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Review of:

From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express: A History of Chinese Food in the United States

Haiming Liu. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Press, 2015. Pp. 212, bibliography, index.

By: Lucy M. Long

Not only is Chinese food one of the most popular ethnic cuisines in the United States, it is also a popular subject of critical analysis (Chen 2014, Cho 2014, Coe 2009, Lee 2009, Mendelson 2016). This addition to the literature offers a thought-provoking overview of Chinese food, as both commodity and cultural tradition, that has over the centuries incorporated new styles, new ingredients, and new tastes while maintaining its essential character and strong ties to regional identities. Recognizing the role of race in shaping American society, Liu explores how Chinese food in America represents the “eternal other,” in that no matter how assimilated the food or the individuals preparing and serving it become, it continues to be perceived as “foreign.” At the same time, this food illustrates the complexity of the Chinese diaspora and the continuous interchange of people and cuisines across the Pacific. Through historical and ethnographic accounts and by focusing on individual “moments” in Chinese American food history in the form of specific dishes, restaurants, entrepreneurs, cookbooks, and films, Liu argues that Chinese American food is not only translocal and transnational, it is simultaneously authentically Chinese and authentically American.

Liu offers fascinating data and intriguing interpretations that are both insightful and frustrating; the latter instances, for a number of reasons, make it difficult to embrace the book wholeheartedly. More effective editing could have avoided the repetition and redundancy of information, concepts, and phrases throughout the book, along with grammatical errors and questionable word choices. Occasional errors stand out, for example, Crab Rangoon, a fried wonton filled with cream cheese and crab, is described as made of cream *and* cheese, rather than the distinctive product known in the US as “cream cheese.” More problematic, however, is a lack of attentiveness to the complexity and nuances



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of such concepts as authenticity, tradition, identity, cuisine, commodification, and so on, that are central to the author's main points. Simply stating that food carries identity and culture is not illuminating; although the book illustrates that idea, the idea itself needs to be more fully articulated. Passages that acknowledge concepts often seem a little tacked on to the otherwise excellent historical and ethnographic descriptions. Further, some analyses demand more contextualization within the broader history of the US. Identifying American food as British fails to recognize the historical and political complexities making up what might be called mainstream American food. Perhaps the most problematic interpretation, however, is Liu's assessment of the perseverance and popularity of Chinese food in the US as resulting partly from it being some of the best food in the world. Aesthetic judgments of food are highly personal and individualistic; taste is socially constructed, as are notions of edibility, healthiness, and cleanliness. Liu's characterization of Chinese food as the best takes away from his own status as an objective scholar and dilutes his more useful observations about the food culture's flexibility and adaptability.

The book is organized historically beginning with the first Chinese immigrants to California in the late 1840s, then focuses on the development of Chinese American restaurants into the present. These establishments offered work in a society that oftentimes shut out Asians from other opportunities, and they also offered spaces for community, nostalgic gathering and eating, and for negotiating Chinese identity and culture with the larger American ones. Much of the book challenges commonly accepted stereotypes about this diverse ethnic food culture. Chapters 1 and 2 describe how the earliest Chinese restaurants were established by wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs who were experienced not only in running restaurants but also in dealing with international customers. These restaurants actually became models for American-style dining halls and were applauded for their sophistication, cleanliness, and professionalism. As described in Chapter 3, however, anti-Asian sentiments in the latter part of the 1880s culminated in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and changed the status of Chinese immigrants (and American-born Chinese) and Chinese food. Chinese restaurants have had to fight the stereotypes ever since of serving cheap food made from questionable ingredients, even while these restaurants spread throughout the nation. Chapter 4 describes how the enduring stereotypes of Chinese food are embodied by the dish "chop suey," an invention in the US that became a mainstay of Chinese American food and is even today an icon of its identity. The outsider status of Chinese restaurants is further explored in Chapter 5 and used partially to explain the well-known affinity that Jewish Americans hold for Chinese food, particularly on Christmas day. Other scholars



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have explored this connection as well, and Liu could have usefully drawn upon some of that work, particularly those that approach the phenomena as ritual and tradition.

Liu's point that Chinese American food has always been translocal and transglobal is demonstrated in Chapter 6 in his discussion of Taipei, Taiwan as an important hub in the more recent Chinese diaspora in the second half of the 1900s. As such, it contained restaurants serving numerous regional cuisines, particularly Hunan. Immigrants from Taipei brought those styles of cooking and recipes to the US, including the ubiquitous invented American favorite, General Tso's Chicken. Liu gives only a nod to the Chinese immigrants to the US from other nations in the diaspora—Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and many more. While I lack the knowledge to assess the fairness of his claim for Taipei, I do think that one of the strengths of the book is the locating of developments in Chinese American food culture in specific places: San Francisco, New York, and, in Chapter 7, the San Gabriel Valley in California from the 1960s on. The restaurant scene there is only the tip of a larger cultural shift in which Chinese Americans moved out of urban Chinatowns, adapted effectively to American society and established their own neighborhoods, grocery stores, and other businesses. They also interacted with other immigrant groups from Asia, creating a blended Asian American fusion culture.

Chinese American food culture also responded to trends in the larger American food culture and society, allowing for the rise of chain restaurants. Chapter 8 explains how P.F. Chang's was able to transform Chinese food into an acceptable and familiar dining experience for middle-class American eaters looking for a "safe" exotic meal. Similarly, Panda Express was able to break into the fast food market. While some of the success is due to entrepreneurial skill, some also reflects the growing multicultural palate of mainstream Americans. The final chapter illustrates again the transglobal character of Chinese food today by tracing the paths of dumplings from Shanghai to Taipei to San Francisco and back to mainland China. The conclusion reiterates that Chinese food has always been both a commodity and a cultural tradition, and significantly, that it is a historical practice for it to be adapted without losing its identity.

How does this book compare to others on this topic? Liu writes primarily as an historian and ethnographer. He offers a good deal of substance but less readability than some other publications, and his lack of clarity in his exploration of the cultural implications of his information make the book less



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useful for scholars than it could be. At the same time, Liu perhaps makes more general readers aware that Chinese food in America is more than just a quick and inexpensive meal. It represents a rich and complex history of people, the food they eat, and the food they serve to others.

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