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Mixed with All the Hokum and Bally Hooey: ‘Chinese Food’ and America

Haiming Liu. *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express: A History of Chinese Food in the United States*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015. xi, 240 pp. Paper \$27.95, ISBN 978-0-8135-7474-5.

I did not learn that I ate “Chinese food” until I was fourteen years old. By this time, I had lived in Kuala Lumpur, London, Brookline (Massachusetts), Newark (Delaware), and, finally, Tampa. I ate food at home, food in cafeterias, food in other people’s homes, and food at stalls and restaurants all over the world. But until I went to my friend Chris’s house, and his father said “So, Chris tells me that your house smells like Chinese food,” I never thought that while my friends ate “food,” I ate “Chinese food.” Or, for that matter, that Chinese food clung to me and to my house. To me, this assertion seemed distinctly more complicated than already complicated questions I encountered constantly, like what was meant by the more typical and nearly incapacitating: “Where are you from?”

Did my house smell? And if it did, did it smell of food? And what did it mean that it smelled of Chinese food? I knew that I ate food, and food of all sorts. There were distinctions between kinds of foods, but those distinctions were on the level of nomenclature: pork chop, chicken rice, Sizzler, pizza, Campbell’s soup, pho. It was all food. We ate it all. We individually liked some dishes better than others, understanding that as a question of personal taste. But now, in this new light, food was something that defined me and, it was clear, defined me as different. It made me, in all senses and valences of the word, smell.

To be sure, the smell of Chinese food was not explicitly expressed by my friend’s father as a negative quality; it did not have to be. As it turns out, this Chinese smell assaulting the American nose has been recorded since American noses started encountering the Chinese on their shores and lanes in the nineteenth century. The newsman, Samuel Bowles, recorded in detail the lush banquet he attended in the company of a mixed group of white Americans, prominent Chinese merchants, and managers of the “Six Companies,” the umbrella group of overseas Chinese men who oversaw and eased the transit of

immigrants from different regions of China to the west. Bowles, while harboring sometimes generous sentiments towards the Chinese, reserved none of them for describing their food. Treated to a costly and extravagant multi-course banquet that lasted for five hours and spared no expense in its presentation and choice of exotic ingredients, Bowles opines:

The dinner was unquestionably a most magnificent one after the Chinese standard; the dishes were many of them rare and expensive; and everything was served in elegance and taste . . . But as to any real gastronomic satisfaction to be derived from it, I certainly 'did not see it' . . . I went to the table weak and hungry; but I found the one universal odor and flavor soon destroyed all appetite.¹

This attitude towards the “one universal odor and flavor” of Chinese food, capable of inducing anorectic response in the previously ravenous, is borne out in the itemization of many similarly phrased statements by other chroniclers of the time. Yong Chen notes that the problem associated with olfactory cues signal broader cultural projections, citing as an example the missionary Otis Gibson's 1877 title *The Chinese in America*:

The Chinese smell is a mixture and a puzzle, a marvel and a wonder, a mystery and a disgust; but nevertheless, you shall find it a palpable fact. The smell of opium raw and cooked, and in the process of cooking, mixed with the smell of cigars, and tobacco leaves wet and dry, dried fish and dried vegetables, and a thousand other indescribable ingredients; all these toned to a certain degree by what may be called a shippy smell, produce a sensation upon the olfactory nerves of the average American, which once experienced will not soon be forgotten.²

The unpleasant smell of the Chinese people, and their food, works up a kind of sympathetic magic where negative properties adhere as if by contagion. This phenomenon of sympathetic magic is described by the Penn psychologist Paul Rozin, whose study of the psychology of disgust points to its being largely a product of culture.³ How to account for the flourishing success of Chinese restaurants in America in spite of its origins, reeking as it does of the foul odor of a baleful reputation?

The past decade has brought us a spate of books that seek to trace exactly that pathway from associations with foul smells, rat tails, and puppies, to relative ubiquity in even the smallest towns in the United States. The tale of the assimilation of “Chinese food” into the American diet is explicitly tied to the assimilation of Chinese immigrant lives into the American fabric. By producing a history of that food item, the books suggest, these authors provide a chronicle of Chinese food in America, and expose the transformation of the American gastronomical landscape in which Chinese food became incorporated. These histories follow in a rich and relatively recent tradition of the study of food as cultural construction, particularly the construction of

ethnic identity, initiated in part by historians like Amy Bentley and Donna Gabaccia. Bentley's 1998 *Eating for Victory* demonstrated how American politics and consumerism, through food consumption and production patterns in government policies and population behaviors, are expressed in patterns of food consumption in World War II era America.⁴ Gabaccia's 1998 book *We Are What We Eat* situates the complicated evolution of American multicultural "melting pot" identity through the assimilation, and exclusion, of immigrant cuisines that "cross the boundaries of taste" from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe into the American diet as culinary companions of the assimilation, and resistance of exclusion, of the populations that brought them over.⁵ Gabaccia explores the complexities of national identity construction through the process of balancing conservative ethnic and regional individual and group identities with national identity.

Four books published between 2008 and the present are named after "Chinese food" items that have also been qualified as "Chinese American food"—the fortune cookie and chop suey—and each bears a subtitle after the colon that suggests grander ambitions. Andrew Coe's 2009 *Chop Suey* has: "A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States."⁶ The aforementioned Yong Chen's 2014 *Chop Suey* adds: "The Story of Chinese Food in America."⁷ Anne Mendelson's *Chow Chop Suey* is subtitled "Food and the Chinese American Journey."⁸ General readerships and viewers were offered similar frameworks, as with *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* and its subtitle: "Adventures in the World of Chinese Food" and the 2014 documentary film *The Search for General Tso: A Documentary Film about Chinese Food in America*.⁹ The main title begins by focusing on a specific food item, then transmits the purpose of the text: to present a history of the Chinese in America, via Chinese food. With their keyword search-friendly titling, they are lively presentations of the history of the Chinese in America; yet they do not always adequately interrogate the assumption of a mutually agreed upon notion of a universal Chinese food.

Whether a fortune cookie or chop suey is or is not authentically "Chinese" food is unanswerable. We are not even sure exactly what makes Chinese food Chinese; but, by making a dish like "chop suey" the expressed subject of the book, the author has to dedicate a significant amount of time to reiterating or rejecting the scant and frequently contradictory evidence relating to the history of a dish's origins before moving on to how a study of said dish exposes broader truths about "Chinese food." The studies proceed in the style of a crime procedural, as if the discovery of the ur-dish will go some way towards explaining its true identity. It also, sometimes unintentionally, sets up a supposition that deviation from the purported original renders the dish inauthentic and artificial.

It is undeniable that what appears on tables in different households at dinner time reflect vast differences formed by culinary history and technique, flavor constellations, and cultural practices that are deeply rooted in a family's social, ethnic, or cultural background. Two American households of Chinese ancestry with vastly different histories—that of a recently arrived restaurant worker from the north of mainland China and that of a third-generation family descended from a southern Chinese man who came to New York's Chinatown by way of Hong Kong, for example—may still be presumed likely to have more in culinary common than either would have with that of a white Midwestern family descended from Norwegian immigrant stock. Yet when we simply say “Chinese food,” we make an error of generalization that is not countenanced in other parallel conditions: if I were to answer “Chinese books” to the question of what kind I liked to read, the questioner would know very little about whether the books I like are cookbooks, or romance novels, or chemistry textbooks. And, indeed, to pursue that example the tiniest bit further, are “Chinese books” to mean books written in Chinese, books published in China, or books written in Chinese but by a non-Chinese author who may or may not have conducted extensive research in China? These tremors arise at just the slightest prod. Such tremors suggest that a blanketing term like “Chinese food” can only attend to its meaning via contradistinction: creating a suitable category to distinguish what other foods are *not* rather than what it itself might be. “Chinese food” in this conception seems something that exists in opposition to “American food,” in a way that undermines its purport of demonstrating how a small minority portion of the population insinuated itself in disproportionate ways into the food industry.

Haiming Liu's book *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express: A History of Chinese Food in the United States* does not use a food item as a metonym for a history of the Chinese in America. Rather, as the title suggests, the book could more properly be categorized as a history of the way that Chinese entrepreneurs all over America—either through transmission via a network of already-established men like themselves, or through the inspiration to replicate existing exemplary restaurants—capitalized on the flattening effect of ethnic labeling that created “Chinese food” as a reliable, consistent, and knowable brand. *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express* chooses not to train its focus exclusively on the laboring class of Chinese immigrants who came to fill the ranks of domestic workers, laundries, and eventually restaurants alongside their countrymen who toiled in mines and on the railroad. Those men, other scholars have contended, accounted for the rise and popularity of a dish like “chop suey,” representing as it did a cuisine of economy and cultural inferiority, even among the ethnic group that brought it to America. Instead, as the title suggests, Liu focuses the majority of his book on what Gabaccia calls the system of “enclave entrepreneurs,” who broached the distance between

specific products of their own particular ethnic enclaves and the curious consumer from outside the group.

This explanation of culinary border crossing as the direct beneficiary of the combined efforts of canny businessmen goes some way in accounting for the strange ways in which the menus of Chinese restaurants from Philadelphia to Montgomery to Tulsa all advertise the same repertory, with slight, but significant, differences. A *New York Times* article on the Chinese takeout menu printing hub in New York City, the printing source for Chinese takeout menus all over the United States, notes the shift of bulk menu orders at the time from Cantonese-owned to Fujianese-owned restaurants: “The Fujianese people like colorful; they like busy. [The four-colored menu with many photographs and insets] looks crowded. The owner of the restaurant, they feel scared, so they like the menu crowded to give them a safe feeling.”¹⁰ The visual details may differ, and the regional ties of the owners may differ, the article suggests, but the menu items stay the same. This kind of consistency, and the reassuring way that an order of chicken chow mein in an unknown place will not be all that different from one for sale at another unaffiliated restaurant far away, is precisely the logic that ensured the success of other ethnic crossovers, from pizza to salsa to hummus.

Liu argues in an introduction that lays out the book’s argument: that “Chinese food” was created by Chinese immigrants to capitalize on an idea of Chinese food. Citing the success of chop suey as an example, Liu writes:

Modified Chinese food became rooted in American society and constituted an important part of the American restaurant market. However, this is not an example of Chinese “assimilation” into American society. Instead, chop suey became a tool or a strategy for Chinese immigrants to create an occupational niche for themselves during the Chinese exclusion era. It represents a creative adaptation of Chinese Americans to American society (p. 3).

Liu’s argument is at its strongest when it hews to this model for understanding “Chinese food” as a social construction, facilitated both by identity politics in America and opportunistic business models that built on the perceived culinary faddish curiosity for Chinese food. As the ongoing research of historian Heather R. Lee shows, it also flourished in response to a legal loophole that allowed restaurant ownership as a pathway to American citizenship. Chapters move chronologically, making case studies of restaurants such as the nineteenth century Canton Restaurant in California in chapter 1, to P.F. Chang’s, Panda Express, and Din Tai Fung in chapters 8 and 9. In between these, there are chapters that pause to draw out the history of the early immigrants to America, in chapters 2 and 3; three chapters focusing on Chinese food history curiosities such as the rise of chop suey (chapter 4), the conjoining of Jewish and Chinese America in the passion of the former for the food of the latter (chapter 5), and the branding of General Tso’s chicken

(chapter 6); and a chapter on California's San Gabriel Valley as an enclave for post-1965 Chinese-American immigrants (chapter 7).

This slender book delivers its tales with lively storytelling and well-placed details, with obvious relish for the telling anecdote, and a careful folding of such into its narrative. There are occasions when the reader wishes for more, as with chapter 5, "Kung Pao Kosher: American Jews and Chinese Food." The chapter's focus on the cultural meaning Chinese food had to some Jewish audiences does not build up the book's argument about creative adaptation with as many examples from the restaurant side as it does with anecdotal comments from the consumer side. The book's stated interest in the entrepreneurial spirit that ensured the ubiquity of Chinese food for all markets misses an opportunity to fortify itself with a closer look at the way that both Jewish and Chinese restaurateurs seized on this aspect of the market, albeit a relatively small one. There are fascinating historical examples that could have emerged from making case studies of a few such restaurants in this chapter. There is evidence in the historical record, and still quite a few contemporary informants, among restaurateurs—whether as a Jewish owner learning to hire and train a Chinese cook, or as a Chinese owner learning about how to check vegetables for insects under the watchful eye of a *mashgiach*—who creatively adapted to the equally wondrous and bewildering subculture of *glatt kosher* Chinese restaurants.

The book has a habit of referring to foods as "authentic Chinese food" in a way that belies a more carefully crafted narrative about ethnic resilience (p. 124) and the acknowledgment that multiplicities of Chinese regional identities and its foods have historically been conceded to the shadow of one imperfectly constructed umbrella. Referring to a dish instead as a local regional specialty would go much further in service of the overall claims of the book than an unquestioning use of "genuine" (p. 120) or "authentic Chinese food" (p. 138) to describe a dish. Authentic to whom? The author has a similar tendency to deliver statements with authority, without supporting sources, that implies that something is so commonly known to the emic reporter that it lacks the need of corroborative evidence. Frequently prefaced by "actually," statements project a confidence about meaning that sometimes rings worryingly, as when explaining terms. For example, Liu quotes these lines from a nineteenth century article about Chinese food: "they cook chickens and ducks nicely though queerly . . . shark's fins, stewed bamboo, duck's eggs boiled, baked, and stewed in oil, pork disguised in hot sauces, and other things like these, are the standard dishes of a Chinese bill of fare, though they have an infinite variety of sweetmeats which are really palatable, and of sweet cakes, which are inviting in their quaint, odd, forms and decorations." This is followed with Liu's explanatory sentence: "'The infinite variety of sweetmeats' . . . was actually *cha shao*, or barbecue pork, beef, or even fish in Cantonese cuisine. In fact, *cha shao* is still popular among the Chinese today" (pp. 43–44). Why sweetmeats cannot be understood in its common usage

in English as candied fruits and nuts, also a frequent accompaniment in Chinese, especially Cantonese, banquets at the time and indeed in the present; or, just as well, understood as such from the context of the passage where it is grouped together with the sweet cakes, is not explained. It piqued my interest that Liu may have uncovered corroborating evidence that showed how the Cantonese tradition of sweet roasted meats became categorized as sweets by American consumers in the late nineteenth century, in line with mid-twentieth century concoctions such as ground beef-laced fudge; but, if he did, he does not share his source, leaving the reader to wonder if this explanation is based on conjecture. This example, and others like it, is hardly worth quibbling over, except that such moments in the text alert the reader to the presence of other authorial interpretive intrusions that may suggest greater impediment, such as the aforementioned references to authenticity and genuineness.

Taken as a whole, however, this book is a welcome addition to a growing body of scholarship that insists on the inclusion of Chinese immigrant history as a crucial part of American history, especially viewed through the lens of the remarkable way that “Chinese food” has become part of America’s culinary landscape. Liu’s book asks questions that are not always asked, because it revises our focus on the history of the early Chinese in America from the illiterate labor force toiling in mines and laundries to include the well-organized network of wealthy, multilingual, and canny businessmen who took advantage of all opportunities that allowed them greater influence in a country explicitly moving to exclude them from any opportunity at all. In their innovations, Liu sees the seeds of the same dynamic of business opportunity and enclave ambassador spirit that ushers the way in for the commodification of “Chinese food” as universally recognized product. What this speaks to has less to do with searches for authenticity than it does searches for consistency. There will always be a place for food of this kind, food that is reassuring, recognizable, and culturally normalized for the average consumer who typically eats out as a convenience or as a modest treat.

The food at the kinds of Chinese restaurants described in Liu’s book should not bear our anxieties about cultural preservation or authenticity; rather, they reflect just one of many food-centered narratives on how to accommodate the twin human impulses of curiosity and fear of the foreign. This fear is not necessarily one tinged with associations of foreigner with dangerous entity, although sometimes it does turn out to be the unfortunate case; indeed, not wanting to offend, or fear of not knowing what to order or how to behave, are equally likely reasons behind the fear of unknown foods. One author describes her own childhood encounter with Chinese food:

I have long forgotten most details of the meal in Philadelphia’s tiny Chinatown that I was taken to as a child, probably during the early 1950s. But the sense of an alien quality, something disturbingly *different* about the food,

is as sharp as ever in my memory. I have never involuntarily flinched in the same way from Indian, Japanese, or any other “foreign” cuisine.

She goes on to suggest that her struggle with Chinese food had to do with an “inexplicable, off-putting smell . . . nameless bits of this or that . . . brazen juxtapositions of ingredients [and] a peculiarly dense, complicated intertwining of several unfamiliar flavors at once.”¹¹ The involuntary flinch in response to the unknown that she describes is precisely that defined in Rozin’s physiology of disgust. It speaks to why even the most sophisticated and adventurous eater in her homeland may still revert to the comfort and predictability of recognizable brands transmitted by golden arches or the words “pizza” when she travels abroad; or goes out to eat with a fussy child; or, that most dire of situations, travels abroad with a fussy child.

Chinese entrepreneurs recognized this twin desire for the exotic and the predictable, which underpins a hunger for assimilation as a place of negotiated meeting, a place that is desired by both sides, but also quite hard to reach. The impossibility of such an effort inevitably results in the creation of something hybrid and artificial. It is the desire to overcome that fear, an accommodation so elegantly detailed in Krishnendu Ray’s recent study of ethnic restaurant workers, that results in the creation of an aura of knowability around an ethnic cuisine; and it is equally right that those whose personal identities are supposedly defined by this hybrid result now bristle against that externally imposed identification.¹² Chinese businessmen overcame consumers’ fear and loathing by learning to identify those anxieties, and to reframe expectations in a way that they could be met.

How did they intuit this so well? It is a skill refined by the sometimes gentle, sometimes frenetic, always balletic experience of immigrants the world over. That feeling of uncertainty about the contents of boxes, the concern about what utensils to use, and when to start using them in a meal. The mystifying labels and packages, the confusing smells and names. Craving the foods that they left behind, and faced with the markets of their adopted land, they learned that substitutions must be made: bacon for guanciale, broccoli for *gailan*, cheaper cuts for expensive ones, ketchup for tomato sauce. Equal to their own private labors of substituting and appropriating were the constant reminders by—sometimes innocent, sometimes cruel, impossible to tell apart in tone—questions and comments that they were not like those who encountered them. They acceded to the distillation into “Chinese food” of the vastness of their cuisine because they had already acceded to the distillation of their vast personhood into being the “Chinaman” with all his assumed characteristics. They understood that it was on definitions of that kind that the notion of “American food” and, it followed, “American,” was delicately constructed. Having left their languages, families, friends, and names behind, they strove nevertheless to copy the flavors of home. They first had to learn

to make it up with what was available to them; and then they turned to welcoming the already-there in for a taste. And a smell.

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NOTES

1. Samuel Bowles, *Our New West: Records of Travel Between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean; Over the Plains—over the Mountains—through the Great Interior Basin—over the Sierra Nevadas—to and Up and Down the Pacific Coast; with Details of the Wonderful Natural Scenery, Agriculture, Mines, Business, Social Life, Progress, and Prospects . . . Including a Full Description of the Pacific Railroad; and of the Life of the Mormons, Indians, and Chinese; with Map, Portraits, and Twelve Full Page Illustrations* (Hartford: Hartford Publishing Company, 1869), pp. 408–412.
2. Otis Gibson, *The Chinese in America* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden, 1877), pp. 63–64 quoted in Yong Chen, *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 83.
3. Paul Rozin and April Fallon, “A Perspective on Disgust,” *Psychological Review* 94, no. 1 (1987):23–41.
4. Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
5. Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
6. Andrew Coe, *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
7. Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*.
8. Anne Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey: Food and the Chinese American Journey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
9. Jennifer 8 Lee, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (New York: Twelve, 2008); Ian Cheney, *The Search for General Tso* (2015).
10. Alex Mindlin, “The Kings of Sweet and Sour,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 2004.
11. Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey*, pp. 28–29.
12. Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).