Eating Turtles in Ancient China

The earliest Chinese literature is enthusiastic about eating turtles, and the popular favorite from ancient times has been the Soft-shelled Turtle (Amyda [Trionyx] sinensis), which is abundant in fresh water everywhere. "Roast Soft-shell" was a fortunate addition to a feast in Chou times (middle of the first millennium B.C.), and later too. The Giant Soft-shell (Pelochelys bibroni), which lives in deep sluggish rivers and along the coast of South China, made a lordly gift, and a prized ingredient in soups. A notice of this handsome dish survives from the seventh century B.C. These, then, were the old reliable kitchen turtles. But we know that the ancient Chinese ate others. The Ch'u ts'u, an old collection of poetry, full of stories about eating turtles, and the popular favorite from the fourth century, tells of a deliciously edible tree-climbing turtle of Kwangtung. Such was the situation in antiquity. It does not seem to have changed much in later times. T'ao Hung-ch'ing, the fifth century pharmacologist, recommended turtle broths and soups for their excellent tonic properties, and indeed we still have a fifth century recipe for making broth of the common soft-shelled turtle: it was cooked with mutton, onions, bean-relish, rice, ginger, magnolia, and wine. An eleventh century source tells how enormous Soft-shells (Pelochelys) were captured in the large rivers and lakes of the South and eaten—as were their eggs, which were pickled in salt. Another book, probably written in the fourth century, tells of a deliciously edible tree-climbing turtle of Kwangtung.

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1 Piehl.
2 Shih ching, "Hsiao ya; Lu yüeh": "roast turtle and minced carp" (Legge's translation).
3 Yüan. It grows up to four feet long.
4 Tso chuan, Hsian 4 (605 B.C.); Shih chi, 42, 0148d (K'ai ming ed.), "Cheng shih chia.""Chen shing chia.
5 The word used is hsi, which later, especially in the form tsu hsi or hsi kuei, refers specifically to the Loggerhead Turtle (Caretta caretta olivacea). But this animal makes rather poor eating. However it resembles the Hawksbill and Green turtles, and it may be that hsi was used as a collective term for these three sea-turtles. The giant Leatherback (Dermochelys coriacea) of tropical seas seems to appear in Chinese literature as the almost legendary ao2.
6 Quoted in Pen ts'ao kang mu [Shanghai, 1916; hereafter cited as PTKM], 45, 33b. Sun Szu-miao, in the seventh century, listed several taboos—turtle should not be eaten with pork, or melons, or wild rice, or pigweed. See loc. cit.
7 Chia Szu-hsieh, Ch'i min yao shu (Ts'ung shu chi ch'eng ed.), 8, 182.
8 The pharmacologist Su Sung, quoted in PTKM, 45, 35a. He observes that boiling the eggs of this turtle does not congeal the whites.
9 Shen Huai-yüan, Nan Yüeh chih, a lost book, here as quoted in T'u shu chi ch'eng, "Ch'in ch'ung tien," 151.
10 Our source says that its name was shen2 wu4, or...
Of the sea-turtles, the best known in China was the Hawksbill or Tortoise-shell Turtle of the seas off Kwangtung, which supplied an abundance of tortoise-shell to decorate artifacts used by the well-to-do. Two similar turtles are often referred to in literature. One, the tzul hsil, is reported as native to the waters and coasts of Kwangtung; its carapace provided an inferior substitute for true tortoise-shell. This must have been the Loggerhead Turtle.

Less often we find the name of a turtle called koul-pi, a sea-turtle from southern waters. Sometimes this rather mysterious creature was identified with the Loggerhead, but some authorities say that it resembles the Hawksbill, and that even the natives of the southern coasts confused it

ยูนูน ชุ่น หรือ ซิน คุเอิล; นิ้วมือเป็นสีทอง, และขนาดของนิ้วมือ; ด้านที่ซึ่งมีร่องศีรษะ นิ้วมือ; และมีต้นไม้ของนิ้วมือ. มันเป็นสัตว์ที่มีลักษณะคล้ายกับhawksbill, และที่นั้น even the natives of the southern coasts confused it

**GLOSSARY**

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| 貝 | ao²%
| 煌臂 | hsi⁴-pi⁴%
| 龜臂, 蛙臂 | koul¹-pi⁴%
| 𩔽 | pieh¹%