured throughout the millennia ever since the Neolithic revolution (12). Alongside the Thai "core", rice (kao), usually several accompanying "fringe" dishes are served, called gap kao (literally, "with rice"). The core-fringe pattern may describe both the most modest meal of poor Thai peasants – namely, rice accompanied by a small bowl of fish sauce with chili – as well as the most elaborate meal with numerous side dishes. However, since ever greater amounts of meat, fat and sugar are consumed by virtually everybody, the relationship of kao to gap kao is shifting. Even in remote rural areas, an increasing amount of people's daily calories consists of snacks, and that means fat and sugar.

We owe an interesting observation to the British emissary Sir John Bowring. He noted in the mid-nineteenth century that although the population's diet centered on rice as the focus of the meal and primary staple, rice was considered "by the opulent" only "as an accompaniment to their meals, as bread in Europe" (1969: 111). Whereas, at that time, the tendency to

dissolve the core-fringe model was true only of the wealthy, with the more recent increase in wealth among the population in general the same may now also be claimed for all social classes. Some differences to the West, however, still remain. Since, unlike us, for whom former "cores" (like bread, potatos or pasta) are classified as "fringe" and have become side dishes, the structure of the meal in Thailand has yet to be reversed. To this day rice continues to be the country's staple food.

Sugar, Sugar

Over the years the consumption of sugar has increased so dramatically that statistically Thailand is among the world's top consumers (cf. Lefferts 2007). As part of the famous Thailand project carried out by Cornell University, researchers studied the eating habits of the village Bang Chan – now part of greater Bangkok – from 1952 to 1954. Although in the village it was common practice to season a number of dishes with a little palm sugar, the research team found out that local sugar consumption was "almost negligible" (Hauck et al. 1958: 74) by American standards. At that time, the United States led the world in sugar consumption. It was in the post-war period that Americans gradually began to consume more sugar than complex carbohydrates, that is more sugar than flour. In their

best-selling book The Taste of America (1972), John and Karen Hess claimed that the country had been afflicted by what they called the "sugar sickness." Today, Thailand outranks the United States. The question occurring to me over and again is what, if anything, now tastes good to the Thais without sugar? It is not only used for sweets and deserts, but it is now a common practice for example, to season a noodle soup with two to three spoonfuls of sugar, in spite of the fact that the soup base is itself already sweetened. Whatever is served, whether it be a seafood salad, a stir-fry such as the national noodle dish patthai, a curry or a dip served with meat or fish – it certainly will taste sweet.

In the nineteenth century, Bishop Pallegoix (1976: 63-64) recognized two cuisines in Bangkok, one Thai and one Chinese. To him, the "Siamese cuisine" seemed "strong and spicy," while the Chinese, by contrast, rather "sweet, fatty and in many cases bland" (14). Thailand's haute cuisine, the cuisine of the royal palace (ahan chao wang), is traditionally known for its generous use of palm sugar. Over the course of the last century this tendency became "democratized", and some of the formerly "royal" dishes found their way into the street (cf. Van Esterik 1992). This might be the root of the current development which, according to Philip Cornwel-Smith, is a kind of collective "sugar addiction" (2005: 22). While present-

day Thai cuisine counts among the sweetest of the world's cuisines, Thailand's regional cuisines, by contrast, use sugar more sparingly. And yet, thanks to the growing popularity of many central Thai dishes and rampant contemporary snack culture, sugar consumption is on the increase everywhere. It would appear that the Thais have cast the wisdom of their erstwhile saying wan pen lom, kom pen ya (roughly translated as, sweet makes sick, while bitter is medicine) to the wind. The Kingdom is currently struggling with a dramatic increase in type II diabetes. Known previously as age-related, more recently children have become increasingly afflicted with the disease as well (cf. Lefferts 2007). Even in Thailand, with its traditionally slender population, the number of overweight people is on the rise (cf. Siriporn 2008).

"Please, not so spicy!"

As a long-term resident in Thailand, William Klausner made a few observations in 1996 concerning the current transformations in Thai cuisine. Although he did not mention an increase in sugar consumption, he was one of the first to note that the characteristic spiciness of the cuisine was gradually on the wane. "There are indications that even in this famed facet of Thai cuisine, there is a perceptible move to lower the spicy-hot temperature" (Klausner 2002: 102). This is

certainly corroborated by my own observations. While conducting research on street food, I would often hear people ordering their food phet noi, "please, not so spicy." Following more detailed enquiries throughout the country, it is now difficult to escape the impression that an increasing number of Thais no longer eat spicy foods. I tried to evaluate this by way of a papaya salad. Whereas no less than five chili peppers are habitually eaten in a somtam, some fifteen to twenty percent of my informants preferred their somtam with only one or occasionally two chili peppers. The taste of chili spice must be acquired, even Thai infants cry when first tasting a spicy dish. But an ever increasing number of children no longer learn how to eat chilis, not even in the Northeast.

Insects

The consumption of insects, by contrast, is on the rise. Whereas in ancient Rome some insects were eaten, since the fall of the Roman Empire they have been completely rejected in the West. Most food cultures of the world, however, classify some insects as edible. According to a widespread Western prejudice, human beings eat insects only where necessity dictates. In that Isan had always been considered the poorhouse of Thailand, it would make sense that insects would not be spurned in that region. But actually a variety of insects

are considered delicacies, not only in Isan, but in many regions of Southeast Asia (cf. Freeman 2008: 117–131), as well as worldwide.

But it is hard to deny that the veritable passion for insects in Isan and in the North is more pronounced than it is in the South, even though some insects were traditionally eaten in Central Thailand. The observant French aristocrat Simon de la Loubère (1986: II, 35) was the first to mention the sale of insects in the markets of Ayutthaya, as did Pallegoix (1976: 63) almost two centuries later in Bangkok. And, as an interested British traveler observed, enthusiasm for the taste of the giant water bug (Belostoma indica, in Thai called maeng daa) unites all classes of Thais and Lao-speakers: "It is a great delicacy which is shared by Laos and Siamese alike; it reaches the tables of princes in Bangkok" (Bristowe 1932: 398). The current boom in insect snacks started when migrants from Isan sold their deep-fried delicacies on the capital's streets. In 2009 the high end Paragon Shopping Mall's food court launched "insect week", thus indicating that eating bugs was now an accepted part of Thai society. .

Concluding Remarks

So much for these remarkable tendencies which have as yet been little discussed by students of Thai food culture. What general inferences may we draw from them?

The demise of the old agrarian nutritional pattern, described and analyzed by Sidney Mintz as the "core-fringe-legume model", constitutes probably the most fundamental dietary-related transformation of our time. Because of the rise of income, comparable developments are taking place in many countries around the world. Increased sugar consumption goes hand-in-hand with this process, and actually assumes a decisive role in it. However, does not the decreasing consumption of chili pepper in Thailand conflict with global trends? In Columbus' Year 1992 the sale of hot chili sauce for the first time outstripped the sale of ketchup in the United States. Today a third of the world's population eats spicy food, and the trend is growing continually, now including countries with temperate climates that in the past had milder cuisines. Although Thailand's "capsicum mania" has apparently passed its pinnacle, Thai cuisine will certainly remain spicy. So this, too, confirms the global trend toward at least a moderate use of the chili pepper.

How about insects then? Like in Thailand, insects are being eaten by growing numbers of urban populations around the

world. As insect chips are already making an appearance even in the West, they might soon become part of a flourishing global snacking culture. So maybe it is time to admit that in an ever-smaller world some global similarities and convergences appear unavoidable.

Footnotes

(1) Columbus was desperately looking for products with which he could generate revenues in Europe. Besides gold, it was above all the much prized pepper that might have solved his precarious financial situation in one fell swoop.

(2) Chiang Mai's iconic noodle curry dish kao soi, however, is the exception to the rule.

(3) Unlike in China, in Thai cuisine raw vegetables and herbs occupy a central place; but in the animal kingdom only oysters and prawns are eaten raw.

(4) For example, the Tai-speaking Shan or Tai Yai of northern Myanmar do not use fish sauce.

(5) Nor does it, by the way, bear any semblance with the regional cuisine of the Northeast. In spite of their structural similarity, with respect to taste the two northern regional cuisines are worlds apart. This may be observed, for instance, when comparing the Isan version of laap (a limey spiciness, with a range of very fresh tasting herbs including mint) with the laap kua of the North, which tastes neither spicy, nor limey, nor particularly fresh, but rather earthy.

(6) On the other hand, the Northeast and Cambodia share a common passion for the powerful fish sauce plara – called prahok in Khmer and padaek in Lao. One further common culinary feature ought not to go unmentioned; their "omnivorousness," above all their appetite for insects, is striking.

(7) But it is not a bad characterization of Chiang Mai's iconic kao soi, mentioned above.

(8) Besides small dishes, such as spring rolls, thousand-year eggs or kanom jiip (a kind of "Thai dim sum"), many street food one-plate dishes that one eats

individually are of Chinese origin, such as noodle soups and rice soup (jook), the Hainanese chicken called kao man gai, and kao ka mu or mu daeng, pork knuckle cooked in soy sauce or red pork on rice. Originally Chinese are also many restaurant dishes based on fish or duck.

(9) Tourist publications seem to be especially inclined to promote the idea that none other than the first Portuguese missionaries themselves brought the much-prized chili pepper to Ayutthaya.

(10) The Berlin Wall had just come down and in every small side street or soi in Bangkok, at least so it seemed to me at the time, there was a much larger – and by far fresher – variety of dishes to be had than in all the restaurants to be found in East Berlin, the former capital of the GDR. Amazing Thailand, indeed!

(11) The May 2012 edition of the Bangkok magazine Mae Baan (featuring the sub-title Good Food – Good Health – Good Living) ran the cover-story "Trendy Isaan." It praised the increased international recognition which the cuisine of "our" Isan was being given, and which was raising the prestige of the entire Kingdom. And yet comparable experiences in Germany or the United States raise only skepticism. Neither the rise of chop suey to the first favorite exotic dish among Americans in the early twentieth century, nor the rise of Dönerkebab as a favorite among the Germans in the late twentieth century contributed much to the kudos of either Chinese or Turkish immigrants in those countries (cf. Trenk 2015).

(12) Mintz actually refers to a core-fringe-legume model or pattern, and yet, in fish and, hence, protein-rich Thailand (fish sauce!), legumes (like soybeans in China or lentils in India) traditionally play hardly any role at all.

(13) Those Chinese born in the country and assimilated, remarked the early German traveler-anthropologist Adolf Bastian (1867: 68), were called "Tjin-nam-phrük," "i.e. a Chinese, who eats pepper-water," the ubiquitous nam prik.

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