

In sum, Wang Gungwu has written a thoughtful book; one that deserves to be read by anyone interested in the development of modern China. Wang argues powerfully and convincingly that in order to understand modern China, or China's modernization over the past century, it is imperative for readers to adopt a historical and cultural perspective. The issues discussed and dissected by him in the book are truly important and highly relevant to such understanding. As stated in the book's title and subtitle, the key message he intends to get across is as follows: Modern China has not been built from the thin air; instead, it has been a result of the relentless endeavour by the Chinese to make anew their past. As a new global historian—I am sure the author is certainly qualified to be one—the task is not to question why, after being exposed to outside influences for so long, China remains loyal (stuck?) to its past tradition; but rather to appreciate and even celebrate the country's attempt to bring to the world its own unique cultural traits and historical heritages.

Q. EDWARD WANG  
Rowan University

*Scribes of Gastronomy: Representations of Food and Drink in Imperial Chinese Literature.* Edited by Isaac Yue and Siufu Tang. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013. Pp. viii + 163. \$25.00.

Food determines culture, food reflects culture, food is culture . . . however one sees it, the relationship is close and significant. Of course it is—the culture which does not eat cannot survive—and the interconnection is not confined to Chinese culture, it is universal. Think of North American *potlatch* feasting where a lifetime's toil culminates in extravagant consumption; think of wedding banquets almost anywhere; think of nomadic arctic seal hunters, of Michelin stars, of killing fatted calves, of witchetty grubs, of endless television cookery programmes, of potato famines, of a land flowing with milk and honey, and of the precarious delights of tasting the *fugu* 河豚 fish.

There is an added dimension to food in Chinese culture, perhaps more a matter of degree than of major difference, a holistic concern with freshness, balance, texture, and appropriate flavourings which elevates the mundane necessity of sustaining life into an art form which can be created and appreciated anew at every meal. Much the same might be claimed *mutatis mutandis* for cuisines all over the world, and it would be rash to say of any culture that it lacked culinary skills, but the degree of difference,

the edge that Chinese food enjoys, is perhaps that at all levels of sophistication, from peasant home to gourmet restaurant, it is relatively commonplace to meet with subtle control of flavours and nutrition by those who cook, and refined delectation by those who eat. There are some terrible cooks and unappreciative diners in China, but they seem to account for a smaller proportion of the population than they do elsewhere.

We all have to eat, and we are all aware of it, just as we are all conscious of the need for shelter, sleep, the company of others, and the certainty of death. In our everyday lives and in our folklore these concerns are ever present, and it follows that they permeate our written literatures too. “If music be the food of love,” “only a beer teetotaller, not a champagne teetotaller,” “Chops and Tomata sauce,” “a man cannot have a pure mind who refuses apple-dumplings” . . . who does not know many such quotations? It goes without saying that Chinese literature is also shot through with food references.

If we look at the small but growing body of English language studies of Chinese food preparation and consumption there is a wide gulf between books such as the one under review here and the socio-historical works of which perhaps the most accessible and wide-ranging are Kwang-chih Chang’s *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* and E. N. Anderson’s *The Food of China*.<sup>1</sup> Both Chang and Andersen are concerned with the totality of China and the whole gamut of its food production and processing. Their primary remit is not “fine dining” but the feeding of the population, what people grew and caught, how much of it there was, and what they did with it; and their sources may include Literature (note the capital L) but are more often government documents, official histories, local gazetteers, memoirs, and sociological field studies. They are not *per se* interested in how the consumers enjoyed the food.

The editors and authors of this book, by contrast, are heavily focused on the relishing of food, and the sources for their research are works of pre-twentieth-century Chinese Literature. Literature was the near-exclusive preserve of the elite few of China, those with money and education, men (women, given their inferior position in China at the time, could not figure large) who had the wealth to expend on fine dining and the leisure to enjoy it. The papers reproduced here do not deal with tonnages of soy production or the lengths of blades of agricultural tools or the daily menus of working people. They concentrate on the refined tastes of the gourmet literati as evidenced in poetry, novels, and *belles-lettres*. They explore a world of fantasy and fiction inhabited by dreamers and lotus-eaters, not the “real” world of everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup> *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. K. C. Chang (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); E. N. Anderson, *The Food of China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

What they record is not irrelevant to the real world—novelists and poets too are human—and no doubt a filter-down effect has always to some extent informed more popular tastes, but those who wrote Literature were writing for their peers who could read it, and were not noticeably interested in the plain fare that the illiterate man in the padi-field had to bear with. In sentiment if not in cultural accuracy “Let them eat cake” could have come from the lips of a Chinese literatus: it certainly was not coined by Marie-Antoinette. Similarly though less stridently, Elia (Charles Lamb) may have eulogised roast pig at great length, but he mentions “plain mutton with turnips” only in passing and only to disparage.

In a sense, then, the editors of this collection appear to have partly missed the point. In their introductory chapter “Food and the Literati” they trumpet their credo that “the unique appeal of food and its special cultural significance within Chinese society cannot be underestimated” (p. 1) but (leave aside the howling error that they must mean “cannot be *overestimated*” or “*should* not be underestimated”) their concern is with “Society” (perhaps “Upper crust” would be the appropriate term in this context?) and they tend to take for granted Chinese society at large. That is their choice and there can be nothing untoward in it, but the reader should bear in mind that while this book is a contribution to the understanding of the “special cultural significance” of food in Chinese culture, seeking here the justification for the claimed “unique appeal” will be in vain.

There are seven other short essays in the book. Three deal with alcoholic drink, one with tea, and the remaining three centre on eating and drinking in specific literary works. This bald formulation exposes at once the bias towards the upper crust, since literature was for the privileged, for many centuries alcohol was a luxury item in China (a point made in more than one of the papers), and tea was not as universal in Chinese society as is popularly believed. When this reviewer lived for an extended period during the relatively affluent 1960s in a village of the Hong Kong New Territories, he was always offered “tea” (茶) when visiting people in their homes, but what was poured was almost invariably hot boiled well water, a more affordable euphemistic variant.

And in a work on a culture justly renowned for its cuisines—there will, I think, be few who would wish to quarrel with the editors’ convictions on this—is it not a strange imbalance to have nearly half the papers deal exclusively with alcohol? Only those who have never tasted Chinese alcoholic drinks (酒 *jiu* “wine,” the conventional translation for both wine and spirits) could be under the illusion that they are “renowned” or refined. Potent, yes; mind-blowing (hence beloved of poets), yes; even infamous . . . but not to be vaunted as a high achievement of Chinese culture. Indeed, H. T. Huang does not credit the Chinese with having understood that there were two separate processes at work in fermentation—the hydrolysis of starch into fermentable

sugars and the fermentation of the sugars into alcohol<sup>2</sup>—and it may be that the failure to appreciate this meant a relative lack of sophistication in the development of wine-making techniques. Whether this was the case or not, it is notable that the authors of the papers here are more concerned with the effects and functions of wine as a medium for intercourse with gods, as a mood enhancer, as a medicine, and as a facilitator of creativity than they are with the enjoyment of it as a taste experience.

The wine related essays are on “Wine and Prose-Writing from Pre-Qin to Jin” by Tak Kam Chan, on “The Morality of Drunkenness in Chinese Literature of the Third Century CE” by Nicholas Morrow Williams, and on “Making Poetry with Alcohol: Wine Consumption in Tao Qian, Li Bai and Su Shi” by Charles Kwong. They show a progressive acceptance of alcohol as an aid to literary inspiration and might seem to point to a loose association of drunkenness with Daoism and of sobriety with Confucianism, but, as Williams warns, “abstractions of ‘Confucian’ or ‘Daoist’ doctrine are misleading; . . . They share a view of alcohol as fundamentally dangerous to social cohesion and political control” (p. 29). There is a certain amount of repetition of material in the three essays which could have been avoided by judicious editing, but this is not a serious drawback, and on the plus side all three are liberally enriched with quotations while, as elsewhere in the collection, the careful attention to supplying Chinese characters for the quotations and for names and technical terms used in the text is to be lauded for the convenience and enlightenment it brings to the reader.

“Tea in the Poetry of the Middle Historical Period” by Ronald Egan reflects on the poetic treatment of tea as its consumption changed from the monastic environment with which it was associated in the Tang dynasty to a more widespread commercial availability in cities during the Song dynasty. With commodification came a lucrative tax opportunity for the government, and the rise of connoisseurship of tea. Like the product itself, this paper is both refreshing and stimulating, but it sits a rather lonely island in a sea of alcohol here.

“The Obsessive Gourmet: Zhang Dai on Food and Drink” by Duncan Campbell is as mouth-watering a presentation as its title suggests, an all too short taster which none the less contrives to impart full meaning to “the enjoyment of food.” Zhang wrote of luxurious living only after he had been reduced to penury, and Campbell has got himself well under the skin of his subject to bring out the poignancy of the situation. Isaac Yue’s essay “Tasting the Lotus” looks at food and sex in the late-Ming *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅, pointing out the deliberate juxtaposition of the two, and

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<sup>2</sup> H. T. Huang, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 6: *Biology and Biological Technology*, Part 5: *Fermentations and Food Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 244, 606–7.

urging that the novel should not be considered solely as erotica. His contention that women are constantly denigrated and yet are equated with food seems to run counter to the laudatory view of food which is the main thrust of these essays, though it is not difficult to see how both are treated as consumables. The final paper “Eating and Drinking in a Red Chambered Dream” by Louise Edwards is an exploration of the role of food in distinguishing purity and corruption in the Qing-dynasty *Hong Lou Meng* 紅樓夢. What seems at first to be a simplistic association of pure/female, corrupt/male is quickly dispelled, and the analysis is deeper and more complex while reassuringly accessible, as befits a treatment of China’s greatest novel.

The editors and authors of this slim collection make no claim to a definitive or comprehensive coverage of their theme, indeed other than the broad focus on food in literature there is no great homogeneity, overall structure or inclusiveness in the essays. That this is so does not seem to be particularly important, and the over-weighting with regard to drink referred to above cannot therefore be of great importance either. The book is nicely produced, marred only by a small number of infelicities of English in chapters 1, 2, 4, and 7 betraying less than fully mindful copy-editing by the publisher, who must be aware of the near impossibility of anyone’s writing flawlessly in a language not their own. Again, this is not a major criticism.

What shines through every one of the eight papers is a loving commitment to the subject of food and drink in literature, and the result is a charming and readable volume which punches above its weight in giving pleasure to the reader regardless of the extent of his/her own knowledge of the field. To misquote Elia: “Food is all neighbours’ fare.”

HUGH D R BAKER  
*SOAS, University of London*

***The First Chinese American: The Remarkable Life of Wong Chin Foo.*** By Scott D. Seligman. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013. Pp. xxxii + 364. \$50.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

When Mary R. Coolidge of Stanford University published in 1909 her classic, *Chinese Immigration*, a 531-page study on the first fifty years of Chinese immigration to the United States, she acknowledged in the Preface her indebtedness to several individuals, all of whom were white American scholars and diplomats, for the help they had given her, a routine custom by grateful writers. However, it must have