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The Chile Pepper in China: A Cultural Biography

Brian R. Dott

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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 annum var. conoides* ‘*Chao Tian Jiao*’ — which is but a stand-in here for the many other colorful examples that illustrate the author’s arguments. The variety *conoides* 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

connected to food in China, is surprisingly short-lived, at least as viewed through the written record.

The book's scholarly rigor will be evident to specialists but is carefully delivered in an engaging and accessible style of writing that should make the book of interest to a wide range of audiences. It can be turned to for recipes (including one for Hunan salted chiles that, as of this writing, I only have to wait ten more days to eat). It will certainly very

quickly become the go-to source on the history of the chile in China in the English language. But most of all it reminds us to look for culinary innovation not only where we often do, in the flashy kitchens of professional chefs, but also in the long-term historical processes of everyday life, the contributions to which, like the chile in China, may be "found everywhere" (p.189).

—*Mark Swislocki, New York University Abu Dhabi*