

2011

Frivolous Friday: In Praise of Jianbing 煎饼

Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Cunningham, Maura Elizabeth, "Frivolous Friday: In Praise of Jianbing 煎饼" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 852.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/852>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Frivolous Friday: In Praise of Jianbing 煎饼

April 15, 2011 in [Frivolous Friday](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

Wednesday morning began like any other. I poured some cereal, made a pot of coffee, and flipped open my laptop to catch up on what had filled my Google Reader and Twitter feed overnight. One of the links I clicked on took me to Evan Osnos's [Condé Nast Traveler](#) article about the ongoing "creative destruction" of Beijing, where my morning routine ended as soon as I read this paragraph:

At a stall just inside the western entrance, I order a fresh jianbing, a Beijing specialty of a piping-hot crêpe, made before my eyes on the griddle then folded around an egg and seasoned with chives, black sesame paste, coriander, mustard-plant leaves, and fermented soybean sauce. (Once, on an eating trip to Beijing, chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten pronounced the jianbing "the best breakfast in the world.")

Suddenly, my healthful breakfast of whole-grain cereal and reduced-fat milk had become completely unappealing. *Jianbing*. Now **that** is a way to start your day, chowing down on egg, crepe, and crispy fried *bing* out of a thin plastic bag that always seems inadequate to hold the enormous delicacy within it. The best breakfast in the world? Yes, indeed.

Jianbing vendors, however, don't roam the streets of Orange County, California, and I doubt I could assemble anything remotely resembling a true jianbing in my own kitchen even if I tried. Besides, half the enjoyment of jianbing is watching the creation come together atop a hot griddle stationed on a Beijing sidewalk. Quite simply, I wanted a jianbing *and there was nothing I could do about it*.

So, like any good 21st-century web user, I took to social media to express my discontent. Within hours, several of my US-based friends had joined me in lamenting the lack of jianbing in our lives. And thus, we decided to put our frustration to creative use, resulting in this: our first crowdsourced China Beat post, where we come to celebrate the humble jianbing.

Kate Merkel-Hess has mined the internet and put together a quick visual introduction to the food for anyone wondering what we're talking about and why we're so obsessed. First, [a jianbing maker in action](#):

Mouth-watering photos from Beijing Haochi's posts on [jianbing](#) and [jianbing sauces](#). Also see their feature on the Suzhou [jidan guanbing](#), a cousin to the jianbing:





Konrad Lawson, a Harvard University grad student and contributor to *Frog in a Well*, shares this jianbing memory:



Lawson and jianbing in 2004

When I was studying Chinese at IUP in Beijing over ten years ago there was something so comforting about the fact that, no matter how cold the winter mornings got, somewhere on the Qinghua campus roads between my dormitory and my first morning class there would be a jianbing seller ready to feed me. Was it a healthy breakfast? No. Did I really know what was in the brown mixture he ladled out from what looked like a well-used paint bucket? No. Was it the cheapest, most delicious, most awesome way to prepare me for my day of studies ahead? Yes.

So much did I love my simple jianbing, and so charmed was I watching the craftsman swirl a splash of batter around on his (only years later in Shandong would I come across my first female jianbing seller) round heated slab to just the right shape and thickness before adding the other ingredients, that I dedicated a homework essay to it. Using all of our most recently acquired vocabulary, only some of it remotely appropriate for such a composition, I wrote my ode to the jianbing and read it out in class. In it I not only lauded the craft and dedication of the jianbing maker, and the brilliant simplicity of the product, but suggested that, given the chance, this simple Chinese crepe was destined for greater glories. Create a cooperative of fifty dedicated jianbing makers with their talent and the entrepreneurial savvy to find the perfect time and perfect corner, and let's deploy them on the streets of New York, London, and Paris. Let them charge ten times or more what it cost at that time on Qinghua campus (2RMB) and customize it to the needs of the local market and a world of fusion foods. Don't like that fried dough? We have a healthy baked version. Don't like that meaty sauce? We have a spicy hummus spread. The possibilities are endless... Alas, my teacher had no faith in my vision, and more justifiably, even less in my ability to make the case in Chinese.

MEC: If you'd like to share your jianbing adoration, tweet your thoughts to [@chinabeat](https://twitter.com/chinabeat), or send an email to [thechinabeat\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:thechinabeat[at]gmail.com); I'll keep adding responses as they come in.



@seeingredchina

Tom

@chinabeat I look forward to my jianbing every morning from the friendly people at the breakfast cart. The only Chinese breakfast for me



@limlouisa

Louisa Lim

@chinabeat but where have all the jianbing sellers gone? nowadays they're getting hard to find in central bj.it's an urban breakfast tragedy