

# The Study of Taro Culture in Song Dynasty: Based on the Investigation of Diet, Medicine and Poetry

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**Abstract:** *In the social life of the Song Dynasty, taro, as an important daily food, formed a unique cultural phenomenon. From the perspective of eating methods, the Song people developed diversified cooking techniques including simmering, boiling, and steaming. In addition, taro has certain medicinal and practical functions. Food poetry related to taro is also not uncommon. These poems are not only a description of taro, but also carry the emotional sustenance of the literati group.*

**Keywords:** Taro, Diet, Medical treatment, Culture.

## 1. Introduction

Taro is an important food in the daily life of the people in the Song Dynasty. Its name is numerous, 'a name is Tuzhi, the big one is called Dun chi, also called Yu kui [1].' In addition, there are Ju, Yuqu and other names. Ancient food research is one of the important ways to understand ancient society. Professor Hua Chen of Harvard University has a profound understanding of this. Through the lens of food, almost all aspects of social and cultural characteristics and their changes can be observed [2]. Li Dekuan and Tian Guang also emphasized in their works that 'diet culture is an intuitive window to peek into human culture [3].' Therefore, this paper attempts to study the cultural problems of taro in the Song Dynasty, focusing on the edible methods, medicinal and practical problems of taro, in order to improve the understanding of the society in the Song Dynasty.

## 2. Eating Methods of Taro in Song Dynasty

Looking back on the history of Chinese diet development, the Song Dynasty is undoubtedly one of the important stages of diet development. Liu Pubing believes that 'the Tang Dynasty is a period of Chinese food culture... The Song Dynasty is the basic mature period of Chinese food culture'[4]. During this period, the food culture developed rapidly, especially the cooking technology became more and more mature, and great progress was made in the aspects of knife work, fire control, cooking method and seasoning. In the process of cooking, people in the Song Dynasty not only paid attention to the balance of nutrition, but also paid more attention to the matching of raw materials, in order to achieve full color and aroma. Chen Weiming believes that: 'In the history of cooking in ancient China, the Tang and Song dynasties were an important historical period. The development of social economy has promoted the improvement of the level of food culture. One of the main aspects and contents is that the cooking of dishes has a very high level [5].' Xu Hairong also highly praised the development of cooking in the Song Dynasty. 'The food cooking in the Song Dynasty has made great achievements. During this period, the cooking skills were further improved, and the varieties of staple foods and dishes were greatly increased than in the past, thus writing a glorious new chapter in the history of Chinese food cooking

[6].'

In the Song Dynasty, taro was popular because of its soft and fragrant glutinous and rich nutritional value. Sun Di once wrote a poem praising the deliciousness of taro. 'Big taro is very appetizing, and its flavor is also very enjoyable [7].' In the Song Dynasty, the cooking methods of taro were mainly simmering, boiling, steaming and other forms. Among them, simmered taro is highly praised for its unique flavor. Among the 20 vegetarian foods included in Chen Dasou's 'Benxin Zhai Shu Shipu' simmered taro is vividly listed. This record fully illustrates the important position of simmered taro in the vegetarian system of the Song Dynasty [8].

The cooking process of simmering taro was recorded in detail in 'Shanjia Qinggong'. 'The taro was wrapped in wet paper, then spread on the outer layer with boiled wine and distiller's grains, and then simmered with bran fire. After the aroma is distributed and the taro is ripe, it is taken out and placed on the ground, and the skin is peeled off and eaten while it is hot [9].' Simmering taro has more advantages in flavor than other cooking methods, 'steamed taro is not as good as simmering taro' [10]. At the same time, simmering taro can also avoid malaria. Huizhou people often eat taro with boiled skin, so they often have malaria. Wu Yuanyou believes that taro should be eaten by simmering and roasting. 'This is not a problem of taro itself. Taro should be peeled first, wrapped in wet paper, then simmered and roasted (pay attention to the fire), simmered to just ripe, and then eat while hot, so that the taste will be soft and smooth, which can not only replenish qi and blood, but also fill the hungry fruit [11].' Song people's admiration for simmering taro was fully reflected in his poems. Li Gang praised the crisp, soft and waxy of taro in his poems, '(simmering taro) peeled off naturally like fine velvet, revealing the rich and delicate pulp; the entrance is soft and fragrant like jade, and it does not need to chew hard at all [12].' Lu You even thought that the taste of chestnuts and simmering taro was better than that of bear's paw. 'The cooked chestnuts and simmering taro were comparable to the precious bear's paw. [13]'

Boiled taro and steamed taro are also common cooking methods. 'Shaoxing Bencao' recorded: 'taro, mainly eat its roots... People usually eat it after cooking [14]. Wei Zongwu

stayed in the mountains because of the cold weather, boiled chestnuts and taro to fill the hunger. 'Repaired the thatch roof with broken tiles, and set up a broken iron pot to cook chestnuts and taro [15].' Adding a little grass ash when boiling taro can make the taro more soft, 'boiling taro with grass ash water, the taro will become soft and delicious' [16]. Steamed taro is a common food in winter because it is easy to make. Shu Yuexiang has a poem saying: 'Winter mountain life is beautiful, thatched cottages do not leak. Taro and chestnuts are cooked in the mountain kitchen, and the wind-blown grass is swept on the wild road [17].' The poet Song Boren returned from afar, and his family greeted him by steaming taro. 'Taro was added to the ceramic steaming cage for cooking, and tea was cooked in a copper frying pan [18].' Others specialize in steaming taro to sell for profit. 'In the winter of 1195, a water and land law meeting was held at the home of a doctor surnamed Hu in Shitou Town, and Gong San, a citizen, carried steamed taro to the market for sale every day [19].'

In addition, taro can also be paired with other ingredients to make delicious food. Among them, soup is more common. In the Northern Wei Dynasty, 'Qimin Yaoshu' recorded a meat soup named 'Yuzi Suanhuo' [20]. Tang Dynasty medical experts believe that taro is suitable for cooking soup with meat, 'with real taro, white taro, lianchan taro three kinds of taro, mixed meat together to cook soup, the taste is extremely delicious [21].' 'Shiliao Bencao' also recorded: '(taro) and crucian carp, black fish together to cook soup, has a good effect of qi. It is particularly beneficial to regulate the spleen and stomach. [22]' These discussions were all adopted by 'Yangsheng Leizuan' written by Zhou Shouzhong in the Song Dynasty, which shows its inheritance in the Song Dynasty [23]. Taro soup is also a regular guest in the poems of the Song Dynasty. Ge Shengzhong attended the banquet, and there was taro soup at the table. 'Boil taro porridge with newly harvested rice, and warmly entertain the guests from afar [24].' Lu You used to use cabbage, radish, yam and taro as soup, which tasted delicious and abnormal. Lu You specially wrote poems to praise it. 'Since then, the eight treasures of jade food have been willing to bow down, and the delicious food of heaven is not the same. This sweet taro soup is the most delicious in the world. [25]' The so-called sweet soup refers to the original soup 'without condiments' [25]p395, which reflects the pursuit of the literati in the Song Dynasty for the original taste of food materials.

Not only that, taro has other ways to eat. The 'Suhuangdu' recorded in 'Shanjia Qinggong' is an example. 'The cooked taro is cut into thin slices, the torrefied and almonds are ground into powder, the mixed sauce is prepared into paste, and it is wrapped on the taro slices and fried.' Through the unique processing technology, the dish forms a complex taste of crisp outer skin and soft inner texture. Its unique flavor makes Lin Hongyou known as 'rare in the world' [9]p86. In the production of desserts, the application of taro is also quite distinctive. Yunying jian is one of the representatives. When making this dessert, it is necessary to steam lotus root, lotus root, lotus, taro and other food materials, mash them in stone mortar and add honey, then mash them again, make them into groups, and cool them before eating. [26] Zhao Xihu 'Tiaoxie Leibian' recorded the production process of 'Liaohuaquiu'. 'The taro was cut into cubes and stir-fried in a pan until all of them floated white and became light, round, crisp and delicious.

Then add a small amount of sugar powder and flour to make decorative fruit, which is commonly known as Liaohuaquiu [27].'

Although taro has a variety of edible methods and is delicious, it cannot be eaten too much, and excessive consumption will cause disease. Su Song clearly pointed out in 'Bencao Tujing' (Taro) is particularly delicious when eaten, but it should not be excessive, otherwise it will be detrimental to health [28]. In 'Bencao Yanyi', it is further pointed out that excessive consumption of taro will damage health. 'Excessive consumption will hinder the operation of air machine and damage the function of spleen and stomach [29].' 'Shaoxing Bencao' records that eating more taro will lead to the invasion of wind evil, 'excessive consumption is easy to induce wind disease and aggravate the old disease [14]p300'. Meng Shen, a Tang scholar, believes that eating too much taro can make people weak, 'long-term consumption will make people weak and lose strength' [22]p41. In addition, Zhou Shouzhong 'Yangsheng Leizuan' specially pointed out that patients with hemorrhoids should avoid eating taro, 'people with intestinal wind, five kinds of hemorrhoids and bloody stool should avoid eating chicken, pheasants, crabs, fish, turtle meat, pickled fish, Brasia schreberi and taro' [23]p91.

About the edible season of taro, the ancients formed a consensus: winter is the best. Zhao Xihu said: 'Taro eaten in winter is not sick' [27]p102. This theory can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty, 'Shiliao Bencao' recorded: '(taro) steamed and eaten in winter does not induce disease, and other seasons or non-steamed methods are not suitable for consumption' [22]p41. 'Fayuan Zhulin' is a clear record of the summer fasting taro, 'summer windy season, should avoid eating taro, beans and wheat food.' [30]

At the same time, wild taro and taro planted for more than 3 years are not edible, and these two kinds of taro are often toxic. 'Zhenglei Bencao' cited Tao Hongjing's argument that 'growing taro for 3 years without harvesting will grow into carnauba taro.' Another wild taro named old taro, its stem and leaf morphology is very similar to edible taro, and it is fatal if eaten by mistake. [31] Su Song also emphasizes that wild taro should not be eaten. 'All edible taro must eat artificially cultivated varieties in the garden. Wild taro contains highly toxic, must not be casually ingested, ingestion will be fatal. 'Su Song recommended an ancient detoxification method: 'only earth slurry and fecal liquid can neutralize its effects.' [28]p547

The diversified cooking methods of taro in the Song Dynasty reflected the prosperity and innovation of food culture at that time. The systematic summary of the knowledge of food taboos and detoxification of taro highlights the development level of natural history in the Song Dynasty and reflects the practical experience of the ancients in food hygiene and toxicology.

### 3. Medicinal and Practical Functions of Taro

Taro is not only a common food, but also has a certain medicinal value. In ancient China, the concept of homology of medicine and food has always been emphasized. 'Zhou Li' said: 'Disease doctors are responsible for the treatment of

various diseases of the people... Through the five flavors to reconcile, grain nutrition and five types of drugs to regulate the treatment of diseases. '[32] 'Huangdi Neijing · Suwen' also said: 'Grain is the staple food to nourish the body, five fruits are the non-staple food to supplement, five livestock can add nutrition, and five dishes can enrich the diet. These five types of food flavors are reconciled and eaten together, which can supplement essence and enhance physical fitness. '[33] This concept not only shapes the unique health culture and diet structure of the Chinese nation, but also is an important cornerstone of the theoretical system of traditional Chinese medicine.

Tang 'Xinxu Bencao' pointed out that taro has the effect of 'treating fever and relieving thirst' [21]. According to the records of 'Shaoxing Bencao', the main function of taro is to relax the intestines and stomach and nourish the skin. [14]p300 It reveals the dual role of taro in promoting digestion and skin care. In 'Zhenglei Bencao', there is a discussion on the medical efficacy of taro in the Tang Dynasty. 'In addition to the basic efficacy, eating taro can also make people's skin moist and white. The texture of small taro is extremely smooth, which can be used to appetize and treat intestinal obstruction. Postpartum boiled taro can promote blood circulation. Drink taro juice can stop vomiting blood and relieve thirst. '[31]p469 It can be seen that taro has a certain effect on the treatment of postpartum blood stasis and thirst caused by blood loss and fatigue. Taro can also treat idiosyncrasy. The so-called idiosyncrasy refers to the disease that the idiosyncrasy is born in two sides and disappears from time to time. Su Song introduced Wei 's' 'Duxing Fang' to the world. This prescription has a good effect on the treatment of idiosyncrasy. 'Duxing Fang in the Tang Dynasty recorded that it was used to treat the disease of abdominal mass. One jin of fresh taro was taken and soaked in five liters of wine for 14 days. '[28]p547

The medical efficacy of taro is not limited to tubers, taro stems and taro leaves also have certain medical effects. The taro stem has a good curative effect on the treatment of bee insect bites. 'Bencao Yanyi' said: 'Using the stem of the taro to wipe the part stung by the bee can heal.' [29] In 'Mengxi Bitan', Shen Kuo exemplified this effect with the case of life. 'When the hermit Liu Yi lived in seclusion in Wangwu Mountain, he saw a bumble bee trapped by a spider web in his study. The spider wrestles with the bee and falls to the ground after being stung by the bee. Soon, the spider 's abdomen swelled and cracked, slowly climbed into the grass, bit the taro stem to slightly rupture, and then rubbed the wound repeatedly against the break. After a long time, the spider abdomen gradually detumescence, restore as usual brisk agile. After that, anyone who was stung by bees was crushed with taro stems and applied to the wound, and immediately recovered.' [34]

The medicinal value of taro leaves is also valued by ancient physicians. 'Zhenglei Bencao', quoted from the fifth generation of Rihuazi, pointed out that taro leaves have the effects of tocolysis and detoxification. ' (Taro) can remove irritability and antidiarrheal, and can treat the symptoms of pregnant women 's upset, dizziness, chest tightness and fetal restlessness. In addition, external application of taro after grinding with salt can alleviate snake bites, carbuncle sores,

and trauma caused by poison arrows. [31] 'Baoqing Bencao Zhezong' also introduced the function of detumescence and detoxification of taro leaves. ' (Taro leaves) is cool and non-toxic. It can treat snake bites, carbuncle sores, and wounds caused by poison arrows. When used, it is necessary to apply salt to the affected area after grinding. '[1]p595 These records not only reflect the ancient physicians ' in-depth understanding of the medicinal value of taro plants, but also show the wisdom of traditional medicine to make the best use of things. From tubers to aboveground parts, from internal to external use, taro has formed a complete medicinal system in traditional medical practice, providing valuable experience for the development of traditional Chinese medicine in later generations.

Taro not only has edible value, but also shows many practical functions in daily life. First of all, taro has a significant cleaning effect and can be used for washing clothes. This use was clearly recorded in 'Shiliao Bencao' written by Meng Shen in the Tang Dynasty. 'The juice of boiled raw taro can be used to wash clothes contaminated with dirt and make clothes white as jade' [22]. Zhou Shouzhong in the Song Dynasty also included this record when compiling 'Yangsheng Leizuan' [23]. Secondly, taro also has the characteristics of anti-insect and moth-eaten. 'Wiping felt socks with raw taro can make felt socks durable and not easy to be moth-eaten.' [16]

It is worth noting that taro played an important role in the ancient seedling planting industry. According to the records of Huang Xiufu 'Maoting Kehua' in the Song Dynasty, an advanced technology for fruit tree cultivation by using taro was developed at that time: 'After the winter solstice and before the beginning of spring, the upright branches of high-quality fruit trees facing the sun were selected, which needed to have a knee-shaped scar, the size of which was like a thumb, about two feet long, and grafted into the tuber of taro. Dig the soil to be wide and deep, mix the mud to be delicate, cut the green onion about one liter, and stir in the mud. The grafted taro block is buried in the mud, covered with fine soil but not compacted, so that it can blossom in the same year and bear fruit in the next year. Its quality is far better than that of fruit trees directly planted with seeds.' [35] This method can not only significantly shorten the growth cycle of fruit trees, but also improve the survival rate, reflecting the high development of horticultural technology in the Song Dynasty. People in Shu are commonly used taro as a binder in grafting flower and fruit trees. 'When people in Shu are grafting flower and fruit trees, they use taro to bond the gap at the grafting site.' [36]

#### 4. The Taro in the Diet Poetry of the Song Dynasty Scholar-officials

Taro not only has medicinal and practical functions, but also has cultural functions. Taro is a common image in literati poetry, carrying the emotional sustenance of literati groups. The Song Dynasty is an important period for the development of China 's food culture. With the prosperity of the commodity economy and the change of social aesthetic taste, the literati had an unprecedented interest in food culture, and the proportion of diet poetry in the poetry creation of the Song Dynasty was greatly increased. Among them, taro is one of the common foods in the daily life of the literati, and the

related poetry works are not uncommon. These diet poems are not only a description of daily diet, but also carry the emotional sustenance of the literati group, which provides an important perspective for us to examine the social customs of the Song Dynasty and the inner world of the literati.

Some scholar-bureaucrats are tired of the officialdom's tendency to be inflamed, struggle for power and gain, and are full of yearning for the leisurely and comfortable rural life. Returning to nature has become the voice of some scholar-bureaucrats. In the seventh year of Qingli (1047), Ouyang Xiu, who had been relegated, was disappointed in the official career and the heart of seclusion came into being. In his poem, he said: 'The world is rugged and wants to leave, but instead, he plunges into the abyss of peril such as Jiaolong. Which is better than a leaf boat drifting, in the red lotus green waves between drunk and sleep.' [37] Su Shi's life career is also bumpy, full of the pain of officialdom, involuntarily issued a 'fame like a dream, will eventually get nothing' feeling. [38] He is very yearning for rural life, 'How many roads in the world can be chosen? Ask the farmers who work side by side in the field.' [38] The evil in the officialdom also made Yang Wanli unable to give birth to the idea of seclusion of mountains and forests. 'Although the seclusion of the countryside still needs salary to maintain his livelihood, the confusion of people in the officialdom and drifting with the flow is no longer worrying. Go back to the seclusion life in the mountains as soon as possible, and spend the rest of your life with poetry and wine.' [39] Yang Wanli 'A Letter from Home: My Son Shoujun's Words' is a frank promise to his son that he hopes to return to the countryside as soon as possible, 'I became an official is just to earn a mouth to eat, you should also study the classics and history books at home... We had better resign earlier to return home farming, tea and rice to spend the rest of their lives.' [39] p623 However, the scholar-official class generally upheld the sense of responsibility encapsulated in the phrase 'to worry before the world worries, and rejoice after the world rejoices.' Most were unable to achieve true reclusion, resorting instead to poetry as an outlet for their emotions.

As one of the daily food of the people in the countryside, the taro has naturally become an important symbol of pastoral life in the poetry of the Song Dynasty. Fan Chengda has a poem cloud: 'The roots of the firewood burned down in the snowy night quietly burning no smoke, the fireplace is warm like hot soup with wine. The old woman did not prepare the dishes, smiled and pointed to the ashes of fragrant roasted taro and chestnuts.' [40] The beauty of idyllic life is on paper. Lu You 'Poem Penned Upon Waking' said: 'How can national events be repeatedly destroyed? How can the poor people go to fame with me? As long as there is a wind furnace and pottery bowl, you may as well try the newly cooked taro soup while the early cold. It fully reflects Lu You's love for rustic life in the countryside.' [13] p60

Among them, the simmering taro was given the meaning of leisure in the works of the Song people. Cao Xun once said in a poem: 'Drink porridge in the morning and walk into the mountains, the fallen leaves rustling at my feet. The winding path to visit the hermit's residence, elegant talk to dispel thousands of worries in the heart. Cook bitter tea with aged soup, and simmer the mountain taro slowly overnight.' [41]

The poet cleansed his mind in the talk, tasted the real interest in the rough tea and light meal, and returned with a wild atmosphere and detached mood until the sunset. It seemed that he was temporarily separated from the shackles of earthly life, and his heart was only at ease. Hu Zhonggong also has a poem said: 'Heaven and earth are like a big house, as long as the heart is safe, wherever you go is home. Taste the world's flavors in the plain days, chanting poetry and Fu is enough to spend this life. From time to time, add some charcoal fire to the simmered taro, boil the spring water and taste the new tea immediately.' [42] Hu Zhonggong sketched out the realm of seclusion beyond the aloof with simple and light ink. In 'Parting Poem for Elder Ju Returning to Mount Lu', Fan Chengda invited friends to simmer taro together. 'The two thousand mile round trip is like a dream, and the forty years change like a duckweed. Go, don't stay under the mulberry tree for a long time; come back, let's simmer the taro together.' [40] p414 At this time, Fan Chengda was still in the middle of the official sea, and he was bored and yearned for a leisurely and comfortable pastoral life.

The Song people used a variety of fuels for simmering taro. In addition to the use of common firewood and charcoal, the Song people also used bran and cow dung. Lin Hong has used bran to simmer taro, 'taro, commonly known as Tuzhi. The larger taro, first wrapped in wet paper, then put the boiled wine mixed distiller's grains on the outer skin, and finally simmered slowly with the bran fire.' [9] p86 Compared with fur, the use of cow dung is more common. Cow dung is a common thing in the mountains, so it is more interesting in the mountains. Su Shi visited friends on New Year's Eve, and tasted the roasted taro with cow dung at his friends. 'The rustling wind in the pine forest brought bursts of spring cold, and the hungry belly cooed in the night. Roasting taro with cow dung, I, a mountain man, eats this coarse tea and light rice, learning the leisurely eating method of lazy monks.' [43] Liu Guo also has a poem saying: 'with cow dung piled fire slowly simmering cooked taro, from time to time can still pick up the taro left by lazy monks' [44] Liu Kezhuang also has a poem saying: 'Roasting tubers over cow-pat flames? No shame. Steeping leaves with deer-horn flowers? Delight.' [45] Cow dung and deer flowers are common things in rural life, with great mountain fun, reflecting Liu Kezhuang's pleasure in crude tea and rice, accompanied by mountain wild fun, and the realization of spiritual freedom in simplicity.

## 5. Conclusion

The society of the Song Dynasty had a strong taro culture. The edible methods of taro in the Song Dynasty were quite diverse, including simmering, boiling and steaming, which vividly reflected the development of the food culture in the Song Dynasty. The understanding of the edible taboos and detoxification methods of taro showed the superb knowledge of natural history at that time. The records of the medicinal and practical functions of taro in the literature of the Song Dynasty focus on the vivid practice of the concept of medical and food homology in the society at that time, as well as the survival wisdom of making full use of materials. The diet poetry works related to taro are also carrying the spiritual pursuit of the literati group's desire to return to the countryside and get close to nature. Therefore, the study of this problem provides a new way of thinking for us to study



the society of the Song Dynasty, and plays a positive role in improving the understanding of the society of the Song Dynasty.

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