

Moral Foods: The Construction of Nutrition and Health in Modern Asia.

By Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell (Eds.).

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A Book Review by

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YUAN Long-Ping (袁隆平) was a Chinese rice breeding scientist who made a significant contribution towards enhancing the production of rice, and feeding Asia's large and starving population. He passed away in 2021. Thousands of people from all over the nation came to say goodbye to him, despite the fact that this was during the period of "Zero-covid" policy in China. Apparently, YUAN Long-Ping is a household name in China, and even more broadly in Asia, but few people know about him in the West. He is so well-known and respected by the Chinese in large part because rice is a common staple across Asia. Rice plays a crucial role in everyday life in Asia, and contributes towards the diverse national and regional identities as well, making it an apt central subject of a collection that contends with the moral values of foods in the process of Asia's modernization.

Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell's edited volume, entitled *Moral Foods: The Construction of Nutrition and Health in Modern Asia*, documents how Asian culinary practices and ideas have transitioned from tradition to modernity, "by analyzing the cultural, political, economic, and historical dynamics through which moral values have been assigned to foods, bodies, citizens, and states" (2020, p. 2).

Moral Foods demonstrates the healthy societies and food systems in modern Asia. The book's title invokes its specific focus on food morality, and its role in contemporary of Asian food and health system. Apart from the introduction, the book is divided into three parts, "Good Foods", "Bad Foods" and "Moral Foods", with each part containing four chapters.

The book gives its unique definitions of 'good foods' and 'bad foods'. Good foods mainly depend on "how nutritional practices were understood to cultivate particular types of desirable bodies and people and, in turn, how these models of the person corresponded to Asian nation's imagination of modernity" (2020, p. 11). On the other hand, "'bad' foods were not simply unpleasant or undesirable for aesthetic or sensory reasons; rather they hindered the stability and development of the person and society more generally." (2020, p.12). Finally, the term 'moral foods' "builds on these themes of good versus bad in projects to make modern persons, subjects, and states by focusing specifically on the ambiguities and malleability of foods and the health regimes in which they are implicated" (2020, p.13).

Whereas there exists a large body of scholarship on Asia's modernization process as viewed from different perspectives (for instance, economy, agriculture, governance, military, and religion), such scholarship seldom explores modernization of Asia by placing food at the centre of analysis. Since food is a vital part of daily life, the contributors to this collection are concerned with almost every aspect of society, and the book offers a creative and unique lens for understanding the modernization of Asian states and regions.

The volume uses the very typical Asian foods as case studies to demonstrate Asia's modernization history. For example, rice, milk, and tea are prominently featured. In Chapter 1, Francesca Bray compares the significance of rice in Japan and Malaysia, noting its contribution to different national and regional identities. Similarly, David Arnold's chapter (Chapter 5) on rice illustrates that eating rice historically served to identify the colonized as inferior to British colonizers in British India.

Furthermore, Tae-Ho Kim (Chapter 6) extends this discussion by comparing rice with two other grains—barley and wheat – in modern Korean culture, and points out that each grain has had a specific cultural value at different historical moments. Regarding milk, in Chapter 2, Jia-Chen Fu argues Chinese people rely on a milk substitute—soybean milk, which is more appropriate to their own histories and values in their quest for modernity. However, that situation changed in the twentieth century. The Chinese made efforts to overcome the lactose intolerance so common in the region, in order to consume milk, since milk was universally regarded as a nutritionally sound food. Meanwhile, Izumi Nakayama (Chapter 3) notes that breast milk is superior to other alternatives, like cow's milk, condensed milk, and soy milk, in the context of “strengthening the nation”.

One of the major strengths of the book lies in its careful explanation of how Asian countries entered modernization – as imitation of Western practices. The interaction between the East and the West, combined with the historical imbalance of power between Asia and the Western colonial states, which often positioned Asian practices as backward, encouraging modernization of everyday Asian life, including food.

Some of the changes brought about by modernization are hard to critique. In Chapter 8, Robert Peckham analyzes the official hygiene practices in slaughterhouses and markets, as implemented by the British colonial government in Hong Kong. There is no denying that the influence of Western civilization pushed Asia to move into modernity when it comes to food, and improvements in food safety seem a positive outcome of modernization. As Hillary Smith (Chapter 12) writes, “In the twentieth century, new Western ideas about diet and nation took root in China and began to compete with and transform preexisting ideas and practices” (2020, p. 268), and an increasing number of Asians started to believe in “You are what you eat” instead of the more traditional perspective of “eat what you are”.

Nevertheless, Asians would not simply copy Western ideas, but instead sought more appropriate ways to adapt those ideas to their own cultures, histories, and values. This resulted in a different dietary path to modernity from Western methods, although inspired by Western influences. For instance, the production of soybean milk, a Chinese dairy alternative, was improved through modernization. In the Introduction, the editors Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell also stress how Western imperialism influenced Asian food systems, and they emphasize the differences between traditional Asian dietary concepts and modern Western

nutritional science. For example, Volker Scheid's chapter (Chapter 11) compares medical texts used by Chinese health experts in the nineteenth century with more contemporary texts by German dietetic experts, which documents how those nineteenth-century medical texts were affected by both domestic and international factors.

The book does an excellent job of highlighting that “eating is a process of fortifying both the nation and its subjects” (2020, p. 2). It emphasizes the relationship between food and health in modern Asian states. As Tatsuya Mitsuda (Chapter 7) explains, in Japan, “Reforming children’s dietary habits, especially confectionery habits, was not just important for the sake of the children — it had implications for the extent to which the state could nurture and maintain a healthy adult population” (2020, p. 160). Similarly, in Chapter 9, Lawrence Zhang explores how modern Western scientific analysis of tea changed the perception of tea’s effects on the body—from appropriate only for some people to healthy for all. It is a common awareness in modern Asia that healthy bodies make strong states, so eating does not only meet personal desire or physiological needs, but in fact also fortifies the nation.

In Chapter 4, Michael Shiyung Liu explores how the Chinese nutrition experiments conducted by Americans in the late 1930s and early 1940s, with special attention paid to “Chinese physique”, provided inspiration to Chinese nutritional policy. In Chapter 10, Angela Ki Che Leung discusses that vegetarianism in the 1920s and 1930s China was promoted by the literati elites with Western training, which reflects China’s quest for modernity in a way that diverges from Chinese traditional life-nurturing practices.

Moral Foods is suitable for anyone who is interested in the history of Asian modernity, and Asian foods and health systems. Through its extensive display of the development of modern Asian foods, *Moral Foods* provides a unique perspective of the process of Asian modernization.

About the Reviewer

Chengjiao Zhang was a visiting doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at York university. Her home university is Hunan University in China. Her doctoral research focuses on Dr. Norman Bethune's image, which she pursued through fieldwork in Canada, and her project "Dr. Norman Bethune's Image in Canada and China" was sponsored by Canada-China Initiatives Fund, York University. Her recent publications include "Theory and Methods----Summary of the Overseas Forum on Chinese Studies (2020)." (Chinese Studies (《汉学研究》), 2021), "A Study on Shen Congwen from an overseas perspective – An Interview with Mr. Pietro Giordan" (Interviews with experts in Overseas Chinese Studies 《海外中国学名家访谈录》, 2023), and a chapter on "Research on Chinese Language Test System of GCSE in the UK" in Research on Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (Ed. Yiping Zeng. Guangzhou: Jinan University Press, Episode 3, 2021)(《华文教育研究 (第3集)》).

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