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Reviews

Comparative Book Review: *Chopsticks and The Land of the Five Flavors*

By Jacob P. Banda

Food and foodways provide a valuable window into Chinese history and culture. Scholars have, until recently, not sufficiently explored them as great potential frameworks for analyzing Chinese history. They are rich potential sources of insights on a wide range of important themes that are crucial to the understanding of Chinese society, both past and present. Historians have tended to favor written sources and particularly those of social and political elites, often at the expense of studying important cultural practices and the history of daily life. The creative use of unconventional sources can reward the scholar with a richer view of daily life, with food and foodways as one of the most important dimensions. From class distinctions and wealth disparity in Chinese history, to essential themes of regional diversity and cultural transformation over time, to global flows of ideas and culture, studying Chinese food and foodways provides an urgently needed addition to our understanding of China.

In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in the serious scholarly attention to the history of food and its importance as a reflection of cultures and societies. This review acknowledges the efforts of two such scholars in their rich explorations of food in China, namely, Q. Edward Wang in his book *Chopsticks: A Cultural and Culinary History* (Cambridge, 2015), and *The Land of the Five Flavors: A Cultural History of Chinese Cuisine* (Columbia, 2013) by Thomas O. Höllmann. These two books examine the distinctive taste of Chinese food and the quintessential Chinese eating utensils, and the culture surrounding them. The authors engage the reader with works that are both lively and scholarly. Wang and Höllmann also pay particularly close attention to current political, social, economic, and cultural trends to make

their analyses relevant to the reader interested in China today. Issues like income or wealth disparity, cultural identity, and others ring true and reflect the authors' awareness of current issues in China.

In *Chopsticks: A Cultural and Culinary History*, Wang takes us on a journey through time starting in the Neolithic Age, sometime between 6600 and 5500 BCE, with the discovery of bone sticks that were found in the ruins of tombs at Longqiuzhuang, in what is today Gaoyou, Jiangsu Province.¹ Some believed them to be just a couple of old hairpins, but after further examination they were determined to be eating utensils, since they were found symbolically placed near the hands of the deceased as opposed to near the head. However, it was during the Bronze Age, during the Shang Dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE), that the use of chopsticks became more common in the preparation and consumption of everyday meals.

The bone chopsticks were not the only type of chopsticks found while excavating ancient tombs in China. Archeologists also found gold, jade, ivory, and metal chopsticks.² Of course, there have been no discoveries of the bamboo and wooden chopsticks that most peasants were using in this period, since most artifacts made from those materials have naturally decayed over the centuries. However, as Wang notes, there are many cases in recorded history by the Han imperial historian, Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BCE) and others that refer significantly to chopsticks.

For example, one colorful figure in Wang's narrative is that of King Zhou (1105–1046 BCE) the last ruler of the Shang. The later philosopher and political strategist, Han Feizi (ca. 280–236 BCE), wrote of the extravagant excesses that the Shang king used to show off his wealth. Han Feizi writes of King Zhou's luxurious tastes, which, in the traditionally moralistic Chinese telling of history, caused the downfall of the Shang.³ King Zhou's ivory chopsticks figure prominently in this account, though elephants were nowhere to be found in the Shang realm of northern China. This conspicuous consumption by corrupt kings and elites has echoes in China today, where party officials and wealthy business people have been accused of throwing lavish banquets, often at the

¹ Q. Edward Wang, *Chopsticks: A Cultural and Culinary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 68.

government's expense, and at the expense of the people of China. Wang's analysis is timely in pointing out that food can be an economic battlefield where the excesses of the wealthy arouse the fury of the common people. This is as true today as it was in China's imperial past, and the elites of China would do well to note Wang's analysis.

Another example comes in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), when Sima Qian wrote of Liu Bang, who would become the first Han emperor, Han Gaozu. In this example, Liu agreed with a counselor on a flawed plan of military action to be taken to seize power from the ruling dynasty; but it was another trusted advisor that changed Liu Bang's mind, using chopsticks as a metaphor to make his point. It was this advisor's plan of action that ensured victory for Liu. Wang deftly incorporates dimensions of military history here, using his exploration of chopsticks as a window on this aspect of Chinese history.

It was in the Late Zhou that we see chopsticks becoming more of an eating utensil and not only used for cooking, which had been their first recorded use. Chopsticks had been used by cooks to avoid burning their fingers in the kitchen when sampling a tasty morsel from a hot pot, be it a stew of vegetable or venison, longhaired buffalo, or unborn leopards.⁴ Of course, meat of any kind was a luxury item usually reserved for the rich. That is why the elites were last to conform to only using chopsticks, because knives were needed to cut meat, and that was something the poor did not usually have. The poor typically ate grains such as millet and rice, as well as vegetables as their main source of nutrition.

However, one could point to Confucius (551–479 BCE) and his followers as the reason for the total change of how one conveys their food from plate to mouth. In the *Classic of Rites*, enshrined by Confucius as one of the most important texts in China for centuries to come, the text advocates eating with proper manners by which one is to eat smaller portions and not have large, uncut chunks of meat on one's plate. Not only is it easier to grasp the smaller pieces of food, but in this view, one also looks less barbaric eating small morsels than trying to pull apart a huge piece of pork or cut up any of the many types of fowl living in China. In the years that followed, food would be cut and prepared in small morsels before being served, and this promotion of proper etiquette

⁴ Ibid., 37.

helped popularize chopsticks. This preparation of most Chinese food continues to this day, precluding the need for knives on the table.

Wang writes of the differences of chopsticks, noting that one can tell where the chopstick is from by just looking at it. Long and pointy? They come from Japan. Metallic and used with a spoon? Korea,⁵ and as for your everyday run-of-the mill type of bamboo or wood? China and Vietnam. Moreover, Vietnam is the only South East Asian country to use chopsticks as their main culinary tool to convey food. However, Wang reminds us that chopsticks are not just for eating. They are used in religious ceremonies, and as gifts at weddings and for the birth of children. Chopsticks are seen as a metaphor for life and companionship, namely, that one cannot do all the work alone (as a single chopstick), but rather one needs the other to accomplish life's goals!⁶ In bringing in this aspect of the analysis, Wang grounds his study in the daily cultural practices of everyday Chinese. The anthropological element here is rich and bypasses the reliance on the elite, and often elitist written sources, of ancient China.

Wang finds that chopsticks are to be respected not just seen as expendable. In the west, they also bridge the gap between cultures. Everyone likes to take a shot at using chopsticks either for fun or for impressing a friend. The easy disposal of chopsticks, however, is also hurting the environment with numbers ranging as high as 3.8 million trees cut down so that China, Japan, Korea, and the U.S. all have disposable chopsticks, which contributes to deforestation in China and around the world. Each year some 10,800 square miles of forest are destroyed leading some manufactures to start using other materials for making chopsticks.

Wang's work is extremely effective in demonstrating that this crucial component of Chinese culture can help us trace Chinese identity not only within its borders, but also far beyond and around the globe. Today, chopsticks are common as the main eating utensil in China of course, but also in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, as well as being commonly used by millions every day around the world. This indicates not only the longevity of Chinese identity, or acceptance of Chinese culture, but rather the global influence of a pan-Chinese culture that is today free of the political boundaries of Chinese regimes.

⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁶ Ibid., 98.

Thomas Höllmann starts *Five Flavors* with a quote from a famous Chinese writer named Lin Yutang (1895-1976). Lin wrote in his book *My Country and My People*, “If there is anything we [Chinese] are serious about, it is not religion or learning, but food.” Reading Hollman’s book, one realizes that we as Americans are missing out on what Chinese food really has to offer. *Five Flavors* introduces the many fantastic delicacies that China has brought to the table, as well as its diverse and brilliant cooking techniques.

The careful reader finds, though, that *Five Flavors* focuses almost exclusively on what the elites of China consumed on a daily basis, and we learn little of what the great majority of the population were making for themselves to eat. This is one significant blind spot in Höllmann’s otherwise outstanding book, and a more rustic companion volume to *Five Flavors* that introduces the cuisine of the wider population might also make for a delightful read! As it stands, Höllmann’s work offers a visceral and rich depiction of Chinese dishes, even providing recipes along with the many insets and sidebars, and yet this reader found that his work neglects crucial aspects of social history that should have been within the purview of the study. While it is noted above that food and foodways are a valuable potential window into the study Chinese history and history more broadly, Höllmann still needs to be engaged with the critical issues of inequality of the time, since no analysis can exist in a vacuum. The growing wealth disparity that is such a pressing issue in Chinese society today was manifestly apparent in the historic moments of Höllmann’s analysis as well, but he is effectively silent on these.

An emphasis on the elite and sometimes exotic dining habits of China may be accused of falling back on an Orientalist perspective, to borrow a phrase from the great Palestinian scholar, Edward Said in his seminal 1978 work, *Orientalism* (Pantheon). An emphasis on the delectable and sometimes bizarre foods of the Chinese elites as noted above, can be in danger of engaging in exotic history, and Höllmann’s analysis can tread close to not only the exotic, but the exoticization and fetishization of Chinese cultural practices. As a German scholar, it is possible that Höllmann remains somewhat constrained by the old “Sinology” of his European predecessors, where there was an emphasis on the perceived strangeness and otherness of China within the non-European world. This residue of the European imperial past unfortunately is apparent in even the most recent scholarship from

many of the best China historians in that part of the world. While Höllmann's subject is inherently challenging to the sensibilities of the non-Chinese reader, he should be aware of this historical bias, and also note the more common and palatable daily foodways of the vast majority of the Chinese population, which would not seem strange or exotic to the average western reader.

In Höllmann's book, we also learn something of the politics of food in Chinese history, including the strict laws that dictated the handling and storage of all grains and cereals, and that violation of these laws came with serious consequences when the stored items either rotted or were taken over by pests. This insight to the importance of food and its preservation as enforced by the state shows a Chinese imperial government that placed food and its provision and storage high among its priorities. The magistrate's granary, where he stored the in-kind taxed wheat, sorghum, millet, and other grains, is in Chinese political history a symbol of imperial control, and can be an indicator of the political health of a regime. A traditional symbol of political success and economic plenty was an overflowing granary, with seeds pouring out the cracks in the walls, and grain sprouting around the structure. An empty granary, or one with rotting grain inside, on the other hand, was a symbol of either incompetence or corruption on the part of the local magistrate, and perhaps even an indictment of the dynasty's very legitimacy.

Höllmann provides an amusing insight into regional diversity in China. One of the most significant misperceptions about China on the part of too many foreigners is the profound diversity of cultures within its borders. From the earliest records of Chinese history up to the present day, China's many regimes have included hundreds and perhaps thousands of different languages, political identities, and daily cultural practices, including foodways. The considerable myopia on the part of many non-Chinese people in seeing China as homogeneous is a debilitating misunderstanding of the most populous country on the planet. The misperception of China as a monolithic cultural zone fails to consider the cultural and ethnic diversity of the enormous country. From Mongols in the north, to Uighurs and Tibetans in the west, to the Dai, Li Zhuang, Hakka, and dozens of other groups, China has always been a rich and complex cultural tapestry. Too many foreigners see China as a place dominated by a single ethnic group, namely the Han, who make up the majority of the population.

These regional divisions, often unappreciated by foreign observers of China, are treated well in Höllmann's book, and in his work, they are reflected in the way that people around China poke fun at the eating habits of those in other regions. This is best summed up with a saying that the people of Beijing like to use in referring to the southerners of Canton (Guangzhou), namely that they eat everything with four legs except for tables.⁷ The Cantonese, however, for their part, also have a modern reply, saying that the people of Beijing "eat all that flies and swims as long as they're not planes and submarines."⁸ The consumption of dog in the north and snake in the south, for example, are not considered edible in the other region.

Höllmann's book takes the reader through countless aspects of Chinese food. From food preservation and storage and the government's role in its regulation, to the profound cultural diversity of China as reflected in its wide-ranging cuisines, Höllmann's book has a remarkable scope. He even provides the reader with glimpses into the taverns and teahouses, and leaves little to question in terms of his methodology and engaging writing. The reader even takes a trip to modern China to learn of the westernization that is influencing China by way of fast food, and its impact on China's rising middle class.

Using food as a way to study a society as a whole is an essential way to see the inner workings of its culture and of its transformation over time. These books are a great contribution to the field of Chinese history, and they are a welcome addition to the serious academic conversation developing around food and foodways. The serious student of Chinese history can find a rich trove of leads for further exploration in both primary and secondary sources throughout these two books. Taken together, they represent a notable recent interest in food and foodways in Chinese history, and they stand as rich and engaging introductions to the subject. While not exhaustive, they serve to introduce the reader to important current themes in understanding China and Chinese culture, and they add an important dimension to the study of Chinese history and the study of daily life in history.

⁷ Thomas O. Höllmann, *The Land of the Five Flavors: A Cultural History of Chinese Cuisine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

