

grassroots voices, already underrepresented in the archival footage that constitutes the bulk of the film.

When *Banana Ruled* is a fruitful resource for introducing students to the opacities of long-distance food systems, and for stimulating debate on the promises and ills of global capitalism, although the film's unabashed critique of American multinationals will likely strike some as too one-sided. As a visual companion, it will give life to readings that might otherwise feel distant from students' everyday lives. Instructors should note that much of the footage remains unlabeled, which may paint a somewhat placeless and timeless image of the "banana republics." Viewing the film alongside Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg's volume *Banana Wars* (2003) would help give historical and geographic specificity to what might come across as UFC's totally homogenizing grasp. Moreover, the spread of Panama disease (aka "banana wilt") as a parable of an empire "rotting from the inside" will raise important questions about the logic of infinite accumulation in a world of finite resources. Environmental histories by John Soluri (2005) and Steve Marquardt (2001) would enrich understanding of how the commercial extinction of the Gros Michel banana became the Achilles' heel to a business model that seemed impervious to consequence.

For younger audiences who may have never seen a banana commercial on television, postwar clips of the half-banana, half-woman Chiquita Banana cartoon, as well as various other ads touting the culinary versatility of the "fruit of American dreams," will surely be provocative. This reviewer's personal favorite is Dole's 1974 commercial, which features a femme fatale figure dancing on her own on a dark stage, banana in hand. Playing in the background is Pink Floyd's "The Great Gig in the Sky," a signature of 1970s counterculture repurposed to promote the largest fruit conglomerate in the world. The ad encapsulates the film's broader message about consumer advertising's many prestidigitations. This plot line reaches its dark climax when audiences learn of UFC's collusion with the CIA in the violent ouster of pro-land reform Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz (in office: 1951–54), and of Bernays's role in twisting public opinion on the matter with the use of Cold War rhetoric. Altogether, these scenes remind us that consumer demand is never a given but rather historically created, and often in line with broader politico-cultural agendas.

When *Banana Ruled* rushes to its conclusion after scenes of Fidel Castro's Cuba, the death of Zemurray, and the rebranding of UFC, curiously leaving audiences with the impression that empires die with their charismatic leaders. Fortunately, Damoiseil's documentary joins a list of others that expand on ongoing issues mentioned only briefly at the

film's conclusion. *Banana Land: Blood, Bullets & Poison* by Jason Glaser and Diego Lopez (2014) documents the persistent violences of the paramilitary and the overreliance on chemicals. Frederik Gertten's controversial *BANANAS!** (2009) and its sequel, *Big Boys Gone Bananas!** (2011), recounts the transnational struggle against pesticide poisoning from the trenches. Finally, a lesser-known Japanese-language documentary, *The Bitter Reality behind Sweet Bananas (Amai Banana no Nigai Genjitsu)* by the Pacific Asia Resource Center (Murakami 2018), presents a rare example of an alternative banana trade network in the Philippines, a form of "social and solidarity economics" to which the current film briefly gestures. Indeed, in many parts of the world the banana continues to rule, and its story is very much unfinished.

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Stirrings: How Activist New Yorkers Ignited a Movement for Food Justice

Lana Dee Povitz

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019

360 pp. Illustrations. \$90.00 (hardcover); \$29.95 (paper); \$22.99 (eBook)

Stirrings, Lana Dee Povitz's study of food activism in New York City in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, is an extraordinary achievement. At the core of the book are four rich and vivid case studies of food-focused organizing. It begins with the United Bronx Parents, an anti-poverty organization of largely African American and Puerto Rican parents who agitated to improve school lunches in the South Bronx and ended up

helping to reform school lunch policy for the entire city. Next, Povitz looks at the development of the Park Slope Coop and its New Left activist roots. Then she moves on to God's Love We Deliver, an organization that brought food and dignity to homebound sufferers of AIDS at the height of the pandemic, and finally, the Community Food Resource Center, a food-focused nonprofit that activists organized in the 1980s to fill the chasms of social need left behind by the Reagan-era assault on social services.

As I read avidly through these pages, I thought of Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, an epic 1995 study of Black freedom struggles in Mississippi in the classic Civil Rights era. Payne's book was, as he described it, a look at "spadework" organizing. In contrast to the "big" events, personalities, and narratives, he looked at the nitty-gritty efforts of those women and men who labored to advance the movement on the ground within their own communities and contexts. While the focus may be different, *Stirrings* is similarly another soon-to-be classic "spadework" history.

The book is set against backdrops like the War on Poverty, New York City's fiscal crisis of the 1970s, the haphazard and arrested development of a federal food assistance program, and the emergence of a larger and more robust nonprofit sector. But the power and dynamism of *Stirrings* comes from Povitz's capture of the spadework moments where individuals made a larger movement for food justice real.

To name a few examples, *Stirrings* brings the reader to provocative face-to-face confrontations with city and state officials, hot street corners in neighborhoods like Hunts Point and Bedford Stuyvesant as bagged lunches for school students are handed out in summertime, cramped shared offices where ideas are hatched and hashed out and the mimeograph machine never stops rolling, up four flights of stairs to bring gourmet pasta to a dying man, to crews of women, men, and even a few children hauling bags and boxes of produce fresh from the wholesale markets. In all these moments Povitz highlights movements and organizations that were not leaderless but in fact leaderful and propelled by strong people. The book moves because of these moments. Such intimate, vivid, and humanizing realities, made possible by exhaustive oral history collection, draw the reader in like few other scholarly histories can. The result is personal and powerful. One often gets a sense of the energy and hard-to-describe yet simultaneously universal feeling of being part of something larger than yourself.

In terms of the larger scholarly landscape, *Stirrings* is first and foremost an important study of urban food justice and food policies in this time frame. As of now, there is no comparable study of any city's food activism. There are many

histories that include overviews of the influential breakfast program run by the Black Panther Party, which Povitz notes, but she moves the narrative forward in showing what came next in a place like New York. On a broader scale of postwar struggles for food and racial justice, the book complements Monica White's (2019) history of Black freedom struggles and food justice and sovereignty in the South, *Freedom Farmers*. In this way the book gives us another invaluable look at the intersection of race, anti-hunger, and anti-poverty efforts.

Stirrings also provides us a lens through which to understand how, during the 1970s and '80s, many activist energies became institutionalized within the growing world of nonprofits. In this way, *Stirrings* is another helpful demonstration, among many others, that this period was not one of civic or activist decline but rather of institution building to help achieve broader social aims. This kind of spadework history shows that activist energies and impulses evolved and adapted rather than disappeared.

Stirrings also illuminates one of the central thrusts of Janet Poppendieck's still-relevant 1998 look at the development of the country's inadequate emergency food system, *Sweet Charity?*, and echoed again in works like Andrew Fisher's *Big Hunger* (2017). As Povitz compellingly argues, food is a unique vehicle for activism. As a tangible and existential need, it pulls on people's desire to get involved in a visceral way, and often manages to transcend easy political categorization and polarization. As such, food-focused organizations can often draw on a wide array of individuals as volunteers, donors, and partners. That said, as Povitz argues, while this helps draw so many to these efforts, the question remains of why we are so willing to give time and resources to fight hunger instead of the poverty and other structural and systemic failings that cause it, and raises further questions on how that can happen, and why it often does not.

I found that the only "shortcoming" of *Stirrings* was that it was not longer. This is not to say that what Povitz has given us is incomplete or underdeveloped. Rather, the richness and depth of her work left me selfishly wanting another one, two, even three case studies. Methodically, stylistically, and academically, this book is a triumph. As such, it is a very worthwhile read, particularly for those who teach food activism, social movements, as well as philanthropic and nonprofit history.

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The Chile Pepper in China: A Cultural Biography

Brian R. Dott

New York: Columbia University Press, 2020

296 pp. Color illustrations. \$32.00 (hardcover); \$31.99 (eBook)

This book is an exemplary study of a key component of cuisine in China today — the chile pepper — the history of which turns out to be full of surprises relevant to several areas of social and cultural inquiry. The author draws on the concepts of “cultural biography” and “identity food” in the service of answering a clearly formulated and significant question: “How did chile peppers in China evolve from an obscure foreign plant to a ubiquitous and even ‘authentic’ spice, vegetable, medicine, and symbol?” (p.2) This question drives most of the narrative, with an unexpected range of answers appearing in chapters dedicated to the timing and geography of the chile’s dispersal in China, its use for cuisine, its place in pharmacopeia, and twists and turns in chile aesthetics and discourse. Thus, we learn that “Chinese gardeners, farmers, cooks, medical practitioners, and writers integrated the new plant into their cultural contexts, adapting it to fit into existing cultural systems” (p.90). Also essential, however, was the “visual appeal” of chiles, which “allowed them an initial entrée into literati culture, catching the eyes of garden connoisseurs” (p.190). The chile is thus both object and (in ways reminiscent of Michael Pollen’s “botany of desire”) agent of history. What we learn is that the chile became Chinese because people from many walks of life wanted it in their life, and for many different reasons, not only (if still mostly) for cooking.

Some of these differences are evident in the history of one important chile cultivar — *Capsicum annuum* var. *conoïdes* ‘*Chao Tian Jiao*’ — which is but a stand-in here for the many other colorful examples that illustrate the author’s arguments. The variety *conoïdes* is native to Central America and, at least in Latin, is merely a “conical” pepper. In China, it becomes the “Heaven Facing (*chaotian*)” pepper, so named because it grows with its tip pointing upward rather than downward like most species of capsicum. The name itself sounds so very “Chinese” (even if translated less “Chinesely” as “skyward

facing”), and even to those of us otherwise committed to de-essentialized analysis of culture in China. English alternatives like “inverted pepper” reveal the relative poverty and richness of the linguistic worlds into which the plant has found homes. Even this single cultivar, however, found more than just one home in China. It is both ornamental and eaten, object of aesthetic appreciation and essential condiment, which in Dott’s telling reveals an important difference in elite and non-elite sensibilities toward the chile more generally.

It turns out, as the book indicates across a range of examples spanning several chapters, that the chile spread through China from the bottom up, through the everyday diets of the rural poor, despite a stubborn but eventually vanquished elite reluctance to eat them, or even in some cases just to see them. One of the more intriguing examples of elite aversion to the chile involves a gazetteer writer who insisted that a reference to the chile in an earlier edition of the same text, which he was now revising, had to be an error, and that therefore the chile was not in fact grown where somebody had once said it was. But the chile was, in fact, “grown everywhere,” just not appreciated as food all the way up the social ladder, and perhaps even less-well-understood the higher up one went. And so its history in China provides a powerful counterexample to the more common idea that centripetal elites deserve the lion’s share of credit for creating cultural cohesion across the Chinese empire and, later, nation-state. One does wonder, however, if the argument is at times pushed a bit too far. Even the author acknowledges that what looks like elite reluctance to embrace the chile may sometimes simply be regional differences in taste, evident in the writing of elites from regions where the chile has become less pervasive in cuisine.

The book also asks, “how did Chinese uses of chiles change Chinese culture?” (p.2). On the one hand, it is hard to imagine Chinese food without the chile, and indeed the change in cuisine may be the most pronounced of all. On the other hand, it depends on what region of China one is talking about. The change is especially pronounced, as Dott carefully shows, in regions with a longer history of consuming pungent (*xin*) spices or flavors, as in China’s western and southwestern regions. The chile may be present but is much less prevalent elsewhere, however. Seen in this light, the impact of the chile may be its contribution to the perpetuation and elaboration of regional difference. There are additional arguments about the impact of the chile on China, ranging from the very meaning of the term *la* (spicy) to the formulation of gender identity, whereby an idea of “spiciness” becomes part of a discourse about “spunkiness, independence, and passion” (p.193) among women, but of martial or revolutionary prowess among men. The impact on medicine, so closely