

Symposium: Foodways in Early East Asia

Tuesday, April 28, 2026, 1:00 pm to 3:30 pm

Galleria Room, Museum of Natural and Cultural History

The symposium is open to the public, and light refreshment will be provided.

Foodways in early East Asia reflect cultural identity, technological innovation, and community practices. Prehistoric societies across the region diversified their diets with wild resources, experimented with early farming, and developed distinctive cooking and serving traditions. This session highlights research on food procurement, preparation, and consumption in Neolithic China and Japan, alongside comparisons with food culture resilience in Oregon.

Program

- 1:00–1:15 pm Welcome address for the symposium, Dr. Todd Braje (director, MNCH)
- 1:15–1:25 pm Introduction of the symposium, Prof. Gyoung-Ah Lee (University of Oregon)
- 1:25–1:45 pm “Urbanization, food preparation, and food consumption at Liangchengzhen, China,” Prof. Anne Underhill (Yale University)
- 1:50–2:10 pm “Foodway diversity at the early Neolithic Balizhuang site in northern China (8000-7000 BP),” Prof. Xuexiang Chen (Shandong University)
- 2:10–2:20 pm Break
- 2:20–2:40 pm “Seeds, insects, and pottery tell plant cultivation in the Jomon period in Japan,” Prof. Hiroki Obata (Kumamoto University)
- 2:40–3:00 pm “Indigenous Foodways from Pleistocene to Present in the Northern Great Basin,” Prof. Katelyn McDonough (University of Oregon)
- 3:00–3:30 pm Q & A & Open Discussion

Talk Abstracts

Urbanization, food preparation, and food consumption at Liangchengzhen, China

Anne P. Underhill

Inspired by increasing publications calling for an understanding of daily food practices, this presentation examines ceramic and other lines of evidence that are informative about the preparation and consumption of foods at the late Neolithic, Longshan period settlement of Liangchengzhen located in the eastern seaboard (Haidai) area of northern China. It considers results from studies of food preparation and consumption in other urban areas of the world in addition to the specific cultural context and relevant spatial areas for one neighborhood at Liangchengzhen. There are some notable changes over time in addition to consistency in food practices among households.

Foodway diversity at early Neolithic Balizhuang site in northern China (8,000–7,000 BP)

Xuexiang Chen

What defined plant-based foodways in early East Asia during the transition to farming? This study investigates Balizhuang (7,900–7,300 cal. BP), a key early village in the middle Yellow River valley. Analysis of plant remains and food residues indicates a mixed subsistence strategy characterized by low-level food production. While millet cultivation had begun, Neolithic settlers at Balizhuang continued to rely heavily on a broad range of wild seeds, nuts, and fruits. The abundance of fruits suggests early tree management practices. Evidence from stone tools and pottery reveals the development of specialized techniques for processing diverse foods, including grinding and slow cooking. Comparative analysis shows that the emergence of agriculture in East Asia was not linear but followed multiple, flexible pathways.

Seeds, insects, and pottery tell plant cultivation in the Jomon period in Japan

Hiroki Obata

The 2007 identification of soybean impressions on Jomon pottery marked a significant turning point in Japanese archaeology and prompted systematic investigation of organic impressions. Subsequent nationwide studies employing X-ray analysis have revealed numerous impressions of seeds, fruits, and insects, which were previously unrecognized. Despite these advances, the nature of these inclusions—whether accidental or intentional—remains controversial. This study contends that they were purposefully incorporated and can illuminate both pottery production technique and ritual practice of Jomon people. This study proposes that seeds and insects were deliberately embedded in the clay as symbolic offerings associated with good harvest. This presentation introduces recent examples of pottery with intentional organic inclusions and examines the cultural motivations underlying this practice.

Indigenous Foodways from Pleistocene to Present in the Northern Great Basin

Katelyn McDonough

Foodways are central to culture, health, and identity yet many questions remain about ancient diets and the nutritional composition of traditional foods. Recent paleoethnobotanical research in central Oregon is contributing to our understanding of past diets, revealing diverse and enduring plant use extending back to the Pleistocene. Archaeological records and traditional knowledge both show that plants have always played important roles within Indigenous foodways in the Great Basin, yet nutritional information for those foods is scarce. This paper shares archaeological research at the Connley Caves, Oregon, and the Traditional Nutrition Project—a study developed by members of the Klamath Tribes, University of Oregon, and University of Nevada, Reno to understand diet and health in the past and present. Together, these efforts highlight the importance of traditional Indigenous plant foods.

Speaker Information

Prof. Anne Underhill (Anthropology, Yale University) is an archaeologist who researches the late Neolithic period of China with a focus on analysis of settlements, urbanization, craft production (especially ceramics), and mortuary ritual. Her main region for research is southeastern Shandong, where collaborative teams have conducted systematic regional survey and excavation at the Longshan period site of Liangchengzhen (c. 2300-2000 BC). Since 2010 she has taught in the Department of Anthropology at Yale University.

Prof. Xuexiang Chen (Archaeology, Shandong University) investigates the origin and spread of early agriculture and its role in the development of social complexity in early China. Her research focuses on the period from the Neolithic through the Bronze Age. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in the Haidai region of the lower Yellow River. Since 2007, she has served as a faculty member in the School of Archaeology at Shandong University.

Prof. Hiroki Obata (Archaeology, Kumamoto University) has worked as a cultural property specialist at the Fukuoka City Board of Education since 1983, where he was responsible for cultural resource management. As a faculty member at the Kumamoto University since 1995, he has investigated agricultural histories in Japan, Korea, China, and Southeast Asia. Recently, he developed creative methods using X-ray and CT equipment on pottery and reconstructed Neolithic fishing net weaving methods.

Prof. Katelyn McDonough (Anthropology, Native American and Indigenous Studies, MNCH, University of Oregon) is an environmental archaeologist who studies long-term relationships between people, foodways, health, and changing environments. Much of her ongoing research focuses on human-plant interactions, Indigenous stewardship practices, and shifting landscapes during and since the late Pleistocene in North and South America.

Event Sponsors

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