

# Gastronomy and Consumption in Eighteenth-Century China

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## Abstract:

In this paper I argue that the contest for cultural leadership between the Qianlong Emperor and the Jiangnan elite played out in multiple ways in the field of gastronomy. Qianlong's wide-ranging efforts to set the standards for social and cultural behavior and to intervene in elite practices, in marked contrast to the situation that had prevailed in the late Ming, extended to every corner of life, so that, among other things, in matters of gustatory as well as aesthetic taste the personal became political. This competition underlay, for example, the high value placed on Suzhou cuisine and the cooks who produced it; the evolving provincial fashion for the "Manchu-Chinese Complete Banquet" and its regional variants; and the endless quest for ingredients distinguished either by lavishness or by subtlety of flavor. This cultural competition was closely intertwined with the competitive allure of luxury consumption. Focusing on gastronomy at the imperial court and in the great urban centers of Suzhou, Yangzhou and Nanjing, I demonstrate that, as a consequence, food and cooking, and the appreciation of food, both formed vital links between the private and public spheres of life and bridged the worlds of aesthetics and commerce.