

Rice Gruel in Chinese Food and Culture

Fan, Zhihong

College of Food Science and Nutritional Engineering,
China Agricultural University, Beijing 100094, China

History of rice as staple food in China

Rice is one of the most important cereal in China. The seed of rice unearthed from ancient tombs proved that rice cultural has a history of more than 7,000 years in south China. The word "rice" was found engraved on turtle-bone scriptures of 1,500 BC. In many ancient Chinese scriptures, rice is among the most important "Five Cereals", which includes millet, wheat, soy bean, rice and sorghum^[1].

However, the staple food of the people in north used to be millet and wheat until in Tang and Song dynasty, when the most productive agriculture center shifted to the south and the densely populated area moved from the Yellow River area to the Yangtse River area. In Tang dynasty, rice production was almost as important as wheat production, and in Song Dynasty, rice ranked first in the "five cereals".

According to the ancient legend, Huangdi is the first person to grow cereals, as well as the first person to make gruels(*Zhoushu*, about 1,000B.C.). The earliest description of gruel was found in an ancient literature "*Liji*"(written in 3 century), in which the gruel was classified into two groups: "zhan" means heavy gruel, and "zhou" means thin gruel.^[1] Another book *Guangya* named thick gruel "yu". According to these recordations, the history of making gruel must be longer than 3,000 years.

In the Tang and Song dynasty, the rice was usually cook into simple steamed rice, mixed steamed rice with other beans, vegetables and nuts, or into rice gruel. According to Zhonmi(Song dynasty) in *Wulinjiushi*,vol.6, people used to make gruels in great variety, such as "eight-treasure gruel", "five-taste gruel", rice and mangbean gruel, rice and millet gruel, sweetened gruel, fried chips gruel, cake gruel and so on.^[2]

Rice, spread to most part of the country from then on, has become the most important ingredient of gruel in China diet.

Significance and meaning of rice gruel in Chinese culture

The rich meaning of rice gruel-eating is concluded to 6 aspects: the expression of filial piety, the best way of saving food, the best food for the poor, the traditional approach of curing diseases, the ideal way of maintaining health, and a great enjoyment as a sort of tasty food^[3].

1. The expression of filial piety

The rice gruel has been long regarded as the best food for the elderly. According to "Han-shu"(Han Dynasty, 1 century.), there was laws that old people aged above 90 be supplied with gruels. In "Liji", an ancient book describing rituals and etiquette, it is described that the elderly should be given gruel with elk meat in autumn to strengthen their body.

In China, people believe that old people's appropriate food must be warm, soft, well cooked and easily digested, rather than those sticky, hard, raw and cold. Rice gruel is no doubt among the best things for the senior people.

In "Yangshengsuibi", authored Caotingdong, a health expert in Qing Dynasty, it is emphasized that gruels were especially good for old people. A hundred kinds of gruels, which are good for improving the health of the elders, are also listed in this book.

2. The best way of saving food and the best food for the poor

Until Zhou Dynasty (-1,000 B.C.), gruel, cooked in brittle crude pottery "ge", was mainly the food of slaves, while steamed rice, cooked in more refined pottery "zeng", was the food of the aristocrats. The number of slaves was often count by the number of "ge"s in field^[4].

From Han Dynasty, gruel become the common food for all ranks of life. However, it is still considered as a way of saving food in poor families. In a poet of Qin Guan, a famous litterateur in Song Dynasty, there was a sentence means that "the family's eating gruels for so long because of poverty". An famous advocator Huang Yunhe, said in his book on gruels that his folk people refused to eat gruel for they thought eating gruel is the practice of the poor.^[5]

In rural areas, even in 20 years ago, many family ate gruels as staple food in leisure seasons and only ate steamed rice or steaming bun in busy seasons. In many poor families in old time, men were given rice and bun, while women were given gruels.

Gruels were the dominant food provided to the poor and the refugees. No matter what kind of calamity it is, the government used to give the starving people gruels to save their life. According to Biography of *Cai Qing in Ming Histroy*(16 century), one of the most urgent task

in (嘉靖八年) is to supply the starving poor people with gruels^[6]. Some kind rich people set up regular gruel delivery center to feed the poor. This kind of conduct was regarded as the manifestation of generosity and mercy.

3. The traditional approach of curing diseases

Ancient Chinese long cherish the idea of "food and medicine are from the same source". Curing disease with food is a common practice in Chinese medicine. Gruel is also used as the carrier of herbs and nutritious materials as one of the important assistant approaches in disease treatment.

In a classic medical document "Huangdineijing" written about 3,000 years ago, it is said that "given hot gruel and the weak person stopped diarrhea and revives." The great doctor Zhang Zhongjing in Han dynasty suggested that the patient eating a bowl of hot gruel after the intake of "Guizhi Soup" in order to enhance the power of the medical reagent.

Many doctors recommended people eat gruel with mild therapeutic ingredients to cure disorders. Zhang Mu, a medical expert in Qing dynasty, suggested that "according to the symptoms and the state of body, cooking gruel with right kind of fruit, vegetables, fishes, meat and herbs, thus changing food to good medicine, can help to cure the disease rapidly and successfully." The great pharmacopoeia "Bencaogangmu" (Ming Dynasty) also listed near a hundred recipe of therapeutic gruels, such as Chinese onion and fermented soy bean boiled with rice for people who just catches cold^[7]. In a great document compiled by Hu Sihui in Yuan Dynasty, gruels such as sheep bone gruel, swine kidney gruel, wild jujube gruel, purslane gruel, peach-kernel gruel, flaxseed gruel^[8]. People find this kind of therapy easy and simple, and very economic.

4. The ideal way of maintaining health

Eating gruel can not only curing disease, but also regulating the metabolism of the human body. Traditional Chinese medicine regard gruel as a perfect way of strengthening body, keeping good state of health and reaching longevity.

The people who are in convalescence were recommended to eat gruels to regain the vitality. Wu Youxun, a famous doctor in Ming Dynasty, commented that, after a serious disease, since the gastro-intestinal function is weak, it is most sensible to give the recovering patient gruel first, then heavy gruel, than soft rice, restoring the normal diet step by step^[9]. It is a common sense that weak people and the lying-in woman be given gruels. The doctors advised that it is important to make sure that the ingredients of the gruels should be in harmony with the season and the metabolic state^[10,11].

There are many articles and poems in the ancient time praising the benefit of eating gruels. Among them the most famous ones are the "On Gruel" by Zhang Lei, and "Eating Gruel" by Lu You, both are famous poet in Song Dynasty.

Zhang Lei said that every early morning, he would eat a bowl of gruel. The gruel is so soft and tender, and nothing is more appropriate for the empty stomach.

Lu You's poem described his findings on gruel: Everybody desires to get longevity, but seldom do they realized that the way to it is right in their hand. I get a simplest way from Wanqiu, that is to eat gruel and have a long life. And true, he lived to the age of 85, although he experienced so many adversities and led a vagrant life in most of his life^[4].

5. The great enjoyment as a sort of tasty food

China has a vast territory that the recipes of gruels are extremely diversified from place to place. The folk people use all kinds of available food materials for their special relish of gruels.

People in the north make gruels with red bean, mungbean, seed of *Coix lachryma*, peanut, sesame, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, leek, spinach, and every mutton. Usually they do not put salt into gruels. On the other hand, the people in the south pay more attention to the taste of gruels and put many delicious ingredients into them. The famous gruel items include fish-slice gruel, pidan and minced meat gruel, roe gruel, liver gruel, sea cucumber gruel, and clam gruel. The gruels are usually flavored with salt, SMG, ginger, Chinese onion, and pepper.

Many young people are interesting in making fruit gruels or vegetable gruels for their skin health and body vitality^[12].

People also tend to put some mild tonics or delicious herbs into gruels, such as lotus seed, lily bulb, Chinese jujube, dried longan, Chinese jam and fructus *Lycii*.

In China, there is a special festival characterize by a certain style of gruel - the La Ba Festival on December 8 of the lunar calendar. The gruel is called La Ba gruel, which is consisted of many kinds of cereals, legumes, nuts and dried fruits, flavored by sugar and sweet-scented osmanthus. The festival was originated from the celebration of harvest and the worship of the spirits of cereals, and promoted by the introduce of Buddhism. This La Ba gruel, has become one of the favorite daily food of consumers.

6. Other meanings associated with gruel

Gruel cooking is simple, but there is also some principles in it. Yuan Mei, a famous litterateur in Qing Dynasty, concluded that "to cook gruel, it is essential to make rice and water in perfect harmonization, perfect softness, and perfect consistency."^[13] This is not only the way to cook gruel, but also the way to manage a family, emphasized in Chinese traditional education.

The application of gruel in modern medical treatment and nutrition

The benefit of gruel to health is paid great attention to by both medical field and the consumers who are more and more aware of the importance of optimal health.

Doctors of traditional medicine are still making effort of utilizing the old tradition of gruel eating as a way of preventing and treating of many chronic disease, such as hypertension^[14], and insomnia^[15], and secondary anemia caused by chemical treatment of tumors^[16].

The nutritionist and food manufacturers are interested in the possibility of utilize gruels as a convenient way of diversify food choices, as a source of dietary fiber and low glycemic index food, and the right food for diabetics and the obese^[17, 18]. Instant high-fiber gruels^[19], fermented gruels^[20] and nutritionally fortified gruels are also developed for better accommodating the need of the consumers.

It is found that some food materials, such as soy bean, seed of *Coix lachnoma*, pumpkin, Chinese jam, konjak and fructus Lycii can suppress the postprandial glucose response and improve the glucose tolerance of the type II diabetics^[17].

For most urban dwellers, especially senior citizen, it is a serious problems to supply enough fiber, whole grains and legumes in their diet. The delicious and soft mixed gruels made of multiple food materials may provide an easy answer to these problems and thus make new contributions in modern diet.

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