

International Conference on Food and Health
15th - 17th December, 2014

Call for Papers

The Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, the University of Hong Kong is pleased to co-organize with the Asian Society for the History of Medicine its 7th bi-annual conference in Hong Kong. This conference, entitled “**Food and Health**”, proposes to examine the link between what we consume and our body’s health in the Asian context, with emphasis on its historical process. Given the various medical traditions and their differing theories of disease, nourishment, and wellbeing, how did Asian societies understand the connection between food and health? In particular, the organizing committee has identified three important themes as related to food and health in history: **Nutrition and Body**, **Food as Product/Poison/Cure**, and **Hunger and Famine**, detailed description of which can be found in the page titled “**Themes.**” Scholars from various disciplines and backgrounds are encouraged to submit proposals related to any of these particular themes.

Once all the proposals are received, the organizing committee will select up to approximately 60 papers for inclusion in this conference. There is a limited amount of resources to help some conference participants to defray travel and accommodation expenses. If you have other sources of funding and do not wish to be considered, please indicate this on the [Online Registration Form](#). The deadline for submission is **15th January 2014**.

1. Nutrition and Body

There are, within Asia, myriad ethnic, regional, national, religious or other dietetic traditions pertaining to the maintenance or enhancement of health. Such traditions, inextricably linked to long-standing medical and bodily techniques, often with gender, class, and age specificities, are generally holistic in method and approach. How resistant or accommodating are they in face of the reductionist yet powerful biomedical, or biochemical notion of nutrition in terms of deficiency or undernourishment, during the colonial period of the late 19th and especially the early 20th century? Are the concepts of proteins, minerals and vitamins replacing those of the hot/cold, replenishing/depleting nature of foods, and of drugs? Or traditional concepts of dietetics have been re-invented with biomedical knowledge? How modern is the concept of “nutrition” (new neologisms created for the idea)?

Further investigation is necessary to understand how food production and consumption in Asian societies and cultures interacted with various dietetic traditions, raising further questions to begin the enquiry. How did different traditions travel within and without “Asia”? Were there observable regional, national, cultural, religious, and gender boundaries? To what extent were the notions of good dietetics or modern nutrition a consequence of changing technology in food production and preparation, or changing economy of food consumption and distribution? How did changing dietetic traditions affect the notion of the health for Asian bodies, and inform the construction of medical knowledge and body techniques?

We invite papers that study the contacts, convergences, and conflicts within different Asian dietetic traditions from historical perspectives, or interrogate the impact of biomedical notion of nutrition on such traditions. Contributors may approach the nutrition question from the perspectives of certain “key” foods in Asia (rice, soya, milk, tea, fish etc.), or of body problems considered to be food-related (jiaoqi/kakke/beriberi, pellagra, obesity, precocity, underdevelopment etc.), or of agents in dietetic changes and reinvention (doctors, mothers, cooks, cultivators, educators, merchants, scientists etc.). Contributions with comparative perspectives are particularly welcome.

2. Food as Product/Poison/Cure

Food has always been essential to human survival. People also recognized that food had effects on the body beyond basic subsistence needs. As the line between food and medicine was never clear in traditional societies, this theme considers how “food” came to be seen as an agent of healing or harm. How were “good” foods different from “bad” ones in the past? Were these attributes specific to individuals, subject to diet, climate, constitution, and environment, or were they universally applicable? What were the factors that influenced such thinking as related to medical theory or practical observations? How did the historical process of food/medicine production, or the changing relation between food/medicine characterize Asian modernity?

Moreover, what were the social, political, and economic drivers of organized food/medicine production and the varied priorities of food as nourishment versus food as medicine? In addition to the economic and political dimension of food production, we also need to consider its consequences, namely food waste and toxic byproducts from the production processes. In ancient societies, people thought of food in terms of scarcity, taste and hygiene. But was there a historical moment when “safety” became a conceptual category for thinking of food? To what extent has the concept of “food safety” in modern civilization radically departed from traditional ones? We are seeking an alternative viewpoint aside from solving “food safety” problems by techno-scientific rationale, incorporating said technological approaches into its social, political and cultural context. Starting from the standpoint of the historical experience of Asian countries, we invite papers that explore the permeable boundaries of food and medicine, and how the issue of food safety was formed in Asian societies and cultures.

3. Hunger and Famine

In the pre-modern societies of Asia, as elsewhere, elite medical theories and therapies were concerned principally with the effects of excess food consumption rather than hunger or starvation. Although large sections of the population were routinely vulnerable to seasonal hunger, famine, or chronic undernourishment due to poverty, the prevention and remedy of mass deprivation were the concerns of statecraft rather than subjects of medical analysis, giving rise to technical debates about stocking public granaries or organising relief. Where the impact of restrictive diets was described and discussed among elites in pre-modern Asia, it was usually as part of a regimen of asceticism adopted in pursuit of spiritual acuity or immortality. Sometimes medical theories of hunger can be read between the lines, however, as in classical Chinese medical analysis of the unpleasant side-effects of a diet of sweet-potato (poverty food).

With colonialism and the emergence of independent modern states, and the growing prominence and globalization of food markets, official concern about the height, weight, strength and overall health of the poor and the labouring classes translated into new medical approaches to understanding the relations between food and health. These modern scientific approaches included the concept of the calorie, research on deficiency diseases, and the rise of anthropometrics. These understandings flourished in the context of growing nationalist preoccupations with food security and efforts to promote commercial agricultural productivity and agricultural systems that ensure urban populations can afford to eat.

We invite papers that explore any aspect of the dynamic relations between medicine, science, health and hunger in Asian societies at any period, but are particularly interested in papers that: a) cross or complicate conventional periodizations; or b) explore sources outside of elite medical texts to shed new light on understandings, experiences, and responses to hunger and starvation in Asian societies.

More Information/ Enquiries:

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