

NEVER JUST FOOD: THEMED ISSUE ON FOOD AND ASIA

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At the time of writing this introduction, a food studies listserv run by the Association for the Study of Food and Society that I am on has been consumed by two threads: one has morphed into a "what is the state of the field" discussion and the other grapples with the crypto-Rumsfeldian question, "what don't we know about the food of the past." These are curiously relevant and timely questions for this themed issue on Food and Asia. We are in a moment of intense scholarly interest in how food is produced, consumed and understood. For many, there is an added urgency to the study of food as agribusiness and scientific developments change the very molecular composition of the foods we eat, and push some foods and foodways into the category of the permanently vanishing. In the context of the globalisation of food, the ongoing fears of a world-wide food crisis and the continuing inequalities of food production and consumption fuel this urgency. For those with an interest in the Asia Pacific region, these are particularly relevant issues.

Considering the state of the field, it is impossible to underestimate the effect on food scholarship of food-related popular culture. Across the

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media-saturated world, viewers sit down of an evening to watch cooking shows, televised cooking competitions and reality-cooking. Cookbooks fly off the shelves at a time when the book market is experiencing a general reduction in many market segments. Gastro-tourism and globalisation bring Asia to the West, the West to Asia but also, Asia to Asia. As Asian-constructed food sweeps the world, food consumers experience both Asian food and food influenced by Asia. Of course migrants have always provided a gateway to new foods, techniques and cuisines, but the globalised pantry brings to many of us foods that come without a migrating community, creating a relentless pursuit of "authentic Asian food" and an acceptance of fusion food in all its varied permutations. The worst of these incoherent trend-chasing mashups, to borrow from *Observer* reviewer Jay Rayner, is metaphorically embodied in "sharing-plate menus of Scandinavian-Mongol fusion kebab wraps."² Or to put it in other words, not all fusion is culinary successful, even if it symbolises the exotic or the risible. But food—and the food penumbra—has become well established as entertainment for the many.

We are, of course, and as scholars of popular culture have well established, rightfully interested in what is entertaining us—how it is built and what it constructs. And the universality of food gives it a built-in relevance and appeal. Yet as food studies pioneer Warren Belasco noted, while food production has a long tradition of study by economists, historians and agricultural scientists, scholars have been more reluctant to study the consumption of food.³ We might frame an examination of this consuming hole with Sherrie A. Innes' 2001 suggestion that food is so ubiquitous, that, paradoxically, it disappears from our attention entirely.⁴

In 2012 it certainly has our attention—and we are far from done with it. Yet the second listserv question, "what don't we know about the food of the past," is a curious one. Several of the articles in this issue deal with historical themes, making this a particularly relevant question. As a historian, there is an enormous amount I do not know about past, as a scholar of food, there is an enormous amount I do not know about the food of the past, as a scholar of Southeast Asia there is a enormous amount I do know about the food of the past of Southeast Asia. Yet there is something about the framing of this question which unsettles me, as it did a number if people on the food studies listserv.

² Rayner, J., *Observer*, Sunday 29 April 2012.

³ Belasco, W., *Food: The Key Concepts* (London: Berg, 2008), 2.

⁴ Innes, S. A., *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 4.

I am reminded of a recently published article by Allen S. Weiss on the conundrum of food and authenticity, in which he suggested that we ask the wrong question; rather than asking is something authentic, Weiss commends us to ask the alternative question: "*How* is it authentic." For Weiss this becomes the question, "What does it mean for such a version of a dish to appear at this time and place."⁵ Inspired by Weiss, we can ask, instead, what does what we do know tell us about the past, about the values and structures of scholarship, and about food.

Food is much more than what we eat. The study of food is also the study of culture and social life. The relationship between identities and food features prominently in the discipline. National and ethnic identities jostle alongside religious, gendered and regional identities. The imposed binary of cuisine and identity is in fact very complex. Some of this complexity is expressed on the plate but it also expressed in the areas around food, its production, purchase, marketing and in its social meanings—the way it is reflected in culture and the way it is refracted by culture.

With the aforementioned complexities in mind, the study of Asian food can be a lens, "giving focus to the broad sweep of history and the complex patterns of contemporary Asian societies."⁶ All of the articles in this issue deal in some way with the topics of Food and Asia, but in necessarily limited ways with regards to both topics. Asia, here is reflected only as China, Japan and Singapore—hardly a comprehensive or even representative sweep. The articles cover the historical and the contemporary, they are written by historians, political scientists and area studies specialists. Some of us write mainly about food; none of us research or teach exclusively in food studies. And this brings us back to the question that so animated the food studies listserv—what constitutes food studies at this moment in time? Food studies has the feel of a new discipline, yet in fact, the study of food is not novel and many of the prominent figures of food studies have been writing about food for decades and, indeed, have made their careers doing so. The assertion that Food Studies is new (as reflected in dedicated food studies programs and degrees) rightfully rankled the membership of the listserv, and calls for a "what food studies is" special issue of a journal likewise generated replies of the "we've already done this, see this book, see that journal" genre.

Perhaps it is the fact that Food Studies is both consciously interdisciplinary and written about by people in very many different

⁵ Weiss, A. S., "Authenticity," *Gastronomica* 11, no. 4 (2011): 74–77.

⁶ Lozada, E. P., "Understanding Contemporary Asia through Food," *Education About Asia* 16, no. 3 (2011): Supplement.

disciplines that causes this adolescence angst. What is evident is that the study of food has been dominated by the United States. That is, both by scholars who reside in America and the field of American Studies, which has produced some very fine studies of food production and consumption. Within this context, the food of Asia is often studied as the food of immigrants, as evidence of globalisation and changes in American cities. Important work is being done on the food of Asia in Asia but it has a, excuse the pun, notably different flavour to it. This edition is but a tiny contribution to this growing field of study.

What does this study of food in Asia tell us about Asia? In a way, very little. Drawing on only a few Asian nations in our themed edition, it is not our intention to be definitive or extrapolative. Reading about fake food in China may tell you about the growing trend of fake food and the challenges it poses, it may tell you about the challenges in contemporary China but it cannot tell us about, say, Korea. The paradox of globalisation—that at the very time borders are becoming more fluid and people, goods and financial systems become more integrated, people are becoming acutely away of their local identities—is instructive here. The foods of Asia are increasingly embedded in the global economy—contributing and receiving goods—yet food is experienced on the local and national level and is increasingly connected with these defining characteristics. Anxiety about consuming the food of China is as acute in Singapore as it is Manhattan, Vietnamese coffee producers are as keen to having their organic coffee beans identified as Vietnamese as Tasmanian cheese producers are to having their products identified as Tasmanian.

Food then in these articles is about a great variety of things. Food is an expression of national identity, a source of anxiety and a potential threat to the esteem of the nation state, a space where nationalism can be imbued, a space in which its trade was both a threat and site of national accomplishment and it is also a site where cultural is marshalled to reinforce nation. In a sense then, these five articles coalesce around a very broad theme of food and nation. The connection between food and identity—I eat/cook/like this dish therefore I am X—is a well trode path and these articles are not so much connecting food and identity in these ways as reading food as a space in which nation is performed and contested in varied ways. Methodologically the articles in this edition reflect the interdisciplinary approach of Food Studies. Beyond that, they all read food as text, whatever the media form. Further, they use food as a lens to tease out broader issues around the theme of nation.

Japan's iconographic instant ramen noodle is the focus of George Solt's article, "Shifting Perceptions of Instant Ramen in Japan during the High-Growth Era, 1958–1973." Ramen is a product rich with multiple meanings about modernity, post-war Japanese innovation and emergency food, as well as to students the world over. Solt takes as his focus the marketing of Ramen in Japan and the responses of consumers to these advertisements to evaluate the social meaning of instant ramen. As cultural historian Jackson Lears pointed out, advertisements have a powerful iconic significance. Iconic, but not static symbols, they are the coupling of "words and pictures in commercial fables." Drawing on the American experience, Lears suggested that advertisements tell stories "that are both fabulous and didactic, that have evoked fantasies and pointed morals, that have reconfigured ancient dreams of abundance to fit the modern world of goods."⁷ Despite ramen's humble origins, first as the food of labourers and then via technological innovation, as a convenience food, the advertising of ramen has simultaneously engaged in debates about morality, especially around social roles, and provided illustration of very modern dreams of abundance. For Lears, these fables have become the most dynamic "representations of cultural values in the world."⁸ Solt suggests that ramen and ramen advertising is one such site. Looking specifically at the myriad of advertising of ramen in the period 1958–1973, including conventional print media, radio, songs, and television as well as such rich forms as game-shows, contests, and brand characters, Solt warmly illuminates the history and cultural significances of ramen.

Children in particular emerged as critical to ramen advertising—as advertising symbol, target consumers and site of anxiety about changing domestic arrangements and responsibilities of women as housewives and mothers. The advertising of ramen worked to construct popular ideas of a Japanese childhood and Solt shows how the Nissin Foods' trademarked character "Chibikko," embodied the desirable characteristics of a happy, healthy, wealthy, white-ish and slightly mischievous child. The popularity of ramen is both evidence of alterations in household structure due to labour changes and evidence of the displacement of established practices of daily life. Advertising reflected these changes and provided a bridge for the management of social and family change. The "My Grandchildren Love it" advertisement, Solt suggests, functioned not only to promote ramen to an older demographic, but to make acceptable the purchase of an item that was

⁷ Lears, J., *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

marketed with the child symbol of Chibikko and was increasingly consumed as a convenience food by the elderly as well.

The association between the consumption of instant ramen and Japaneseness, while started by product-specific advertising, was quickly picked up by the popular press, then by academics and it is now a well established trope in the popular culture of Japan and in representations of Japanese culture outside of Japan. Solt quotes medical doctor and mountaineer Imai Michiko, who talked in 1971 about her use of instant ramen while mountain climbing, about how impressed other mountaineers were and how this made her feel more Japanese, to show this connection. That is not to say that the connection was uncontroversial, in fact ramen has been the site of sustained controversy around food production, the addition of chemicals to food, concerns about food safety and food security. While on the one hand the processed nature of instant ramen signified technological advance, Solt identifies on the other hand, considerable anxiety about the mechanisation of food production in Japan. Outbreaks of food-borne illnesses in the 1960s heightened anxiety about food safety precisely because of the emergent centrality of instant ramen to a Japanese identity.

Fears about the safety of food are not, as Bee Wilson reminded us in her history of food fraud, a thing of the past.⁹ From anxiety about the safety of the commercial production of instant ramen we move to the rise of fake food in China. Kaz Ross in her article, "Faking It: Food Quality in China," considers a series of food scandals in recent and contemporary China, focusing on key industries such as milk, to argue that food is a fruitful site for illustrating how the concept of "quality" (*suzhi*) can be understood and demonstrating that understanding this term is central to understanding the continued failure to safe-guard food in China. Milk, so often framed as a symbol of modernity, has emerged as a symbol of food fear in China. The Fonterra baby-milk melamine scandal of 2008 revealed a significant issue of food adulteration. Melamine tainted products, while originating in China, were found across the global, highlighting how food safety concerns can no longer be considered within the framework of national boundaries. The deep structural and regulatory problems in China's dairy industry lead Ross to suggest that such a controversy was inevitable. The milk adulteration scandals of 2010 and 2011 bring into tension the understanding of milk as

⁹ Wilson, B., *Swindled: The Dark History of Food Fraud, from Poisoned Candy to Counterfeit Coffee* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 272.

the symbol of a modern globalised life, with its perceived benefits to health and nutrition, and the fear of modern food production.

Large scale industrial food production coexists with unregulated small scale production in China and Ross highlights the intersection of these production methods as one of the structural issues that affects effective food safety regulation. Small producers squeezed by an industrial system that requires them to compete with large agribusiness producers are not only incentivised to cut corners, they are less scrutinised. In addition, because of the sheer scale of industrial food production, their produce if tainted or adulterated, is hard to identify once it has been amalgamated with the food of many other such providers and made into other products. The regulation of food is complex and involves multiple agencies at the national, provincial and local level and consequently jurisdiction is not always clear. The case of fake eggs provides an illustration of how a problem—even though identified—is not well-managed, in part because of jurisdictional issues. Just as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) famously has legal responsibilities to both protect consumers and promote producers, and as food safety issues are split between the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS, part of USDA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA), and various state-level agencies, so too in China are products sometimes redundantly regulated by the same overlapping agencies, or as Ross suggests, not regulated by any of them.

Ross points to a sustained rise in food scandals in the 2010–2011 period, including: calligraphy ink in noodles, fake wine, fake tofu, poisoned mushrooms, recycled steam buns, illegal food colouring, banned steroids fed to pigs, pork marinated to masquerade as beef, tainted bean sprouts, fake sweet potato flour, fish contaminated with mercury, shrimp injected with sodium, nitrite poison added to milk, extensive use of sewer or gutter recycled cooking oil. The breadth of these food scandals has drawn the Chinese media, as well as the international media, into the controversies. Food adulteration slides from scandal into urban legend as claims became more outlandish (although not necessarily untrue) and the media coverage became more sensational. As Jiayang Fan noted in a recent *New Yorker* piece, "Until China reaches a place where the world of officials begin to share some commonalities with that of ordinary citizens, the rumor mill will always be hard to differentiate from the newsreel."¹⁰ The rumour mill and

¹⁰ <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/05/bo-xilai-zhang-ziyi.html>, accessed 1 June 2012.

the newsreel remain firmly focused on China's food at the moment. A growing international fear of food produced in China tarnishes the image of the nation. The connection between food and nation is both strong and contested. The desire for a safe supply of food is increasingly been constructed as a discourse of food security and food sovereignty. As the example of China shows, however, the global food economy works to dissolve the category of nation in this setting.

As a city-state of the twenty-first century, Singapore is unusual. Singapore does not have its own agriculture, aside from some hydroponic bean sprouts, grown in high-rises, and relies on dirty water purchased from Malaysia, which it cleans and makes into "new water." The Port has protected Singapore from scarcity—a logic that relies in part on its structure as a city-state. Precisely because of these unique circumstances, the way in which Singapore has thought about cooking and domestic management is interesting. Drawing together the themes from the previous two articles of advertising and milk, Nicole Tarulevicz in her article "Let Lifeguard Milk Raise Your Child: Gender, Food and Nation in Singapore's past," takes as her point of departure an advertising slogan for Lifeguard Milk in Singapore. The slogan encouraged parents and specifically mothers, to "Let Lifeguard Milk Raise Your Child," and Tarulevicz's article works to make sense of this slogan, which is displayed on a teacup in the Singapore History Museum.

Examining discursive sites that were particularly subject to government efforts to sculpt femininity—school textbooks and cookbooks in particular—allows Tarulevicz to show that the state took a keen interest in domestic gender roles and the organisation of domestic space. Food preparation and cooking at home, however, were marginalised in discourses of femininity, reflecting the importance to the state of domesticity as a site of citizenship training—with ideology preeminent over outcome. As Tarulevicz notes, teaching young Singaporean women to have a neat kitchen or to prepare thrifty meals enshrined the values of social order and fiscal responsibility, not how to bake a sponge-cake. The qualities of "good citizens"—clean, controlled and hygienic—were embedded in textbooks creating the student as proto-housewife and proto-citizen. Once women are housewife-citizens they are still subject to guidance from the state. Tarulevicz uses as an example the anxiety about foreign domestic workers, who are relied upon by middle class women but are also feared as a source of corruption for making the next generation of Singaporeans weak by spoiling them during their childhood.

Ideological work is also done by cookbooks and Tarulevicz highlights key examples of this. The centrality of food to Singaporean identity and to Singapore as a nation-state is underscored by the popularity of *Mrs Lee's Cookbook*. Mrs Lee is the mother of Lee Kuan Yew, the acknowledged father of the nation, making Mrs Lee the Grandmother of the nation and resplendent with symbolic values for a relatively young nation struggling to define and maintain a national identity. In displaying items like the Lifeguard Milk teacup, the Singapore History Museum, as a representation of the state, works towards normalising particular constructions of motherhood, childhood, food, cooking, domesticity and more broadly of the idea of Singapore as nation-state.

From teacups and the milk that might be added to them, we move back to the tea itself in Kristin Bayer's article "Contagious Consumption: Commodity Debates over the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century China Trade." Bayer argues that the trades in tea and opium were inextricably linked at this historical moment and both were seen as possible sources of contagion, a vector for the spread of cultural and economic pathologies. That is, in this trade exchange commodities carry more than their respective use and value, they have a social and cultural meaning. Furthermore, tea reflected a tension between the desire to sell products and the fear that those products would have undue influence. At the most basic level the fear was that if the English consumed "too much" Chinese tea they might start behaving like the Chinese. Of specific concern was the unmanly nature of tea sipping, which it was feared would destroy British masculinity and potentially undermine British trade dominance.

Yet, simultaneously, a fall in tea supply threatened the British way of life and commentators expressed a fear that without sufficient tea the British would suffer and partake in worse social ills, such as alcohol consumption. China's ability to trade directly with England was limited through a range of legislative interventions. It was not sufficient for Britain to be making profit out of selling opium to China they also sought power in the exchange of goods such as tea. The threat that tea posed was one of vulnerability—an insufficient supply of tea made Britain physically and economically vulnerable and Bayer notes the irony that tea became associated with weakness when it was in fact Britain's trade in opium that was so devastating.

The linking of the trade in tea to the trade in opium, Bayer suggests, allows us to see that tea and opium were the medium through which British and Chinese trading partners expressed their trade and imperial anxieties. The relationship between the tea and opium trades relied on the link

between physical and economic health, conceptions of progress grounded in the circulation of trade and idea that China was backward and in need of force in order to modernise. Tea and opium did not merely inspire debate; for Bayer this is a much deeper process, as she argues that nineteenth century imperialism and trade transformed the disputed logic of commerce, which sought to promote exchange, consequently tea and opium made the very nations benefiting from so-called free trade express concerns of being contaminated by it.

The power of food to contaminate and pollute is as powerful in contemporary Japanese cinema as was the case of nineteenth century debates about tea. Barbara Hartley, in her article "Food and Pollution in Two Films from Contemporary Japan," uses *Departures* (2008) and *Gemini* (1999) to examine ways in which food conveys messages about ritual pollution and the categories of the ritually unclean. Specific food items have symbolic values and the process of eating in turn has symbolic value. In *Departures*, food becomes a symbol of life-affirmation for the main character who is working in the socially unacceptable role of mortician. A devotion to food, to the pleasure of food, is a devotion to the forces of life. Food too in these films functions as a narrative device for transformation. Hartley, drawing on Levis-Straus' paradigm of the raw and the cooked, reads the reaction of characters in the film to chicken as symbolic of personal journey. She considers an early scene in the film in which the character Daigo is repulsed by the sight of a raw chicken as a metaphor for Daigo's concern, at the time, about death as pollution and as outside the boundary of culture. The second chicken scene involves a cooked chicken, which is eaten with pleasure and for Hartley is a marker in the Levi-Strauss schemata of thorough enculturation. She further reads the chicken to suggest that it symbolises an understanding of the need for death to be an active part of civilised life rather than marked as unclean.

Reflections of uncleanliness and disorder also occupy the second film that Hartley studies, *Gemini*. Set after the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05, the film engages with the issue of the appropriation of Shinto by the Japanese state, relevant here because of Shinto's emphasis on ritual pollution. Hartley points to the way in which Shinto was transformed by the authorities of Imperial Japan into a device for, among other things, identifying and expunging the socially "unclean." Her reading of the film focuses on the disorder unleashed when the marginalised take over the centre, the example here being provided by both the riverbank people (marginalised by occupation, lifestyle and social status) and by an identity theft in which the high-status doctor who is the main character has his

identity stolen by his twin, who was outcaste for his polluting snake-shaped birthmark. In this context, food offers not a celebration of life, but a potential site of order-making.

For the elites depicted in the film, those who might be "disordered" by the presence of the marginal, food is consumed in Hartley's view in a geisha-esque exaggeratedly delicate fashion. Order is maintained through the ordering of the body and food becomes a site of the maintenance of discipline and order. The spilling of a bowl of soup becomes a symbol for the emerging loss of control—the inability of the family to control the food moves it, for Hartley, from marker of control to sign of chaos. That is, when those things that should be ordered become disordered or disruptive, their unsettling power is magnified. Food as symbol of disorder intensifies as the film progresses—culminating is a scene in which the outcast twin throws a bowl of kitchen scraps down the well and over the body of the "good twin" who he has imprisoned. The world is turned upside down, the outcast twin has the power, when he should be powerless, the good twin is confined when he should be free and rather than having control over the food he eats, the food is thrown at him; it is very unruly food. Food in both these films becomes a vehicle for interrogating the connection between social exclusion, ritual pollution and order, themes that have occupied Japanese artists in a range of media, reflecting a broader social concern with these issues.

In all of these articles food is many things—it is symbolically laden, it threatening, it is anxious-making, it is instructive, it is a site of power and it is unruly. It is this multiplication of potential meanings across varied historical and cultural contexts which make food such a rich and rewarding area of study. Furthermore, while the percentage of income people spend on food varies wildly from nation to nation (the United States is commonly cited as one of the lowest at around 5 percent, in contrast to and India and Indonesia at 25–35 percent),¹¹ there is no denying that food does important economic, cultural and political work, and has done so for millennia. This is as true of the eighteenth century tea trade as it is of China's current food trade. The recent decision, for example, to allow Pakistan's Murree Brewery to sell their beer in India (which has not happened since Partition in 1947), has been heralded by commentators as a trade event laden with significance

¹¹ <http://www.motherjones.com/blue-marble/2012/01/america-food-spending-less>, accessed 5 June 2012.

and symbol. Beer is not just beer and food, as *Bon Appetite* journalist Molly Wizenberg reminds us, is never just food.¹²

We buy food that is ready to eat, ready to cook or in need of significant preparatory work. We buy food that is familiar and we buy food that is exotic. We buy good food, we buy bad food, we buy healthy food and we buy frightening food. We eat because we need to, we eat because we want to, we eat out of social obligation, we eat to show our identity, we eat to show hospitality, to celebrate, to commemorate, to mark religious and personal events. Food then is the very fabric of the lived experience; it is can be what makes you part of a community, of a nation. Food is inclusive precisely because it is universal; it is much more inclusive than the nation-state but at an ideological level, it does the important work of creating a space for personal experience within the national narrative.

¹² Wizenberg, M., *A Homemade Life: Stories and Recipes from My Kitchen Table* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 2.