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Iowa State Plays Host to Chinese Students

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The land of luxurious silks, chopsticks, and native festivals has been temporarily forsaken by over 600 handpicked Chinese students, for this land of rayons, forks and raw vegetable salads. Twenty-four of them, quartered in the big White House on West Street, are dipping eagerly into the Iowa State College way of life.

The other day I went over to the White House to visit them. Because I had met them all at dinner given for them and had since been seeing and chatting with them here and there on the campus, the ice of unfamiliarity had already been broken.

By the same token, they were able to bring very few American clothes. By the same token, they were able to bring very few American dollars, is practically valueless. Unfamiliarity had already been broken.

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We talked that day about everything from the raising of chickens. We talked that day about everything from the raising of chickens. Travelling from Calcutta, India to Norfolk on troop ships, they were generously exposed to American mores and folkways by their “G. I. Joe” shipmates.

Aboard ship, the misuse of one little four letter adjective nearly culminated in tragedy. The scene was at supper; the cause was a piece of steak. One piece per man was the quota, but it so happened that there was one extra portion which was given to one of the Chinese men. The lucky recipient pointed to his two pieces of steak and said, “Too more.” Everyone at the table was aghast and agape. One particular soldier reacted belligerently, and pointed out in no uncertain terms that the Chinese lad already had more meat than anybody else. When the accused finally managed to explain that he had meant to say “too much” all the wrinkles were ironed out of the precipitating crisis.

The men agree that our greatest culinary offense is that we over-cook our vegetables. While they are not accustomed to eating raw vegetables, neither are their palates adjusted to the softness of our cooked vegetables. The Chinese plunge their vegetables into several tablespoonsful of hot fat for only 2 or 3 minutes, salt them and usually add some of their rich black soy bean sauce resulting in a crisp, highly seasoned dish that has no equal on our American bill of fare.

Killing the pig is an occasion for great festivity in the rural communities of China. Each family kills a pig, if it has one, on May 5 or August 15 and again on New Year’s Day. In the spring and summer a small amount of the meat is set aside for the family and the rest taken fresh to the market to be sold. After the pig is sold, part of the money is used to buy another pig to feed and fatten, the rest of the money is “saved.” This is the pig that will be killed for the New Year festival, at which time another will be bought for the spring slaughter. If this particular pig is not fat enough to be killed the following May its fateful day is postponed until August. More of the winter pig is set aside for the family because it can be kept easily during the winter months without danger of spoilage. All of this pork with the exception of that eaten immediately is salted and dried in the sunlight.

It was Mr. Wu who told me in glowing terms about the Chinese restaurant. They are housed on several floors, the first being set aside for the kitchens and the raising of chickens. On the upper floors are the dining rooms. Waitresses are unheard of in China because there are many men. The tables are always round and the method of ordering is considerably different from the American way. Instead of selecting a number of special dishes for himself, each diner orders one dish. Therefore, the more members there are in a dining party, the greater the variety of food.

The food is served in large bowls which are placed in the center of the table and from these bowls the diners eat. If the party is particularly large, then, in order to be together, they sit at a larger table and the chopsticks are correspondingly longer in order that the bowls in the center can be easily reached.

Wu chuckled to me and said with a twinkle in his eye, “For sanitary purposes, you know.”

Watermelon seeds are considered a particular delicacy in China. The seeds are ground, fried, dried in the sunlight, stored, and eaten with the fingers at tea time. Sometimes, instead of watermelon seeds, there are sweetened rice cakes.