Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America. Yong Chen. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780231168922

How do we account for the ubiquity of Chinese food in the United States? Were dishes like chop suey and chow mein born in America or did they originate in China? Yong Chen poses these puzzling questions and supplies intriguing and unexpected answers in this flavorful book. A welcome contribution to the fast-growing field of food history, Chen's narrative is uniquely and refreshingly personal. Chen intertwines his journey to America to both the experiences of preceding immigrants from China and to the upswing of interest in Chinese food in the U.S. since the 1970s. Embarking from regions of relative food scarcity, Chen, like others before him, was drawn to the U.S. by the allure of an empire of abundance, yet maintained a strong fondness for the cuisine of his country of birth. In *Chop Suey, USA,* Chen's personal reflections invite the reader into spaces both intimate and momentous, including two significant kitchens: his mother's and that of his first American hosts. As his historical narrative unfolds, Chen makes clear that food was essential to the perseverance and the formation of identity among Chinese in America. He complements newspaper accounts with his own personal stories and interviews, and even shares recipes throughout the book that correspond to important themes in each chapter. A recipe for Kung Pao chicken in chapter six, a hybrid dish, is representative of the negotiated process that has shaped Chinese food over the years in the exchanges between restaurant owners and their patrons. Chen's creative methodology ensures that reading the history is only one of several ways in which this book will be enjoyed.

The prevalence of Chinese food in America today is unlikely in many respects. Chen's most difficult task is accounting for the twentieth-century success of Chinese food in America in the face of the cultural stigmas and social and political barriers leveled against Chinese in the United States over the last century and a half. At the height of anti-Chinese prejudice, Chen points out, slurs and tropes circulated in areas home to Chinese immigrants that stigmatized the food they prepared. For non-Chinese observers in the nineteenth century, Chinese food was odious and might consist of ingredients such as rats. Anti-Chinese sentiment in the U.S. did not end with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which formally restricted the entrance of immigrants from China. As a result of informal discrimination and legal restrictions, the population of Chinese descent in the U.S. is believed to have declined from over one hundred thousand in 1890 to just over sixty thousand only thirty years later. And yet, in the twentieth century, Chinese food took off.

For Chen, the marginalized status of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. in the nineteenth century is the key to understanding the historical place of Chinese food in America. He argues that the opening of food establishments was an outgrowth of the experiences of Chinese Americans in the service economy and in the kitchens of affluent homes. Chen notes that Chinese men were often adept and welcomed cooks among the well-to-do. Chinese entrepreneurs found sites for businesses in the laundry trade, and many would later launch restaurants. Chased away from rural settlements, many Chinese settled into developing Chinatowns, which emerged as centers for Chinese-American activity and vitality in major U.S. cities such as San Francisco, Chicago, and New York. Chen explains that these neighborhoods became exoticized spaces attracting

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non-Chinese tourists and "slummers" seeking the thrill of potential vice or danger without the expense of travel. They also came for the reasonably priced food.
Indeed, for Chen, it was convenience and affordability that allowed Chinese food to thrive. The ability of Chinese-owned restaurants to meet the demands of middle- and working- class consumers drove the success of the enterprise rather than the cuisine's culinary attributes. As Chen notes, Chinese restaurants were among the first to be open late at night, to accommodate patrons who wished to "take out," and to offer delivery. This helps to explain their appeal in emerging urban industrial centers such as Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Detroit. While Chen points to a handful of cultural ambassadors and elite urban Chinese who assisted in what we might today call public relations efforts to make Chinese cuisine better known, the real heroes of Chen's narrative are the everyday entrepreneurs who fought the odds and emerged with profitable businesses. As Lauren Janes points out in *Colonial Food in Interwar Paris*, the adoption of peripheral cuisines into metropolitan societies often requires concerted work with no guarantees of sure success. To Chen, it was the determined and savvy Chinese restaurateurs who were able to overcome stereotypes, successfully market Chinese food, and establish the cuisine as a fixture in the U.S. Chinese restaurant owners created new dishes that appealed to non-Chinese palates. And, they cleverly used advertisements, menus, and décor to make their establishments stand out, creating an appeal that would translate into success for restaurants around the country in the first half of the twentieth century. In so doing, these restaurateurs ensured that Chinese food became an important part of the democratization of eating out for working-class African Americans and Jewish communities, for instance. Chen notes how Chinese dishes even made their way into Jewish cookbooks.

In his chapter on cookbooks, as throughout the book, Chen grapples with the question of authenticity. How Chinese was chop suey? While Chen acknowledges the sentiment among non-Chinese that this staple of early Chinese restaurants wasn't really "Chinese," he challenges that assertion and points to the work of several scholars who trace the dish back to China. Chen also points out that chop suey is not a single dish, but is, rather, a method of cooking with definitive origins in China. Rather than being known as either authentically Chinese or entirely Made in the U.S.A., Chen argues that Chinese food in America is an "empire food," or a cuisine created amid the crucible of the U.S.'s historical relationship with China and imperial divisions of labor. Though omnipresent in America, Chinese food is still marginalized in terms of respectability, according to Chen, its status mirroring the nineteenth-century Chinese domestic servant: indispensable but not embraced by the American family on equal terms.

The invocation of empire was among the most intriguing facets of the book, and Chen might have done well to dive into its implications a little further. The birth of empire food in the midst of rising American material abundance could be explored in conversation with scholarship on the exploitation of labor and resources that generated new, often unequal, patterns of consumption and living standards in the U.S. Useful too, would have been an engagement with the bevy of scholarship on American empire inaugurated most prominently by the work of Amy Kaplan. Academics hoping for a more thorough treatment of labor and empire might therefore be left wanting. Notwithstanding this critique of an otherwise solid work, *Chop Suey, USA* is an important addition to the growing list of culinary histories. Chen's method of connecting the

personal and the historical will be a model for historians attempting to make social histories of food more palatable.

James McElroy is a PhD student in the department of history at the University of Minnesota.