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Understanding Contemporary Asia through Food

By Eriberto P. Lozada

While once-exotic Asian foods have become a familiar part of American life, the study of Asian food continues to be a sharp lens, giving focus to the broad sweep of history and the complex patterns of contemporary Asian societies. The eating habits and culinary practices (foodways) of Asian societies are both local and global, revealing the historical impact of past events and the everyday tensions of contemporary Asian societies. Humans often use food to distinguish their own group from others.¹ The following essay is an overview of “big-picture” issues in Asian food that are of immediate interest to students and teachers at all levels. Are we really “what we eat?” Asian interactions with food can be understood by examining how food establishes cultural identity, the social ramifications of food production, and how food and globalization intersect.² This essay and accompanying resources will assist readers in gaining new perspectives about the roles of food in Asians’ lives.³

Why Study Asian Food?

Asian foodways in particular expose the rich diversity of human social institutions and cultural practices in Asia. Foodways also show the diversity within Asian nations as well; what we call “Chinese food” in the US is unrecognizable to people from China, who associate particular dishes with specific regions in China. Pedagogically, food as a subject is also relatively easy for students to digest. Everyone must eat—the production, consumption, and exchange of food are the most basic economic activities for families throughout the world and a shared social activity in all cultures, however separated individual “tables” are from the “farm” (to paraphrase the moniker of the American local food movement). The act of turning a raw food item into a cooked dish is perhaps the most fundamental of cultural activities.

Second, students should understand that food is crucial to contemporary political and economic issues in Asia and around the world. The world can and does produce enough food to feed the world’s population, and yet the United Nations lists solving food insecurity—the problem of availability and access to food—as its first Millennium Development Goal. The 1998 Nobel Prize winning economist

Amartya Sen concluded that the primary cause of famine in Bangladesh was human, not natural. Humans have the technological ability to feed the world, but we do not have the social and political will to solve global hunger. The sustainability of food production and consumption is featured in contemporary debates because of concerns for the environment. This can be seen in political issues such as access to clean food and water, the use of agricultural inputs (including fertilizers and insecticides), and the ecological and health impact of introducing genetically modified organisms.

Third, cuisine illustrates the central paradox of globalization in Asia. Globalization appears to homogenize cultural practices, as societies seem to be converging toward what sociologist Benjamin Barber refers to as the “numbing and neutering uniformities of industrial modernization and the colonizing culture of

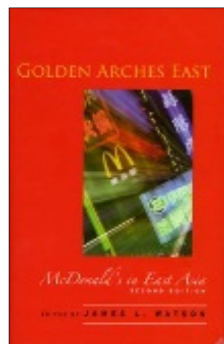


Figure 1. *Golden Arches East* by James Watson.

McWorld.”⁴ At the same time, however, globalization catalyzes the resurgence and power of local Asian cultures and traditions. Harvard anthropologist James Watson makes both these points eminently clear in his book *Golden Arches East*—which offers case studies of McDonald’s in the different societies of East Asia. How can a tray of food from a “set meal” (the Chinese term for a McDonald’s value meal) be considered a meal when there is no rice (a defining feature for a Chinese meal)? Part of the Chinese

localization of McDonald’s involved shifting its food from the category of snacks (as McDonald’s food was initially categorized in China) to a meal. Even a cursory examination of the spread of different particular national and regional cuisines (and the many cookbooks and cooking shows) demonstrates that the local also transforms the global. Consider the differences—to cite just an example—between Chinese-American cuisine and typical food consumed in China. Cuisine thus gives us a platform from which to see how people from very different social contexts and historical experiences are cooking up different solutions to the challenges of globalization.

Food as a Marker of Identity

In various religious traditions, food draws a sharp border between different social groups, as seen in the kosher restrictions of the Jewish tradition, *halal* dietary restrictions in Islamic tradition, or the food purity rules in the Hindu tradition. In Christianity, the symbolic use of a shared meal of the body of Christ as the focal point for religious services underscores the importance of food as a marker of identity. In secular contexts, differentiated patterns of food consumption also separate the elite from the masses. Historically, these food patterns were codified through laws that denied commoners access to certain foods. In contemporary times, these differences in cuisine and behaviors relating to food are often culturally

enforced. This is why many career services offices at colleges and universities offer “etiquette classes” for students applying for their first jobs.

One study that brings together both religious and secular uses of food as markers of identity is anthropologist Maris Gillette’s *Between Mecca and Beijing*, which describes food consumption among urban Chinese Muslims. Adherence to halal practices differentiates Chinese Muslims from the predominant Han Chinese (the majority ethnic group in China). Like Jewish kosher rules, Islamic dietary restrictions prohibit the eating of pork, which is a major and highly desired source of meat for Han Chinese. Nevertheless, changing Chinese diets include “convenience foods” (such as instant noodles and other factory-prepared foods) that are eaten by both Chinese Muslims and Han Chinese as social demonstrations of affluence and modernity. As in the US, differences in food practices demonstrate that sometimes, social mobility can be complex.

The use of food as a marker of identity is slightly different from that of cuisine—a style of preparing food—because of the particular process by which cuisine develops and spreads. Cuisine as a marker of identity involves the standardization of cultural practices through mass media such as cookbooks. What was once taught in multi-generational households, with mothers-in-law showing daughters-in-law how to combine spices (“a pinch of this, a handful of that”), is instead learned by newly married urban women through a formal recipe (“five grams of this, one kilogram of that”). As a result, an Indian national cuisine emerged from varied regional cuisines with the development of a new urban middle class. Upper class Indians become disconnected from the traditional kinship structures that passed on culinary knowledge; at the same time, middle class Indians became connected to wider networks of multi-ethnic urban professionals who consume a similar globalized popular culture. National cuisines continue to be further standardized as they spread beyond borders to satisfy the palates of global cosmopolitans.

Food can also strengthen nationalist bonds within a particular society. Japanese schools and mothers instill dominant Japanese cultural values through the production and consumption of *obentōs* (lunch boxes). The socially required neatness and separation of different lunch foods and the enforcement by teachers of “clean-plate” requirements for schoolchildren reflect Japanese conceptions of social order and group cohesion. Violations of socially accepted rules become social issues as teachers correct students who do not eat properly (and women who fail to meet expectations of motherhood by failing to provide adequate *obentōs*).

Food Production

Because food production has been a basic economic function of families, anthropologists have long studied how food production structures family and kinship patterns. Food studies from the latter half of the twentieth century include both an economic and an ecological approach that examines how food production

is shaped by the natural environment. This approach, known as cultural ecology, has once again become relevant because of environmental concerns. One such classic study is anthropologist Clifford Geertz's *Agricultural Involution*, where Geertz looked at how characteristics of wet rice agriculture shaped the historical development of Indonesian society. Increased yields in wet rice agriculture can be achieved through the application of more labor, unlike other forms of agriculture that require capital expansion (i.e., more land). As a result, Geertz concluded that wet rice agriculture resulted in a more static Indonesian society, unlike other societies in environments that required the expansive accumulation of more capital and technological evolution for increased yield.

Contemporary studies of food emphasize the global interconnectedness of food systems. While many developed economies have shifted away from agriculture, food production continues to be an important livelihood for many people in the developing world. Like other economic sectors in this age of globalization, agricultural production has become consolidated into a smaller number of worldwide firms. This consolidation has been made economically feasible because of global agricultural commodity chains—the integrated system of food production that connects a farm in one locale to the consumer in another. While food is initially harvested in specific localities, global food chains such as the tuna trade (much of which emanates from Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market) now impact global production and consumption. Small producers, such as traditional American fishing communities, are often squeezed out as industry consolidates. Demand for global cuisine becomes part of daily life in this era of globalization. Sushi competes with hot dogs for hungry fans at American ballparks.

Globalization and Genetically-Modified Food

People have been genetically modifying their food through breeding since they first domesticated wild foodstuffs. With the industrialization of agriculture and developments in science and technology, the direct manipulation of genetic material has now become a standard agricultural practice. The truth is that genetically modified foods, starting with the development of a tomato that could ripen without softening so as to survive the rigors of transportation, make a global commodity chain possible. This enables foods to be eaten when they are out of season, something now taken for granted in American society and, increasingly, in Asian societies. Genetically modified livestock are also being developed, but as of September 2011, have not been approved for the market. The first application for national approval for consumer consumption of a genetically modified animal, a salmon that can reach market size twice as fast as traditional fish, was submitted to the US Food and Drug Administration in the fall of 2010. This submission followed the establishment of international safety standards for genetically modified animals by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in 2008.

Consumers throughout the world have been very wary of global food chains and genetically modified foods, resulting in the formation of organizations such as the Slow Food Movement. The Slow Food Movement emerged in 1986 in Italy as a farmer’s movement to protest the opening of a McDonald’s near the Spanish Steps in Rome. Today, it is a leading global non-governmental organization that promotes local agriculture and the preservation of local foodways centered around an ideology of “eco-gastronomy”—an emphasis on local, organic, and sustainable food. This combination of environmental concerns and gourmet food has made local food fashionable again in Asia and throughout the world. One such example of this is a Korean movement that rejects McDonald’s hamburgers in favor of Korean rice. The Korean National Agricultural Cooperation Federation mobilized Korean consumers to eat local foods by using Buddhist ideas that emphasized a connection between the land that grows Korean rice and the Koreans who ate it.⁵ While the nationalist position of Korean rice is clear, Korean *kimchi* (spicy fermented vegetables) is an ambiguous marker of Korean national identity. While kimchi is a traditional part of Korean cuisine, some Koreans also see it as an embarrassment because foreigners are bothered by its spiciness, its smell, and its messiness.

As globalization has matured in various cosmopolitan localities, Asian cuisines that were once exotic have become familiar; for example, in 2001, Britain’s Foreign Secretary Robin Cook proclaimed *chicken tikka masala*, an Indian dish, a true British national dish. One reaction to this familiarization with Asian foods has been the development of fusion cuisine that blends elements of different national cuisines into something distinctive. Another reaction has been the renewed popularity of regional cuisines such as Cantonese *dim sum* in Hong Kong; it has also become popular among American “foodies” as part of an ongoing search for “the authentic” by an American cultural elite.

In terms of food safety and environmental activism, recent trends in China highlight the complex issues behind high technology food production. Chinese farmers and consumers are ambivalent about the use of agricultural chemicals and its negative impacts on health. Increased productivity means higher profits for the farmer and lower food costs for the consumer. China’s rapid economic growth in the last twenty-five years started with a tremendous increase in the productivity of Chinese agriculture in the countryside. However, as recent food safety incidents such as the 2008 tainted milk scandal demonstrate, Chinese consumers are concerned about the healthiness of industrialized food. This tension has resulted in mass protests over food, swift government prosecution of people found guilty of



Figure 2. Chicken tikka masala.
Source: <http://bit.ly/ZPP42>.

food tampering, and the development of an organic food market in China. With rapid advancements in biotechnology, and its more widespread application in China and India in particular, high-tech food case studies will continue to illustrate the dramatic changes and social contestations taking place in Asia.

Asian Food, Globalization, and the Future

While globalization has made national cuisines possible, it has also promoted its antithesis—industrially produced fast food stripped of its local flavor in favor of a uniform food product. It is not by accident that Barber chose the concept of “McWorld” to summarize his perspective on global consumer culture, nor was it merely fortuitous that the Slow Food Movement started with a protest at a McDonald’s in Italy. Fusion cuisines are popular at the same time that authentic, regional cuisines are celebrated. In cosmopolitan Asia, there is a myriad array of choices in the realm of food, embodying the idea that choice is the hallmark of postmodern cultures. At the same time, there are many people throughout the world who have little choice but to go hungry. In a world of plenty, we are also food insecure—whether by not having access to adequate levels of food or because of health hazards due to food safety issues. However Asian cuisines develop in the future, they will be closely tied to the contradictory workings of globalization.

Notes

1. For a good collection of general food studies, see Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, eds., *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and James L. Watson and Melissa Caldwell, eds., *The Cultural Politics of Eating* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005). These readers provide an interdisciplinary set of foundational readings that span the wide variety of topics in the study of food.

2. Over the course of ten years, I have taught a food and culture class in a number of different formats: as a lecture course, upper-level seminar, and as a community-based learning class. See <http://lozada.davidson.edu> for past syllabi and other teaching material.

3. I have also tried to select articles instead of books or chapters within books that are of a more manageable scale for students at all levels; for example, James L. Watson, “China’s Big Mac Attack,” *Foreign Affairs* 79 no. 3 (2000): 123–134 brings out many of the same issues from his more detailed book *Golden Arches East: McDonalds in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

4. Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Random House, 1996), 9.

5. James L. Watson, ed., “McDonald’s in Seoul: Food Choices, Identity, and Nationalism,” *Golden Arches East: McDonald’s in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 136–160.

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Selected Teaching Resources

Jennifer 8. Lee. "Jennifer 8. Lee Hunts for General Tso," (Lecture, *TEDTalks*, July 2008). This TEDTalk is an entertaining exploration of how "Chinese food" throughout the world is not Chinese; through food, Lee connects various issues such as American historical stances towards Chinese immigration and globalization, while deconstructing popular dishes in America such as General Tso's chicken, fortune cookies, and chop suey.

http://www.ted.com/talks/jennifer_8_lee_looks_for_general_tso.html.

Ted Bestor. "The King of Sushi in Trouble." Produced by Michael H. Gavshan and Drew Magratten, *60 Minutes*, CBS News, 2008. This thirteen-minute segment of *60 Minutes* features anthropologist Ted Bestor, who looks at the global trade of tuna, the popularization of sushi, and the impact of industrialized fishing on the blue fin tuna population.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4423723n>.

Itami, Juzo. *Tampopo*. Fox Lorber Home Video, 1985; DVD, 1998. This comedy features multiple narrative streams centered on one Japanese woman's quest for the perfect fast food noodle; rated NSFW (K-12), because of food and sex scenes.

Yin shi nan nu (Eat, Drink, Man, Woman). Directed by Ang Lee. MGM World Films, 1994; DVD, 2002. This comedy-drama features a Taiwanese chef and his three daughters; familial relationships and changing lifestyles are represented by food.

Dadi's Family. Directed by Michael Camerini and Rina Gill. Documentary Educational Resources, 1981. This film is about an Indian grandmother and her extended family; while kinship is the focus of the film, much of the film is shot in her kitchen and in the farm fields of the family, and the food preparation for a wedding banquet is a featured event.

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