You can learn culture through cuisine. Next to living within a country and speaking the language, food is one of the most important means to understanding a culture.

Cuisine is a source of pleasure and pride, elevating the basic act of eating from a purely biological necessity to an art. In many places of the world is one of the main instruments of socialisation and identification.

Every culture has designated what it considers to be edible, which type of animal can be eaten and how it should be prepared – Judaism and Islam among the most prominent instances. Food often is used symbolically by nations; it tells us what is important to them and can educate us about their history.

The concept of joie de vivre, for example, is reflected in the finesse and precision with which a meal is prepared and eaten. The meal was presumably created to satisfy both the Chinese and French taste buds. The concept of Chinese cuisine and can be found in many places of the world it is one of the main instruments of socialisation and identification.

In the appreciation of culture, the importance of cuisine lies in its unlimited variety that is not essential for human survival. For many survival people everywhere could eat the same basic types of food. The very fact that we all eat so intricately differently from each other reflects a deeper aspect of human existence: the way we understand ourselves in the context of the world. Whoever is aware of this holds the key for friendship, or at least a better understanding for one another. Something utterly necessary in a world that gets smaller every day.

Many people conclude they don’t like Chinese food after eating something that likely did not even come from China, but is a demonstration of the commercialising of Chinese fare in foreign countries. The list of recipes which have incorporated local taste preferences, resulting in dishes that say more about the country they are consumed in, goes on endlessly. Examples are the salt and pepper frog-legs of France, the sliced gelatin in Italy, and the crisps shredded beef in England.

These presumptions are not trivial. Error-free beliefs are a basis for false judgements and distorted worldviews.

The Diplomat’s Daughter
ON CUISINE AND CULTURE
By Ariana Sommer

I fell in love with the philosophy behind food in China. The principles of yin and yang – hot and cold, male and female – lie at the heart of Chinese cuisine and can be found in any of its dishes.

Being German-born I am regularly amused and also slightly offended when confronted with the ideas of many foreigners about typical German food: sausages, beer, and sauerkraut. ‘Krauts’ was what American GIs used to call the Germans in World War II. A term that is still used gleefully by British tabloids in the event of a one’s health. Diet is used as a means of prevention from illnesses and as a cure. Food, therefore, is medicine.

Few other cultures are as food oriented as the Chinese. A meal with friends or family can easily become a several-hour affair. For the Chinese it is an opportunity to affirm the importance of the people they are spending time with. It would be rude to hurry through a meal.

In fact the meaning of eating is of such significance that one of the most common greetings when meeting one another, instead of ‘How are you?’, is ‘Have you eaten?’. Historians believe this custom stems from the times of great famine in China.

In the late 19th century Vienna coffee-house culture which prevails to this day. Or the Yorkshire pudding and chicken tikka masala of Great Britain, the incorporation of the latter being evidence of a long-standing history of colonialism and immigration with India.

National dishes, or what we perceive as such, also function as stereotypes. Although most of these have positive or neutral connotations, they can as well acquire a derogatory tone.

The emergence of chop suey is a mystery. According to legend, the Chinese ambassador, Li Hung Chang, had his cooks invent the dish in New York for his American guests at a dinner on 29 August 1896. The dish was presumably created to satisfy both the Chinese and American tastes. Ambassador Li skillfully used the instrument of food to create good relations with the United States. As the saying goes, the way to a person’s heart is through their stomach.

So-called ‘national dishes’ render a concise picture about how a culture behind food in China. The principles of yin and yang – hot and cold, male and female – lie at the heart of Chinese cuisine and can be found in any of its dishes.

Chinese ‘fortune cookies’ were invented in 19th-century Japan and sold in Japanese confectionary shops in San Francisco, until World War II when Japanese-Americans were interned and the business was taken over by the Chinese.

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The Diplomat’s Daughteratsu Ariane Sommer was born in Bonn and grew up all over the world due to her father being a German ambassador. Sommer has lived in some of the world’s most diverse cities, including Free-town in Sierra Leone, Nsede Delft, Madrid, Barcelona, Paris, Antananarivo in Madagascar, Miami, Berlin and London.

Currently this cosmopolitan, who has embarked on learning Mandarin and speaks five languages fluently (Korean, English, Spanish, Italian, French) resides in Los Angeles and New York. Sommer is an international columnist and author of The Bible of Behavior which has been hailed as ‘the style guide for the 21st and the City generation’ and is presently being translated for the US and Chinese markets. Her book Foreign Affairs, a short story collection, will be published on the German market in June.