

BOOK REVIEWS/EAST ASIA

**Angela Ki Che Leung and Hallam Stevens, eds. *Crafting Everyday Food: Technology, Tradition, and Transformation in Modern East Asia*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2025. 212 pages, 8 illustrations, 1 table. Hardcover, \$70.00.**

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*Crafting Everyday Food: Technology, Tradition, and Transformation in Modern East Asia* represents a genuinely new integrated approach to the highly fragmented study of food in Asia.

This volume brings food craft into conversation with food technology: artisanal production of such iconic products as soy sauce, tea, and kimchi meet industrialization, commodification, globalization, and such social processes of modernization as nation building and heritagization. The emphasis is on everyday foods as opposed to gourmet, ritual, or culturally iconic ones.

Each of the volume's seven chapters revolves around the same triad of forces: laboratory research, the modernizing state, and commercial interest. To these, each adds unique elements. Angela Ki Che Leung's chapter (chapter 1) on the early twentieth-century transformation of Chinese soy sauce emphasizes the role of the salt tax and of Japanese competitors as equal parts threat and inspiration. Victoria Lee (chapter 2) presents the social life of *kōji*, the personification of *Aspergillus oryzae* as a uniquely Japanese microbiome, which retains individuation even as it is standardized by industrial pure-culture processing. In his chapter on high-mountain Dongding tea, Shuenn-Der Yu (chapter 3) shows how distinct waves of research into processing, followed by a turn toward the domestic Taiwan market, marked a transformation in the tastescape that was led by, and eventually moved beyond, Dongding itself. John DiMoia (chapter 4) traces the reassertion of Korean foodways following the initial influx of American agricultural surplus and procurement for Korean troops and laborers in Southeast Asia. Returning to soy sauce, this time in Singapore, Hallam Stevens (chapter 5) tells a story of commercial intrigue, state-sponsored nostalgia, and shifting public values. Rounding out the book with a section on new foods, Tatsuya Mitsuda (chapter 6) traces the history of Japanese beef, not the well-known story of the Meiji Emperor popularizing the new taste, but the slower process of domesticating meat supplies secured from overseas. Finally, Jakob Klein (chapter 7) tackles the efforts of various Chinese state actors to convince consumers to accept potatoes not as a supplementary vegetable, but as a staple grain.

This book is a welcome addition both to food studies and to Asian history. Each of the chapters represents top-tier primary-language research, largely historical in nature, but also crossing disciplines to engage the opportunities presented by history, anthropology, and Science and Technology Studies (STS).

As with any edited volume, the question is what makes this book greater than the sum of its parts—i.e., the larger themes that grow out of unique points of comparison. To the three broad categories of industrialization, mobility, and new foods offered in the book's introduction, I would add two unique insights. The first is the book's ability to divorce transformative processes from the deterministic grip of national narratives. Often portrayed as unique narratives of national salvation, the developmental states that feature differently in each chapter are revealed by their juxtaposition to have much in common, particularly in regard to the role of everyday foods in nourishing the people (both literally and rhetorically), as well as advancing national commercial and cultural interests. The second is how the emphasis on foodways takes seriously the forces that shape the acceptance of new foods into dietary systems. Work on the symbolic value of food often focuses on iconic objects of aspiration, newly introduced tastes like coffee or McDonald's, particularly during the early years when scarcity or expense gave these foods additional class status. Such foods are often shown to travel a fairly predictable generational arc from novelty to acceptance, and finally to an iconic place of cultural ownership. A second example comes from the fate of imports, branded or unbranded items like condensed milk or tinned luncheon meat that arrive with an inbuilt advantage of pricing below local alternatives, and gradually move up the ladder of respectability. This book treats us to the everyday, the distinct taste of soy sauces from one country to the next, the humble home cooking that doesn't make it onto social media, the condiments that appear as if by magic at every table. Uncovering the circulation and meaning of these foods, so ubiquitous as to be almost invisible, is the true genius of this volume.

My only regret about this excellent and timely volume is that it did not bring in a greater disciplinary voice from folklore. While it is hardly fair to complain about what a book doesn't say, the idea of foodways, raised by name in the introduction and subsequently through many of the chapters, doesn't seem to receive the same disciplinary attention as other specialized approaches, such as business history, STS, or the anthropology of craft communities.

*Crafting Everyday Food: Technology, Tradition, and Transformation in Modern East Asia* represents a genuinely new integrated approach to the highly fragmented study of food in Asia. Bridging a wide array of disciplines and national histories, this important book will appeal to a readership that is equally diverse.

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