

## China

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**Thomas David DuBois**

***China in Seven Banquets: A Flavourful History***

London: Reaktion Books, 2024. 256 pages, Cloth, \$25.00. ISBN 9781789148619.

This book tackles an ambitious project—distilling over five thousand years of Chinese food history into under three hundred pages of prose—with a light hand and humor. Focusing on two central questions, “What was the food?” and “What did it mean to the people?” (13), the author invites his reader along to eat their way through Chinese history. Thomas DuBois presents both descriptions of Chinese foods and their backstories, both big-picture transformations and intimate details, and both “real” and “imagined” foods depicted in philosophy, literature, and film. The word “banquet” in the title apparently indicates authorial focus on “haute cuisine” and luxurious living but fails to do full justice to the dazzling array of dishes included, varied as they are in ingredients, cooking methods, occasions of consumption, class associations, and cultural significance as well as in time and location. Nonetheless, it is a useful organizational principle to unpack six major shifts in Chinese foodways through six chapters: ancient Chinese philosophies embodied in discourses on food; new ingredients and techniques imported from China’s neighbors; the perfection of culinary techniques in late imperial China, by his account from Song through Qing (tenth to nineteenth century); the introduction of Western cuisines and industrial food production in the early twentieth century; new foods and fads during China’s economic boom of the 1990s; and tech-driven food globalization of the 2000s.

In each chapter, “banquet” also serves as an effective narrative device to weave together different strands of food production and consumption, enabling DuBois to tread lightly back and forth until the climatical food events that hold people’s imagination even today, such as the Eight Treasures feast of Zhou (1046–221 BCE), the Tail-Burning Banquet to present newly promoted high officials to the court of Tang (618–907), the New Year’s Eve dinner from the eighteenth-century classic *Dream of Red Mansions*, or the mouth-watering family meal from the 1994 film *Eat Drink Man Woman*.

Following a succinct introduction that discusses its scope, perimeters, approach, and sources, the book progresses chronologically, though also looking back as necessitated by featured themes in each chapter. Chapter 1, “Of Meat and Morality,” outlines ancient Chinese philosophies constructed about and through food, encompassing cosmology,

medicine, music, rituals, and ethics. While hyperbolic depictions of foods from Chinese classics feed and stretch the imagination, they are grounded in “real” foodstuffs and utensils discovered through archeological excavations and tested through “reverse engineering” of ancient recipes (25). In chapter 2, “By Silk Road and High Sea,” DuBois adopts the same approach of integrating textual and material manifestations, describing China’s exchanges with neighboring countries through various venues, such as the overland Silk Road, the seafaring trade routes centered on Southeast Asia, and the Columbian Exchange. Similarly, chapter 3, “Gardens of Pleasure,” delineates the concrete economic, political, and sociocultural forces transforming premodern Chinese foodways, such as the rise of urbanization and print culture, even as he offers literary representations from *Dream of Splendor in the Eastern Capital*, *Plums in the Golden Lotus Vase*, *Water Marsh*, and *Red Mansions*.

Starting with chapter 4, “Fancy Foods and Foreign Fads,” the author takes his reader into the “modern” era. DuBois features a New Year’s set-meal at a Western-style restaurant in 1929 Shanghai as the central “banquet” of the chapter, illustrating new food items and ways of eating made possible by trade and commerce across national borders. An equally, if not more, impactful historical event was the industrialization of food production, whose effects would be experienced beyond the early twentieth century. We continue to see the impact of globalization and industrialization on Chinese foodways in chapters 5 (“Life’s a Banquet”) and chapter 6 (“Franchise Fever”). DuBois illustrates how changing ways of branding, sale (from roadside stalls to supermarkets), and purchase (in-person to delivery) of foods transform Chinese people’s foodways with no turning back, culminating in the remarkable success of the hotpot chain Haidilao, whose business relies as much on takeout as dining in.

So, what lies in the future for Chinese foodways? In the last chapter, “And Beyond . . .,” DuBois paints three scenarios: deepening globalization that would bring “the whole world” to a Chinese dinner table, a “Cold War–style” food security due to supply chains truncated by sanctions and a limited number of production bases, and a techno-dominant world taken over by algorithms in food production and consumption. Dystopian tales aside, DuBois also identifies China’s efforts to develop alternative protein, its aggressive policy thrusts for food security, and ultimately, change as the only constant in Chinese food history, which may signal resilience and hope. As a book intended for nonspecialists, it does an admirable job parsing complex issues through revealing vignettes chosen from five thousand years of history. DuBois brings to life the rich and sometimes perplexing evolution of Chinese foodways in comprehensive and accessible ways and opens up the field to general audiences. Read in totality, the book gives an extensive survey of Chinese food history, while each chapter can be picked to illustrate certain themes, suitable for undergraduate instruction. For those eager to “get their hands dirty,” it also provides abundant recipes to cook through Chinese history. It is no trivial act to include tried-and-true recipes of historical dishes. Not only does this testify to DuBois’s erudition and years of meticulous work, but it is also vital to the success of a book for general audiences, for it helps them experience and enjoy Chinese food in all ways possible.

Since all narratives are driven by data, DuBois accentuates urban and higher-class Chinese foodways drawing on available records. However, the necessary omissions also spotlight underexplored areas for future scholarly endeavors. As he rightly points out, an “update in Chinese food studies” is due (11), and more conversations between historians and anthropologists are called for. Ultimately, DuBois skillfully canvasses a

wide span of Chinese foodways with a deceptively simple, charming style, even though occasional typos and a misreading of the family relationship in *Eat Drink Man Woman* in chapter 5 (216), where the author misidentifies the little girl as Chef Chu's granddaughter (rather than the daughter of his oldest daughter's best friend), suggest more thorough copyediting would not have gone amiss.

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