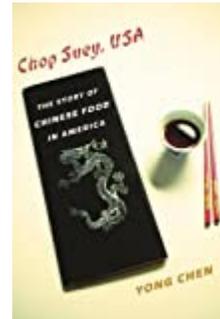




Yong Chen. *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America.* Arts and Traditions of the Table: Perspectives on Culinary History Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 312 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16892-2.



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Chop Suey: America's First Big Mac?

He had barely stepped off the plane when historian Yong Chen's American host thrust a sandwich and cup of milk into his hands and said: "You are a Yankee now; please eat some American food" (p. xi). It did not take long for Chen's "Chinese stomach" to protest. Wherever he traveled, he sought out Chinese restaurants. And he found them! They were everywhere! His culinary cravings inspired a question. Why did the United States support so many Chinese restaurants? *Chop Suey, USA* is Chen's answer.

Chen quickly dismisses the "The Best in the World" hypothesis (p. 11). If Chinese food is always and everywhere judged superior, why is American fast food so popular in China? He is unsympathetic to the "Cultural Transnationalization" explanation as well (p. 14). A Chinese restaurant may have offered American diners the vicarious joy of travel to China, but if they viewed China as a filthy, impoverished, rat-infested country, such "joy" would have been one most would happily forego. Instead, Chen suggests, the key to understanding Chinese food's widespread popularity but fundamental lack of re-

spect is that it is an "empire food," an inexpensive, ubiquitous food available to the American public through the agency of an American "empire." "Chop suey," he writes, "was the Big Mac of the pre-McDonald's era" (p. 4).

Is the United States an empire? Yes, Chen argues, just not a traditional one. Unlike Rome, which "conquered its world with Roman legions," or Britain, whose Royal Navy ruled the seas, the United States achieved domination through its mass consumer culture (p. 45). Home to a "people of plenty," America conquered with the promise of a better life (p. 28). To achieve and maintain its domination, Chen asserts, America relied on low-pay service workers to supply a cornucopia of consumption delights that seduced outsiders into voluntary allegiance.

Is Chinese food "empire food"? It is not a classic "empire food" like chocolate, sugar, coffee, pineapple, and tea, foods that became "important and popular commodities in mass consumption (in the empire nation) ... (and were) often produced by those who were not citizens of

the empireâ (p. 22). As Chen readily acknowledges, Chinese food is not a single ingredient but a food *system*. Nor has it become American the way tea has become British. Still, Chen insists, the ubiquity of Chinese food and its low cost were important in bringing restaurant meals, a luxury consumption good in the early twentieth century, to the masses (p. 22). âIn a word, [the Chinese] were empire stewardsâ (p. 43).

This empire stewardship role, Chen admits, took some time to develop. The earliest Chinese immigrants worked in mining and construction though they were soon muscled out of those industries and threatened with outright expulsion. Chen argues that it was the intervention of clergy and other sympathetic observers promoting Chinese usefulness as service providers that won them a temporary reprieve. Quoting diaries, newspapers, and magazines, Chen documents these supportersâ arguments. âFor patience, docility, willingness to receive instruction, and economy, we have not seen the equals of the Chinese,â wrote the Reverend William Speer (p. 46). âAlmost every Chinaman is, by a kind of natural instinct, good both at cooking and at bargaining,â opined the Reverend Robert Henry Cobbold (p. 48). As early as 1870, domestic service had emerged as the third largest occupation of Chinese Americans. By 1920, domestic and personal service occupations accounted for fully 60 percent of the Chinese workforce (p. 52). âThe idea of service jobs naturally befitting the Chinese also illustrates a reality in the global division of labor between whites and non-whites, and between rich and poor nationsâ (p. 49).

Given the eventual popularity of Chinese food, it is interesting to learn that the Chinese who cooked in nineteenth-century white peoplesâ homes did not cook Chinese. Instead, as a somewhat critical observer noted in 1869, the Chinese âimitate the American style with painful accuracyâ (p. 63). But even while Chinese domestic servants were learning Western-style of cooking, they kept their own cooking traditions alive in Chinatowns. These enclaves were crammed with restaurants, patronized by Chinese residents who often lived in overcrowded quarters without private cooking facilities. They were also patronized by the Chinese âminers, farmhands, railroad laborers, laundrymen, and cooks outside Chinatown [who] could not easily avail themselves of Chinese foodâ in the places where they resided (p. 89). Chinese loyalty to their own food maintained a market for it, even during the darkest days of anti-Chinese agitation.

So how did Chinese food finally become popular with non-Chinese Americans? Chen attributes this cultural

shift to two developments. One was âa profound demographic and socioeconomic transformation of Chinese Americaâ in which the Chinese became geographically concentrated in Chinatowns and occupationally concentrated in the laundry and restaurant industries. During this era, Chinatowns transformed themselves from targets of hatred into objects of curiosity; from places of danger to sites of pleasure (p. 95). The second was âthe extraordinary expansion of the American economyâ (p. 93). With higher incomes, more non-Chinese could afford Chinatownâs pleasures, especially Chinese restaurant meals.

To better understand the making of Chinese food and its meaning, Chen next turns to an investigation of the key players, Chinese American food providers and their non-Chinese clientele. The non-Chinese clientele, Chen argues, and here I think he is wrong, was composed of three principle groups, all marginal to the larger American society. The first were âslummers,â âadventurous and rebellious city youths,â who patronized Chinese restaurants precisely because their parents abhorred them. While these bohemians helped launch the chop suey craze, Chen reports, they were too few in number to fuel a sustained trend. Police crackdowns in the late 1910s and early 1920s largely eliminated them. The Chinese found a more stable customer base, Chen argues, in the African American community. With limited incomes and facing discrimination in many restaurants run by whites, Chinese restaurants were one of the few places that African Americans could afford and in which they could feel welcomed. The other stable clientele for Chinese food were Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. Settling in New York City only a few blocks from Chinatown, it did not take them long to discover chop suey. Apart from the Chinese reliance on pork and shellfish, there were many similarities between Chinese and Jewish food. Citing food critic Mimi Sheraton, Chen notes that both favored chicken soup, tea, and dishes seasoned with garlic, onion, and celery. Neither cuisine mixed meat with milk. Chinese restaurants were open Sundays and Christmas Day and they displayed no Christian iconography or anti-Semitic antagonism. In Chinese restaurants, eastern European Jews could feel like Americans. âPersistent Jewish support was critical for the rise of Chinese food,â Chen insists (p. 119).

The three final chapters address related but somewhat distinct issues. Why did Americans fall in love with the simple and inexpensive Chinese dishes like chop suey while rejecting Chinese haute cuisine? His answer is that âthe rise of Chinese food performed a social service

rather than an admiration of Chinese cooking as a culinary artâ (p. 126). In support of this argument, he quotes numerous non-Chinese for whom the most notable feature of Chinese food was its low price. The âslummers,â African Americans, and eastern European Jews, Chen argues, were people for whom price trumped most other considerations. Their choices came to define the image of Chinese American food for the society at large. âAmerica has enjoyed Chinese food as a convenient and affordable service but has yet to fully embrace it as a cuisine,â Chen writes (p. 152).

Chinese cookbooks began appearing in large numbers, especially after World War II. Intended as âculinary ambassadors,â Chinese cookbooks situated Chinese cooking in the context of its larger culture and went beyond standard Chinese American restaurant fare to offer readers âa more systematic and comprehensive knowledge of Chinese cookingâ (p. 163). They introduced the non-Chinese American public to stir-fry; dim sum; and the delights of Sichuan, Hunan, Yunnan, and other Chinese provinces beyond the Guangdong origins of Americaâs earliest Chinese immigrants. Despite these cookbook authorsâ best efforts, however, Chinese American food remains disrespected, according to Chen. This will change only if the Chinese economy continues to grow and Chinese workers become highly paid. âWhen Americans can no longer get a Chinese lunch special for as little as the price for a Starbucks coffee, when customers no longer expect the entire Peking duck for less than \$30, and when opera-goers regularly dine in a Chinese restaurant before going to a theater for Puccini, then a new geo-economic order will be just around the corner. Then, perhaps,... there will no longer be the American Chinese food as we know itâ (p. 181).

The bookâs strongest elements are the section on the Chinese experience in early San Francisco and in the gold mining districts (which borrows from Chenâs earlier work, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850-1943* [2000]), and the accounts of Chinese engaged in domestic service in the late nineteenth century. Citing travelersâ reports and newspaper articles, Chen provides a vivid picture of early Chinese restaurants, Chinese experiences in mining camps, and the strange encounters of people from all over the world who were drawn to California by the lure of instant wealth.

I am less persuaded by the overarching Chinese-as-âempire stewardsâ framework. If America âneededâ the Chinese to supply low-cost services, then why did it exclude them after 1882? In the standard story, Americans

became a âpeople of plentyâ because wages were high, not because services were cheaply supplied. When organized labor came to view the Chinese as a threat to its high wages, it mobilized and ousted them.[1]

Chen is incorrect when he states that in the late nineteenth century âthe anti-Chinese forces simply cleansed Chinese settlements from the open space of small-town Americaâ and âsafely contained [them] in the confines of a few urban blocks in major citiesâ (p. 96). It is true that in the West the Chinese were driven out of many towns and even cities, but in the East, Midwest, and South the Chinese moved into communities without Chinatowns to open laundries and restaurants.[2] Even those living in big cities with established Chinatowns often resided and worked in the non-Chinese neighborhoods of those cities to be close to their customers.[3]

While Chen is correct that many Chinese restaurants then and now direct their appeal to customers looking for a low-cost meal, his insistence on an equivalence between chop suey and Big Macs leads him to ignore the many elaborate palaces that served refined and high-priced Chinese cuisine in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[4] Chop sueyâs appeal was certainly not limited to âslummers,â African Americans, and east European Jews. The white soldiers and sailors stationed around Portland, Maine, in the early 1900s ate it, too.[5] So did the governor of Wisconsin.[6] For Carol Kennicott, Sinclair Lewisâs fictional heroine in *Main Street* (1920) and certainly no âslummer,â it was cosmopolitan. For President Calvin Coolidge, it was such a favorite that he employed a Chinese chef to cook it for him on the presidential yacht.[7] For Jack Kerouac, the deeply religious French Canadian Catholic, it was one of the few luxuries in which his family indulged as he was growing up in gritty Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1930s (*Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* [1959]). Middle-class moms made it for their families. Everyone ate chop suey.

Chen seems not to appreciate how few Chinese were living in the United States when Chinese food began changing the way Americans ate. Speaking of the 1910 era, he writes, âThe labor force in the nationâs service sectors never became entirely Chineseâ (p. 56). How could it when the Chinese accounted for only one-tenth of 1 percent of the total American population? If every Chinese American man, woman, and child had worked in the service sector they would have comprised less than 3 percent of that workforce.

Chen also misstates the relative growth rates of the Chinese and American economies. While the American

economy did grow at the healthy average annual rate of 4.5 percent over the last thirty years of the nineteenth century,[8] this was hardly analogous to the economic miracle taking place in China in the late twentieth centuryâ (p. 93). Whereas the American growth rate boosted real output to 3.6 times its original level of thirty years earlier, the Chinese growth rate bumped up output by over ten-fold over a similar length of time. Chenâs figure 7 implies an impossible average annual growth rate of the Chinese economy of over 15 percent and a thirty-two-fold increase in output over the last quarter century. This is just wrong.

More appealing is the personal story that motivates and enlivens the narrative. My favorite example of the latter is Chenâs description of his motherâs first cookbook which she bought in Maoist China in the early 1970s and used, for the most part, âfor her reading pleasure. In those days of food shortages, many ingredients mentioned in the 496-page book were beyond our reach, and someâsuch as spaghetti, cream, bearâs paw, sharkâs fin, and deer antlerâmy mother had never even seen or heard ofâ (p. 153).

This well-researched book comes with seventy-eight pages of notes and a thirty-one-page bibliography. It is seasoned with interesting recipes, most of them chosen for their personal significance. Chenâs mother taught him the one for âSteamed Savory Pork Belly with Preserved Vegetablesâ (p. 5). Chen includes Julia Childâs gumbo recipe simply because he likes it (p. 64). The recipe for âRisotto with Sheep Belly Mushroomsâ is meant to illustrate the overlap between ingredients in Italian and Chinese cuisines and to support Chenâs belief that Americans need to take Chinese cuisine more seriously. âFor many American elites,â Chen writes, âChinese food is not high-class enough to be associated with opera. But using what people in Yunnan Province call sheep-belly mushrooms (morels), the following dish may go very well with Pucciniâ (p. 148).

Individually and collectively, these personal stories reinforce a point Chen makes in the afterword: âTo more appropriately appreciate the significance of food, we have to recognize not only its intimate connection to every facet of our socioeconomic, cultural, and political life but also its central importance to our physical well-being and existence. To do so, we must study and understand food from perspectives that transcend the boundaries of traditional disciplines. This is a daunting task, but it also makes the study of food an exciting intellectual endeavorâ (p. 187).

An exciting intellectual endeavor indeed!

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Mary Roberts Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (New York: Henry Holt, 1909); and Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[2]. For evidence of Chinese restaurants in small towns, see Gary Libby, âHistorical Notes on Chinese Restaurants in Portland, Maine,â *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (2006): 47-56; Sherri Gebert Fuller, *Chinese in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2004); and John Jung, *Sweet and Sour: Life in Chinese Family Restaurants* (n.p.: Ying and Yang Press, 2010). See also Andrew Coe, *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Susan B. Carter, âAmericaâs First Culinary Revolution, or How the Girl from Gopher Prairie Came to Dine on Egg Fooyung,â in *Economic Evolution and Revolutions in Historical Time: Essays in Honor of Gavin Wright*, ed. Paul Rhode, Joshua Rosenbloom, and David Weiman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 419-446.

[3]. Paul Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study in Social Isolation* (New York: New York University Press, 1987); and Xinyang Wang, *Surviving the City: The Chinese Immigrant Experience in New York City, 1890-1970* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001).

[4]. Libby, âHistorical Notes on Chinese Restaurantsâ; Huping Ling, *Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004); David B. Holmes and Wenbin Yuan, *Chinese Milwaukee* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008); and Huping Ling, *Chinese Chicago: Race, Transnational Migration, and Community since 1870* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

[5]. Libby, âHistorical Notes on Chinese Restaurants.â

[6]. âGovernor Eats Chop Suey,â *Oshkosh [WI] Daily Northwestern*, September 14, 1908.

[7]. âChicken Chop Suey a la Coolidge,â *The Dispatch* [Lexington, NC], July 22, 1972.

[8]. Samuel H. Williamson, âWhat Was the U.S. GDP Then?â *MeasuringWorth*, 2015, <http://www.measuringworth.org/usgdp/>.

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