

Tasting Asia 亞洲的滋味 (12 Poems)

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Hainanese Chicken Rice (Singapore version)

Do I have the best recipe
to cook chicken in steaming water
remake tenderness in a foreign land
console parents who drifted over the oceans?

Do I have the best recipe
to make the best sauce and chili-lime dip
reconcile the taboos of food and language
readjust to the rules of the new dinner table?

Do I have the best recipe
to cook rice in chicken broth with the right texture
make it less oily to please new neighbors
accommodate to the city's diverse appetite?

新加坡的海南雞飯

我可有最好的祕方
用沸水把雞浸熟
在異鄉重造故鄉的鮮嫩
安慰飄洋過海的父母?

我可有最好的祕方
調製最美味的醬油和薑茸
調節食物和語言裡的禁忌
適應新的餐桌的規矩?

我可有最好的祕方
拿雞湯煮出軟硬適中的熱飯
測試油膩的分寸在異地睦鄰
黏合一個城市裡多元的胃口?



Stuffed Snails in Ginger Leaves (Vietnam: Hap La Gung)

I was picked up from the water field
taken out
minced
added dried mushrooms, lean meat and onion
added salt
fish sauce and pepper
added a blade of strange ginger leaf
to be put back
into my shell
to make me more tasty



I was taken out
removed from
my own geography and history
given exotic colors
foreign flavors
added value
paid high prices
just to place me
into my unknown
future

釀田螺

把我從水田撿起
把我拿出來
切碎了
加上冬菇、瘦肉和洋蔥
加上鹽
魚露和胡椒
加上一片奇怪的薑葉

為了再放回去
我原來的殼中
令我更加美味

把我拿出來
使我遠離了
我的地理和歷史
加上異鄉的顏色
加上外來的滋味
給我增值
付出了昂貴的代價
為了把我放到
我不知道的
將來

Basin Feast (Hong Kong: Pun Choi)

There should be roast rice-duck and pan-fried prawns on top
Order of the classes are clearly laid out in layers
But the poking chopsticks gradually reverse
the lofty five-spice chicken and the lowly pigskin
The Sung army once sought shelter here after defeat
wolfed down the fishermen's reserves from big wooden basins
dined on the beach in crude circles, with no elegance of the past
Away from the capital, they tried wild flavors of the rural folks.

Unable to stay on top, they collapse with gradual consumption
No escape from touching bottom colors, whether you like it or not,
no way to block exchanges between humble mushrooms and rare squids
Reversed relationships taint each other and affect the purity on top
Nobody can stop the meat juice from trickling down, and let
the bottom-most turnip absorb all the flavors in all its sweetness.



盆菜

應該有燒米鴨和煎海蝦放在上位
階級的次序層層分得清楚
撩撥的筷子卻逐漸顛倒了
圍頭五味雞與粗俗的豬皮
狼狽的宋朝將軍兵敗後逃到此地
一個大木盆裡吃漁民貯藏的餘糧
圍坐灘頭進食無復昔日的鐘鳴鼎食
遠離京畿的輝煌且試鄉民的野味

無法虛排在高處只能隨時日的消耗下陷
不管願不願意亦難不蘸底層的顏色
吃久了你無法隔絕北菇與排魷的交流
關係顛倒互相沾染影響了在上的潔癖
誰也無法阻止肉汁自然流下的去向
最底下的籬蔔以清甜吸收了一切濃香

Stone-grilled Rice (South Korea: Bibimbap)

That many vegetables
each in its own pride and beauty
What hands shake the bellflower?
string them into a tune to put around one's neck
Cut the cucumber into half-moons
dipping them in sesame oil
Massage the lettuce tenderly
let it play a melody of the haegum violin
Transform the mushrooms into ten long drums
beating through the weeds of autumn chill
Arrange the bean sprouts disheveled in tumults
long daegum flutes orchestrating in the crisp of dawn

Let the beets tell the secrets of their hearts
and dye all the faces red
Each with its own woe beneath the beauty
that many vegetables in a dance entangled
Falling into shape in a heated stone basin
change our rice into a song of mixed colours

石鍋拌飯

許許多多的蔬菜
各有各的美麗和驕橫
甚麼樣的一雙手搖響風鈴草
把它掛成一串頸上炫耀的小調
把青瓜切成半個月亮
把月亮蘸點麻油
溫柔地給生菜按摩
讓它發出胡弓的旋律
把冬菇變成十只長鼓
敲出秋天蘆葦間的蕭殺
芽菜姊妹排好又在動亂中拆散
長竹笛合奏黎明的爽涼
讓紅菜頭翻出絃間的祕密
把大家的臉龐染紅
美麗底下有隱藏的悲涼
這麼多的蔬菜交纏的歌舞
在炙熱的石盆上錯折成形
把白飯攪拌成斑駁的七彩



Hot Soup (Thailand: Tom Yum Kung)

The hottest is pepper

The hottest is water

The hottest are her lips

The hottest are your ear-plugs

The hottest are their official announcements

The hottest are your gossip columns

The hottest is her body

The hottest is his gaze

The hottest are their basic law

The hottest is our self-censorship

The hottest is her smell

The hottest is your big nose

The hottest is her passion

The hottest is your indifference

The hottest is your nakedness

The hottest is her eternal neatness

The hottest are his eyes

The hottest are her moods

The hottest is her dimple

The hottest is when you are vulnerable

The hottest is your language

The hottest is your silence



冬蔭功湯

最辣的是辣椒

最辣的是清水

最辣是她的嘴巴

最辣是你的耳塞

最辣是他們的發佈

最辣是你們的報導

最辣是她的身體

最辣是他的凝睇

最辣是他們的法紀

最辣是我們的顧忌

最辣是她的氣味

最辣是你的大鼻

最辣是他的熱吻

最辣是她的冷漠

最辣是他的裸體

最辣是她的整齊

最辣是他的眼

最辣是她的心情

最辣是她的梨渦

最辣是你的無助

最辣是你的言語

最辣是你的無言



Sticky Rice with Meat (Laos: Larb)

Sound of the cleaver drumming on the chopping board
calls forth our expectations for a warm supper
The meat slowly matures under the beatings
Shredded vegetables become more complete
Glutinous rice has its tender charm
holding together all the daily shattering
Time spent in preparing a dish
slowly accumulates into an exquisite flavor

老撾菜肉飯

刀在砧板上細切的聲音
呼喚我們期待溫暖的晚飯
肉在琢磨中逐漸成熟
蔬菜撕裂了變得更完整
香草的苦辣帶出魚的鮮美
糯米有它溫柔的魅力
把所有日常的破碎黏合
預備一道菜所花的時間
點點滴滴收穫它的美味

Coconut Rice (Malaysia: Nasi Lemak)

Never feeling hungry when you eat it
Never feeling sad

Fewer and fewer people grow rice
Fewer and fewer work in the fields

The city develops different tastes
Yet rice always neutralizes our pain

Feeling full when you eat it
Feeling strong when you have it

Fewer and fewer people sow seeds in Spring
Fewer and fewer harvest in Autumn

The city develops different melancholies
Rice has become the bits and pieces you lost

Fewer and fewer people grind the grains
Fewer and fewer people husk rice

The city gives you scars in seven colors
The rice gives you consolation in white

Never feeling grief when you eat it
Never feeling wrath

Never feeling lost when you have it
Never gone astray

椰醬飯

吃了永不會飢餓
吃了永不會憂傷

插秧的人愈來愈少了
種稻的人愈來愈少了

城市發展出不同的口味
米飯永遠中和我們的辛酸



吃了感到充實
吃了就有氣力

隨著季節播種
隨著季節收割的人
愈來愈少了

城市發展出不同的憂傷
米飯是我們失去的點滴

隨著季節去打穀
隨著季節去曬穀

磨穀的人愈來愈少了
舂米的人愈來愈少了

城市帶給你七色的疤痕
米飯給你白色的安慰

吃了永不會悲傷
吃了永不會激憤

吃了永不會迷路
吃了永不會失落

Yellow Rice (Indonesia: Nasi Kuning)

India brought over spices and curry

Arabian Shish Kebab became satay

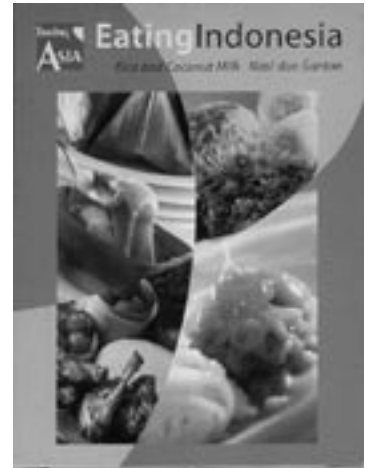
The Dutch seized the nutmeg and cumin

The Chinese came with black beans and vegetable seeds

The soy sauce landed here from afar became sweet
Numerous islands line the coastline on the dining table
Nobody can colonize spices
Turmeric dyes my fingers yellow
Padan leaves always have a strong fragrance
The fiery chili pepper refuses to bow to anyone
Hot as volcanic lava
Rugged as ocean rock. Only
Rice is our common language
Rice is our consoling mother
Rice encompasses all colors
Rice soothes the old wounds in the stomach

黃飯

印度帶來了香料和咖喱
阿拉伯人的串燒變成沙爹
荷蘭人覬覦豆蔻和茴香
中國人背著豆鼓和菜籽逃難
鼓油遠道而來定居在這裡變甜
餐桌的海岸線上無數小島
大家都沒法把香料殖民
黃薑染黃了的我手指頭
香蘭葉總有濃郁的香氣
辣椒火爆拒絕向任何人低頭
火山溶若那麼熾烈
大海岩那種嶙峋，只有——
米飯是我們共通的言語
米飯是我們安慰的母親
米飯包容不同的顏色
米飯燙貼腸胃裡舊日的傷痕



Comprador Soup

Taking pride in your creamy face?
Underneath the smooth surface
One wonders what lurks in secrecy?
To whom is the shark's fin offered?
Dragging out old time legends of the ancestors
Delicacies easily taken as common stuff

Between the differences in prices
How's sweet profit gained?
Yesterday the leftover of salty-fish stalls
Today the delicacies waiting for the highest bid
You match-make affection on the palm of a hand
Anyone can propose to shrimps or bass at will

Who's not haggling around us?
No one puts a scale in the air
A retractable measuring tape in the pocket
Abacus beads going up and down
Those from four corners of the land seeking their own place
Bless that customers flooding in and goods flying off shelves

Was there a child in you and me on the merry-go-round
Dizzy because of drinking too much or spinning too fast?
Gamble all you have to take on a roller-coaster ride
All fall down
The thick paste of wealth seemingly bottomless
Was but petty profit watered down?

金必多湯

以奶油的臉孔驕人？
滑溜的表面底下
不知有甚麼乾坤
把魚翅向誰獻寶？
搬出老祖宗陳年的傳說
山珍海錯容易當了平常

如何在價格的差異間
賺取美味的利潤？
昨天是鹹魚欄裡的剩貨
今天是待價而沽的珍饈
把感情的買賣玩弄於股掌
誰都可隨意投入小蝦或是石斑

咫尺間人人不都在討價還價？
沒有誰在天空上放一把天平
至少口袋裡的軟尺伸縮自如
算盤的各子不住上上下下
來自五湖四海分別找到自己的位置
蒙誰眷顧客似雲來貨如輪轉

旋轉木馬上可有你我的童心？
暈眩因為喝醉還是轉得太快
賭這一回所有財物如過山快車
突然墜落谷底
盡似無底深淵的富貴濃稠
可是蠅頭小利粉末和了開水？

Presidents' Menu

the president likes a tasty starter called *Long Life Lucky-Dip*:
take lilies plucked in full bloom, oven dry and mix with mackerel
take tribute kale from south and west, dress and serve it cold
take every clacking duck-tongue, spice and stew in gravy for a bowlful

in the prime of life he loved rich and heavy flavours
getting on in years, he has to lighten it up a bit now
for instance, take some boiled milkfish and
match it with black beans that stimulate digestion

for him, like every senior citizen
using ordinary soy sauce is wrong
so simmer black fermented bean stock to bring out the taste of soy
in lobster there's too much cholesterol
so use sea cucumber as a substitute

he likes fresh and tasty fish-lips simmered with shiitake
so easy for an older man to suck and chew on
all nuts must be ground and steamed until they're soft
then scattered over winter melon like a hazy muslin curtain
his sense of taste may be a little slow, but then texture is more
important

he goes back more and more now, back to his own bailiwick
he likes country-style pickled radishes and dried cucurbit flowers
and can make his own *bidaibo* rice cakes
but bland and uneventful won't always be to his taste
so sometimes he'll need to spice things up a touch

July 1999

(This poem was translated by Brian Holton.)

總統的菜單

總統喜歡爽口前菜「福祿壽」
把盛放的曇花摘下烘乾伴著鯖魚
把各方蠻夷進貢來的貢菜涼拌
把所有喧囂的鴨舌頭拔下來鹵成一盆

在春秋盛年愛吃濃味
現在年紀大了不免清淡一點
比方把煮過的虱目魚
配上有助腸胃消化的烏豆

像所有高齡的人一樣
不適合用食用醬油
就用高湯燉豆豉帶出醬油香味
龍蝦的膽固醇太高了
就用海參代替吧

還喜歡鮮美的魚唇燉花菇
適合老年人慢慢咀嚼
所有堅果都得磨碎蒸爛
用來覆蓋冬瓜如朦朧的窗紗
味覺雖較緩慢口感是最重要的

愈來愈回歸鄉土了
喜歡鄉下的菜莆和葫蘆花乾
也能自己用米造米苔目
只是嘴裡有時不甘平淡
也來那麼的辣它一下

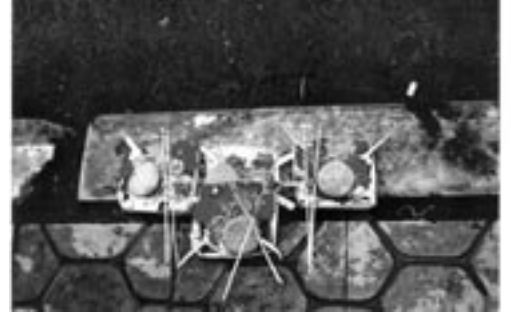
一九九九年七月

Banten in Bali

A small basin made from palm leaves
carrying flowers, rice
a bit of fruit and salt
sprinkled with holy water
put at the door for sacrifice
To the Gods of the mountain crests
To the evil spirits of the ocean deep
Praying for protection of all we have
From the disasters of volcanoes and earthquakes
From the torture of epidemics
From explosions that kill many
Praying for tourists to return unafraid
We respect gods and fear evil spirits
So many footsteps trigger hidden currents
So many dogs tread on buried secrets
That blue shadow of the walls
When one protects
one is Vishnu
When one destroys
one is Surya
That stretch of red earth
with its unpredictable lives and deaths
That shimmering streaks of light and shade
in the depths of the forests
in the depths of our hearts
A small palm leaf boat
carrying our respects and fears
trembles on the waves

峇里的祭品

用棕櫚葉造成小盆
承載了花朵、米飯
一點點的水果和鹽
灑上聖水
放在門前獻祭
向住在山頂的神靈
向住在海底的惡靈
祈求保佑我們所有的一切
免於火山和地震的災害
免於傳染病的凌虐
免於令數百人喪命的爆炸
祈求遊客再來不害怕
我們敬畏神明但也懼怕惡靈
人的腳步牽動潛伏的暗流
狗的四足踐踏誰的祕密
那一片藍色的牆影
當他保護事物
他是毘濕奴
當他破壞時
他是濕婆
那一片紅色的土地
上有無常的生死
那閃爍不定的片片光影
在森林的最裡面
在我們心的最深處
小小一葉棕櫚的小舟
承載了敬畏與恐懼
在波濤上顛簸



A Taste of Asia

The jar you sent had just arrived, stood still unopened,
When the grim tidings blew in from the grey clouds
North of your coast. The earth's contractions
Had brought forth a tsunami. A hotel swallowed in an instant.
A train thrown from its tracks, continuing derailed, driverless
On a journey from this life to the next.
The ocean suddenly overhead. Human lives
Oilslick-black, flotsam doors, provisions adrift, homeless...

I open the tightly-sealed jar. Pickled garlic.
What is this taste? A bitterness
Buried deep in layers of mud? A harshness of trees broken apart?
A stench of ocean, shattered coral, fish floating belly-up?
What does it speak of, your message, wafted my way this sunny
afternoon?
Of something brewing in the dark? Of something growing in turmoil?
Of pity and cruelty, glimpsed in the heaving motions of nature?
Can a drop of sweetness temper the infinite brine of this world's woe!

December 2004

(This poem was translated by John Minford.)

亞洲的滋味

剛收到你寄來的瓶子，還未打開
沒想到，隨灰雲傳來了噩耗
沿你們的海岸線北上，地殼的震動
掀起海嘯，一所酒店在剎那間淹沒
一列火車沖離軌道，無人駕駛
從今生出軌闖入來世的旅程

海水突然淹過頭頂：油膩而污黑的
生命、飄浮的門窗、離家的食物.....

我打開密封的瓶子，嚐不出
這醃製的蒜頭是怎樣一種滋味
是泥層中深埋的酸澀、樹木折斷的焦苦
還是珊瑚折盡魚肚翻白的海的鹹腥？
從陽光普照的午後傳來，你可是想告訴我
如何在黑暗中醞釀，在動亂中成長
千重輾軋中體會大自然的悲憫與殘酷？
如何以一點甘甜調理大地人世無邊酸楚？
二〇〇四年十二月

Interview with Leung Ping-kwan (excerpt)

What is the original idea behind this “Tasting Asia” project?

Leung: The main part of the poems from this series came from “Tasting Asia,” an installation exhibition at Hong Kong Cultural Centre from October 27 to November 10, 2002. I collaborated with eight artists and eight designers from Asia. The Design Alliance, which is a collaborative network of Asian design houses, was responsible for organizing this. Freeman Lau, a famous designer who is also the organizer, approached me because he knew I had been working on food and have a great interest in Asian food. He introduced me to the artists and designers from eight Asian countries who discussed with me and chose their favorite national dish for presentation. Each artist did an installation art work and each designer designed a small box package that supposedly could contain the dish as fast food. My poems would be printed on the floor or on the tables at the

installation, and put into the boxes. It was a pleasant experience working on this project. I was glad to make use of this chance to reflect upon my feelings about living in Asia and interacting with other Asian cultures. Some of the food, such as chicken rice, tom yum kung soup, and bibimbap, I knew very well and had feelings for; others I learned and tasted and discussed with artists and friends who knew more about them. I further revised the poems afterwards and added four poems along the lines of those that I wrote before.

Is the choice of Asian cuisine for your poetry random? Are there any reasons why Japanese and Indian cuisines are absent in “Tasting Asia” (is it because you’ve written on them before)?

Leung: I have written a series of poems about Asian food and culture before in the book *Dong Xi* (East West Matters, 2000) which included poems on kim chi, President’s menu (Taiwan), bartenders in Tokyo, and a papaya tree poem about a Vietnamese American girl. I had written about Indian and Japanese food before that. Last year I was in Japan for a period of time and wrote a series of poems about Japanese and other Asian food. All these could be counted as my on-going works on Asian food and culture. I just thought these twelve would form a new series.

When you wrote the poems, did you have the Chinese diaspora in mind?

Leung: Not necessarily in the “Tasting Asia” project. But in my first “Foodscape” project I had poems such as “Eggplants” and “Dry Cabbage Soup,” which are more about the Chinese diaspora. In the poem about yellow rice from Indonesia, Chinese soy sauce is one of the ingredients in Indonesian cuisine, but here it’s more from an Indonesian rather than a Chinese perspective.

Have you done any research on the various Asian cuisines/dishes you write about? Are you attempting to write Asian histories in the poems?

Leung: Yes, I have done research in a general way. I have a student from Indonesia, and we examined the ingredients and cooked various dishes. He showed me where to buy ingredients from India, Malaysia, and Indonesia in Hong Kong. I used to talk to old people to find out more about the stories behind food. I have Japanese and Indian friends, and we discussed a lot about how food traveled and developed. I have a good friend who is a wine and food critic living in Macao, and I am fascinated by her stories of going from one household to another to collect old recipes. I discovered that stories about food are always not just about food but linked with various layers of histories. Poems on the Indonesian rice dish or Hong Kong pun choi are more obviously about histories, but even in other less obvious ones there are histories behind them as well.

How are these “Tasting Asia” poems different from (or related to) those foodscape poems you have written previously?

Leung: I have written poems for many years, but it was only in 1997 that I began to write about food and held an exhibition of poems and photographs called “Foodscape” in Vancouver. The Foodscape poems started with the examination of Hong Kong culture and proceeded to touch upon the Chinese diaspora. Then when the exhibit traveled to other cities, I had dialogues with other foods and cultures as well. The poems accumulated through exhibitions in different cities and finally developed into the exhibition “Hong Kong Foodscape” at the Heritage Museum in the summer of 2004. It was a collaboration among Millie Chen the installation artist, Lee Ka-sing the photographer, and me. Millie did a wonderful job by building a fake tea house, and we have on the wall a mixture of two eighteenth-century prints of the histories of tea and coffee plantations as

the background wallpaper for the “tea-coffee” poem. Millie built food stalls with twenty-two pots that you could open to listen to poems and smell the strong smells of Chinese herbs. She also made Chinese cloud and dragon patterns by using Western fast food logos such as McDonald’s, KFC, Delifrance, etc. to decorate the tabletops. Quite a good visual presentation to show the strange encounters of East and West nowadays!

As for my writing of the food poems, it started as random, spontaneous efforts. I don’t just write about all the food I tasted. Some foods I like but did not write about. In Chinese poetry there’s the tradition of *yongwu shi* (poetry about things), which is a dialogue between the poet and objects in the world, and I am merely renewing the genre from a contemporary perspective. Of course there are various kinds of encounters between the mind/heart and the outside object, and it is not necessary that a poet always projects his interpretation of the world and turns the objects into mere symbols; it could also be an exploration into the immanent world. The encounter could be meditative, absurd, humorous, satirical, hysterical, discursive, imagistic, public, or private.

Some of my other food poems might be more satirical and political (“The Pork’s Discourse,” “Panic Caused by a Fish,” etc.), and usually I only dwell on topics I want to write about. But here in this series I am also having dialogues with artists from other cultures. This suits my interest in exploring further Asian cultures and histories, such as the colonial past and the conflict between tradition and a more aggressive popular culture, but I also tried to use a more subtle and less provocative form, more imagistic, less judgmental, attempting more to see and feel from other perspectives. There are of course my opinions and hidden criticisms as well, but I think they are more a self-mockery rather than put-downs on others. And poems such as “Tom Yum Kung” (Hot Soup) and “Coconut Rice” are more rhythmical because they were written for the dance/performance in the festival.

What Asian commonalities do you find in your poems?

Leung: On a more superficial level, there are the spices and the rice. If you look into it, the spices are the biting, sharp pain of tumults, the sour, sweet, and bitter colors of the imperial and colonial histories; the rice is the daily, the homely, the common folk, the endurance and the soothing balm for the pain. The imagistic and the discursive. The picture and the music. The hidden, distorted identity, and the cover-up mask on the surface.

As a Chinese poet of Hong Kong who writes both in Chinese and English, how would you position your works in relation to Asia?

Leung: We always have access to a great variety of Asian food, but not enough understanding and respect for Asian cultures. I have always wanted to learn more about the history of Asian food, and they are all inter-linked to various stages of our culture. We have a lot of Vietnamese restaurants in the Jordan area because of the sea traffic from the pier there to Vietnam, and there were exiles and boat people from Vietnam who fled to Hong Kong during the Vietnam War. The Gurkha soldiers brought Nepalese food to the Shek Kong area; Indian merchants were prominent figures in the development of Hong Kong business from the very beginning. Every Sunday you naturally encounter Philippine domestic workers crowding in festive celebration in the squares at Central. Thai and Malaysian foods are always popular, as well as Japanese and Korean soap operas. But other than the trends, as a writer I also see that we share the shattered histories of Chinese and English languages, the bitter and sour histories of colonialism, and the vain and expansive tastes of modernism or postmodernism!

The comprador soup I wrote about was popular in Hong Kong in the 1950s. It was part of the “Soy Sauce Western Cuisine” that started in the 1940s in Guangzhou and Hong Kong as a modification of Western cuisine in which butter and cheese were replaced with soy sauce to suit Chinese

stomachs. The soup in question is a Western cream soup elevated by adding shark's fin, and the name of the soup came from the nouveau riche of the time, the popular middlemen that played important roles in the trade business between the Chinese and the foreigners in the early twentieth century, one of the products that came from the strange and unbalanced encounters between the East and the West. This soup could very well have its variations in other Asian cultures. Now the Chinese name of this soup has remained (as a transliteration of the original English name), but most people forget the original meaning, and there are now all sorts of variations. I recently tasted this soup in a nostalgic-style restaurant in Vancouver. It has become a sort of mushroom cream soup, with the name re-translated into English as "Cambridge Soup." So it has been elevated to another status with a new identity and a forgotten memory. There are always so many stories about food and its translation from one culture to another.