A Journey to the West
Chinese Food in Western Countries

China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West
J.A.G. Roberts
London: Reaktion Books, 2002
255 pp. Illustrations. $29.95 (cloth)

Shopping at Giant Foods:
Chinese American Supermarkets in Northern California
Alfred Yee
xi + 193 pp. Illustrations. $35.00 (cloth)

Representing an essential part of culture, food and foodways have served, in fascinatingly revealing ways, as markers of cultural encounters. Travelers from Odysseus to Marco Polo used food to measure their journeys and to appreciate their own food traditions in unfamiliar settings. Bearing witness to important human activities and events, cuisines themselves have also migrated, sometimes along with human agents such as conquerors, tourists, and immigrants, and sometimes along with capital. Chinese food is one such cuisine that has spread to different parts of the world, including Europe and America.

Scholars, especially students of American history and society, have demonstrated an increasing interest in the subject of food. From Linda Brown and Kay Mussell's pioneering Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States (1984) to Donna Gabaccia's 1998 synthetic work, We Are What We Eat, our understanding of America's ethnic food, in particular, has come a long way. But our knowledge of the food history of individual ethnic communities remains limited and scattered. The two books under discussion are valuable contributions to our knowledge of ethnic food, especially Asian food, which has become ubiquitous in the gastronomical landscape of America but has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. While J.A.G. Roberts's China to Chinatown charts the migration of Chinese food to the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Alfred Yee's Shopping at Giant Foods is focused on an important economic institution that illustrates the importance of food in twentieth-century Chinese-American life.

China to Chinatown aims to illuminate “the radical alteration in the eating habits of the Western world” (p.9). Part 1 of the book deals with attitudes to Chinese food of Westerners residing in China. Part 2 discusses Chinese food in Europe and the United States. The book begins with a short chapter that attempts to define Chinese food and identify its basic foodstuffs. The next four chapters cover the reaction of Westerners who went to China in four different periods: before the nineteenth century; the nineteenth century; the first half of the twentieth century; and post-1949 China.

In covering the first period, Chapter 2 recounts, with interesting excerpts and anecdotes, narratives of Chinese food from various Western visitors to China, ranging from Marco Polo to Jesuit missionaries, from diplomats to Americans in the China trade. By attempting to cover such a long period in a twenty-four-page chapter, however, Roberts does not go beyond a summary of past narratives to any understanding of the larger social and cultural contexts. He uses the same approach in dealing with later periods in the following three chapters. While offering few theoretical insights, together these four chapters nevertheless represent a systematic survey of important Western writings about Chinese food. The book marks a necessary first step towards a more contextual and comparative understanding of the globalization of Chinese food.

Drawing on existing studies of America's and Canada's Chinese communities, Chapter 6 discusses the arrival of Chinese food in the United States and Canada. Chapter 7 investigates the transformation of Chinese food in the West after 1945. In the final chapter, the most thoughtful of the book, Roberts tackles questions about the spread of Chinese food throughout the West. Here, he makes brief but interesting comparisons with other national cuisines, including Indian, which has become the most popular ethnic food in the United Kingdom. His comments on the ethnic cuisines enjoyed by the British are very insightful: “in the nineteenth century the atmosphere of heightened imperialism and racial
superiority led the British in India increasingly to reject Indian food. French cuisine became fashionable and curries were relegated to luncheon rather than dinner fare” (p.205). Roberts points out the differences as well as the similarities between British reactions to Indian food and receptions of Chinese food in the Western world. Like Chinese food, Indian food was seen “as an exotic experience, as the product of a despised society, and as a source of cheap and convenient meals” (p.207).

Ambitious in scope, Roberts’s book has serious gaps. He appears to know Europe, especially Britain, better than the United States. His coverage of the latter contains obvious mistakes. For example, his assertion that “the first recipe books for Chinese food written in English appeared in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s” (p.187) demonstrates his ignorance of cookbooks that were published earlier. Also problematic is the assumption that “the increased assimilation of second-generation Chinese Americans” (p.148) was key to the gradual acceptance of Chinese food. Not only does that assumption remain unproven, but Roberts also fails to define the highly loaded term “assimilation.” Moreover, Chinese food is a topic that transcends not only geographic boundaries, but also disciplinary confines. Roberts does not seem to have taken sufficient advantage of insights from food scholars and fails to address important issues that they have raised, such as the relationship between individual and national identities. Finally, Roberts has located different kinds of interesting narratives of Chinese food. But he has yet to offer a critical reading of them based on an in-depth examination of the larger historical context and textual nuances. It is such a critical reading of sources including personal accounts, menus, and cookbooks that gives the study of food historical import.

By comparison, Alfred Yee’s Shopping at Giant Foods is a much more focused study of one fascinating phenomenon: Chinese-American grocery stores and supermarkets. For millions of Chinese-Americans, these supermarkets constitute an intimately important aspect of life, a conspicuously visible marker of the community, and a vital component of its economy. Yet it is extremely difficult to uncover their history. For this reason, Yee’s pioneering study represents a significant contribution.

What makes the book of additional interest is the fact that the author has been in the supermarket business for many years. Thus he is able to offer valuable insights as an “insider.” The professionalization of the field of history has generated an increasingly clear distinction between those who write about historical events and those who participate in them. Fewer and fewer scholars of business history know how to run a business, for example, while those who have run a business and want to write business history often do not have enough familiarity with the highly specialized academic lexicon and discourse to engage in dialogue with business historians. Yee’s background, however, combines the strengths of both participants and academicians.

The first two chapters provide general information about supermarkets and Chinese immigration. The book’s remaining chapters are designed to chart three phases in the development of Chinese supermarkets: their modest beginnings in the early twentieth century; their proliferation and prosperity from the end of World War II to the early 1970s; and their decline and passing from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s.

Yee acknowledges the difficulties in unearthing primary sources, including business records. Oral interviews of supermarket owners, employees, and salesmen, therefore, constitute the most important material for his study. Based on such interviews, the life stories of individuals in the supermarket business represent one of the most interesting parts of the book. Combined with his research, Yee’s personal experience adds significantly to his discussion of internal Chinese supermarket operations. His analysis helps us appreciate the significance of Chinese supermarkets. First, such “grocery stores and supermarkets helped advance the socioeconomic status of Chinese Americans” (p.12). Second, they were large enterprises, while most other Chinese businesses remained small in size. Third, they “did not sell ethnic foods and merchandise in ethnic enclaves, but sold
American groceries, meat, and produce to mostly Euro-American customers” (p.3). Thus we can easily imagine how these supermarkets existed as sites of cultural interaction and conflict between Chinese food operators and shoppers from the surrounding communities.

A comparison with Chinese elsewhere in similar situations and occupations would be intellectually fruitful. Unfortunately, however, Yee pays little attention to such important issues. Overall, his book is marred by fundamental deficiencies. As a study of Chinese-American history, it fails fully to take advantage of the scholarship in the field. For example, Yee uses the word “sojourner” rather casually and frequently in reference to Chinese immigrants—a word that was used to attack them for decades. He also makes many unqualified, unsubstantiated, and factually problematic statements, including assertions that in the nineteenth century, rural America was more tolerant of the Chinese than urban America (p.11), that laundries were the oldest and most numerous of all Chinese-owned and operated businesses (p.39), and that “Chinese Americans considered operating retail food stores more desirable than operating restaurants, laundries, farms, and other small businesses” (p.10).

As a study of business history, the book offers neither theoretical insights nor enough documented empirical specifics. And it fails to provide a complete history of Chinese-American supermarkets in northern California as an economic institution. Inexplicably and inexcusably absent from the book is Chinese San Francisco, where grocery stores have flourished since the mid-nineteenth century; they are an integral part of the history of Chinese-American supermarkets. Equally inexplicable is Yee’s failure to consider new Chinese-American supermarkets that have become so visible in Chinese-American and racially mixed communities throughout California since the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time that Yee sees as the end of the prominence of Chinese-American supermarkets. The distinctively Asian flavor of the new supermarkets marks the transformation of this Chinese-American institution, a transformation that had already occurred in the cooking profession: Chinese cooks in the earlier years were primarily engaged in preparing non-Chinese food before Chinese food became popular in the mainstream market. Yee’s work is also limited by his narrow focus on a few places in Northern California. He needs to put his analysis in a much broader context. Over 90 percent of the Chinese families in Mississippi, for example, operated groceries catering to a non-Chinese clientele, a phenomenon that James W. Loewen has called “an incredibly uniform occupational emphasis.” As Loewen and numerous food scholars have reminded us, the story of food is intimately related to fundamental issues concerning the ethnic economy and the intersection of race and class. But they are yet to be fully explored in Yee’s study.

These two books represent welcome additions to our understanding of the fascinating topics of food in Chinese-American history and ethnic food. Their obviously serious deficiencies underscore how challenging it is to research this topic. Part of the challenge comes from the interdisciplinary nature of the research, which requires familiarity with scholarship and methodologies in numerous fields, including anthropology, history, sociology, and Asian-American Studies.

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