

China

Jin Feng, *Tasting Paradise on Earth: Jiangnan Foodways*

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Guo Huiling, *Meiwei you quanli: Yige Huabei cunzhuang 70 nian yinshi shenghuo bianqian* [Taste and power: 70 years of culinary transition in a north Chinese village]

Beijing: China Economic Press, 2020. 222 pages, 25 illustrations, 7 tables. Paperback, ¥68. ISBN: 9787513657624.

The field of food studies in China is currently enjoying a long-awaited resurgence. New work by anthropologists and historians, as well as growing prominence in media, such as documentary films, has returned food to a place of central importance, even as it explores original approaches to the topic. Two recent publications illustrate the breadth of this newly energized field and the unique role that ethnology can play in

enhancing and uniting disciplines. In *Tasting Paradise on Earth: Jiangnan Foodways*, Jin Feng introduces three different perspectives on the foodways of Jiangnan. The first of these comes from historical writings, including ethnographic accounts of urban food culture, gastronomic writings, and semi-autobiographical or fully fictionalized stories that centered on eating, such as Zhou Zuoren's reminiscences about food in his native Shaoxing or Li Wenfu's novella *The Gourmet* (*Meishi jia*). A specialist in Chinese literature, Feng demonstrates an encyclopedic knowledge of this diverse body of writing, dwelling at length on the personal background that drew each of the authors to write about food.

The second perspective focuses on the commercial public face of the food industry. Feng combs through promotional literature of "Old and Famous Brand" (*laozihao*) restaurants, commercialized histories, and internet food sites, such as the "eat drink man woman" discussion forum on 19lou.com, to show how food enterprises portray themselves. At the same time, Feng deftly explains the rapidly changing business of food—the cost of rent and labor, march to expansion and franchising, and constantly evolving market expectations.

The third perspective is Feng's own fieldwork, which included interviews with entrepreneurs and food professionals, as well as extensive personal visits to the restaurants discussed. Beyond providing detailed description of each restaurant's decor, Feng expertly and with purpose describes the food itself. Calling one restaurant's signature dish "mediocre" and noting that another was served tasting of ketchup, Feng gives substance to her repeated claim that culinary excellence is far from the only concern for diners.

The book consists of five content chapters based around place and loosely around themes. Chapter 1, on Jiangnan, is purely historical. It sets the stage by introducing the idea of regional culinary identity and shows how imperial-era aristocrats, literati, and merchants each used diet to project unique identities, be that the collector of rare delicacies, the morally transcendent vegetarian, or the masterful connoisseur. But this world was for men; women writers such as Zeng Lu instead emphasized practical tips for nutrition and household economy. Chapter 2, the first of two on Suzhou, continues the focus on literary themes. Historical depictions like *Gusu shihua* describe a city filled with elegant entertainment and demanding patrons. For writers like Ye Shengtao, memory of the city's graces evoked nostalgia for a slower pace of life and a bygone era of youth. Others such as Li Wenfu viewed its connoisseurs with combined fascination and revulsion. Chapter 3 examines the commodification of Suzhou tradition, especially by China's selfie-snapping middle class, whose adoption of aspirational consumerism has been wholeheartedly blessed by the national government and urged on by entertainment like the wildly popular documentary *Bite of China* (*Shejian shang de Zhongguo*). High- and low-end restaurants both seek ways to capitalize on this search for new experiences, creating artificial scarcity and exaggerating tales of culinary heritage but often neglecting the quality of the food. Emphasizing the range of strategies, Feng introduces the fight between three restaurants to claim the mantle of "authentic" Fengzhen pork noodles. Chapter 4 moves to Hangzhou, which as a former capital of the southern Song dynasty aggressively markets its culinary heritage, with restaurants like Tower Beyond Tower (*Louwai lou*) using franchising and national distribution of packaged food to build imperial nostalgia into a national brand. Chapter 5 on Nanjing shows the gentrification of taste by literati writers like Yuan Mei, and the

nostalgia for Republican-era glamor, which Feng reveals in the “willful amnesia” of the Ma Xiang Xing halal restaurant or the refurbished Nanjing 1912 food district.

Asynchronic and non-linear, *Tasting Paradise* is nevertheless bound together by themes that recur across space and time in the voices of Qing literati, contemporary consumers, restaurant managers, or local tourism boards. Discussion of gender features most strongly in the chapter on gastronomic writers but emerges again in the discussion of internet chat rooms. Official promotion appears as the force driving such diverse strategies as the construction of food streets, web platforms, and official recognition of “Old and Famous” brands. But it is in the book’s central themes of nostalgia, authenticity, and the anxieties that fuel the performance of identity that the tactic of interweaving across time reaches its full potential. Freed of a chronological narrative, Feng demonstrates connections across time in the ways that people use food to express their identities, be that the vegetarian simplicity of the lofty scholar, the conspicuous taste-making of the celebrity gourmand, or the lifestyle consumption of the anxious middle class. Similarly, she shows us how nostalgia draws on a range of perceived authenticities: of locale, ingredients, decor, technique, and how this search for authenticity is itself a theme that links contemporary and historical writers. Ultimately, everything and nothing is authentic, a conclusion seemingly embraced by many of the restaurants she visits.

Guo Huiling’s *Meiwei you quanli: Yige Huabei cunzhuang 70 nian yinshi shenghuo bianqian* takes a very different approach. Despite the title, this is less a village study than a general walk through anthropological food theory, applied to historical and contemporary China, with the specific case study appearing almost as an afterthought.

The titular north Chinese village is Zhang Village in Shanxi, known to English-speaking readers as the “Longbow” village of William Hinton’s (1966) revolutionary account, *Fanshen: A Documentary of a Chinese Village*. Although a Shanxi native, Guo seems to have spent fairly little time in the village itself—a total of four months over ten years—and thus relies heavily on extant studies for much of her detail. Instead, the village is used as a case study and vehicle for the book’s real purpose, which is the exploration of themes of food studies in China and in the anthropological literature more generally.

Guo focuses on three major content questions. The first is simply a recreation of how and what people actually ate. Based broadly around the question of how food preferences are determined by exogenous forces like climate, she begins with grain consumption, tracing historical changes like the introduction of wheat, corn, and potatoes, an emerging preference for rice, and nostalgia for dishes that are rarely cooked at home, such as *geda* wheat noodles. She also discusses the changing physical location of the kitchen in the home and the transition of vegetable consumption from self-grown plots to local markets, but other than a general discussion of consumerism provides little detail in the way of a case study.

The second question concerns categorization. Drawing upon Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas, Guo examines how food recreates such social identities as class, age, and gender. Rather than a single argument, this appears as a series of vignettes: reflecting the privations of their youth, older people still see *mantou* (steamed bread) as a small luxury but dislike rice, which they associate with outsiders, specifically the workers who built the railway during the 1960s. Concerning age, she notes that children are uniquely allowed the privilege of snacks, while the very old are often rel-

egated to eating away from the family, in what Guo describes as a state of near abandonment. Gender is recreated both in the woman's responsibility to prepare food, as well as in social conceptions of how taste is divided by gender (e.g., the fact that men like to eat noodles while women prefer porridge). The final division is that between host and guest, which she discusses largely through the work of Marcel Mauss and Yunxiang Yan.

The third question is about how food figures within two main systems of knowledge. "Sacred knowledge" ties particular foods to the traditional calendar of festivals and determines the use of food in ritual, such as the custom of making sheep figures out of flour (*mian yang*) as protective offerings for young children, or the question of which temple sacrifices should be raw or cooked, meat, or vegetarian. Especially poignant is her description of how familiar foods are used in funerary rituals in order to serve as a bridge between the living and the dead. The second category of what might generally be called "scientific knowledge" takes numerous forms, including traditional medical systems that divide foods into yin or yang, or by their hot or cold nature (*huoxing / hanxing shiwu*), and more recently, the language of Western nutrition science, including a flood of questionable information from such sources as internet influencers. Rather than a simple transition from traditional to modern ideas, Guo portrays these systems as overlapping an internal contradiction, often creating confusion over such basic questions as to whether people should eat more or less meat, or how to adapt diet to seasonal change.

Guo's interesting study makes careful use of secondary sources and is especially useful as a guide to the large body of Chinese-language literature on food, both historical sources and secondary scholarship. Conversely, however, I found little depth to the case study. Apart from general information, such as a changing population and income, there was not much sense of the village structure or real detail about how food shaped relations within the community. Images of Zhang Village were not just impressionistic, they were also very recent. Apart from the occasional references to Hinton's study, there is little substance behind the book's titular promise of seventy years of change. I was especially disappointed by the author's over-reliance on anthropological models to guide her fieldwork and wish that she had instead allowed us to hear from any of the many voices who could have rounded out her picture of village culinary life: medical experts, cadres or supermarket managers, or food professionals like the itinerant cooks who prepare funeral banquets.

Despite their obvious differences, these two books converge on several points. First, both effectively use historical literature to show deeper patterns that lie behind immediate change. Feng draws on a trove of guidebooks and personal reminiscences to highlight both the sheer depth of Jiangnan culinary tradition and the predictable emergence of nostalgia during moments of *fin de siècle* anxiety. Referring to classical medical works like the *Huangdi neijing*, Guo shows the existence of overlapping knowledge systems as something other than a unique condition of modernity. Second, among the external conditions that change the way people think of and consume food, both focus on China's relatively new condition of material excess. For Feng, this marks the emergence of a new crisis of middle-class anxiety as conspicuous consumption increasingly loses power to signify success. For Guo, it partially underlies the generationally specific nostalgia for simpler foods. A third point of comparison is the changing audience for the performance of identity. Feng's juxtaposition of the intense

interiority of literary reminiscence and the virtual audience of internet chat rooms has, I think, the potential to add depth to the village-bounded world of local studies. Guo gives us a glimpse of this online world but mostly as a force entering rural lives rather than the reverse.

While I appreciated both books, this third point distills a key difference in what makes Feng's volume such an excitingly original challenge to the field of food studies. Although informed by theoretical perspectives such as Bourdieu's idea of middle-class anxiety, Feng is deeply and personally grounded in China's culinary present, an experience she uses to create new perspectives and sympathies for her written sources. In this way, she is remarkably successful at bringing voices of the past into meaningful conversation with the parallel transformations of China's food enterprises, tastes, and culture.

REFERENCES

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