



## The globalization of Asian cuisines: transnational networks and culinary contact zones

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To cite this article: Cecilia Leong-Salobir (2016): The globalization of Asian cuisines: transnational networks and culinary contact zones, Asian Studies Review, DOI: [10.1080/10357823.2016.1148551](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1148551)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1148551>



Published online: 24 Feb 2016.



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BOOK REVIEW

**The globalization of Asian cuisines: transnational networks and culinary contact zones**, edited by James Farrer, New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 239 pp., US\$88.00 (hardback)

*The Globalization of Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Culinary Contact Zones* presents sophisticated analyses of culinary cultures from Asia by leading food scholars. The volume contains eleven chapters from diverse fields including anthropology, history, sociology and cultural studies.

Editor James Farrer starts off in the Introduction by challenging extant views that Asians are loyal to the foods of their home regions. Farrer explains that so-called “Asian culinary traditions” (p. 2) are often recent inventions, either borrowed or outcomes of culinary politics from recent times. The overarching framework is to interrogate: how cuisines travel, and why some cuisines travel better than others. The various chapters address these questions by not only examining transnational processes that allow cuisines to be adapted but also viewing local processes that lead to culinary innovations and intercultural exchanges.

Krishnendu Ray’s chapter looks at recovering “the literal taste and corporeal sensory experience” (p. 23) to challenge the idea of national cultures by “deterritorializing good food” (p. 23). He dismantles the naturalisation of the nation-state as the only legitimate domain of thinking about taste. Ray uses the culinary examples of the curry leaf and betel leaf to “show the importance of transnational and transoceanic connections” (p. 23).

Jean Duruz analyses a cookbook to untangle meanings of Asian food and to reflect on global culinary flows in and outside Asia, on hybridisations of dishes, ingredients and flavours. Through this cookbook Duruz demonstrates “the ease of culinary border crossing” (p. 49) and that transnational Asian foodways constitute a mobile and not fixed food culture.

“Umami”, regarded as the fifth basic taste and an essential aspect of Japanese cuisine, is seen as a “useful catalyst to give Japanese food culture a wider appeal to a transnational audience” (p. 65). Shoko Imai’s chapter helps us to look at new ways to think of the globalisation of food cultures.

Farrer’s ethnographic account of Western restaurants in Shanghai focuses on how restaurants are culinary contact zones in which migrant workers and urban consumers acquire specialised forms of culinary capital. He looks at Western and other migrant chefs working together with Chinese chefs in Shanghai restaurants, with the transfer of knowledge in food preparation flowing both ways.

By contrast, Keiichi Sawaguchi’s chapter provides a sociological and historical account of the Italian restaurant in Japan. Sawaguchi attributes the high quality of Italian restaurant cuisine in Japan to Japanese chefs acquiring skills in Italy, Italian chefs in Japan training Japanese chefs, and the establishment of cooking schools in Italy specifically for Japanese students.

The state is viewed as a key actor in promoting previously little known Shanxi food, a Chinese provincial cuisine. David L. Wank’s chapter counters the popular view that migrants were mainly responsible for the spread of Chinese regional cuisines to new locales and markets. From the 1990s Shanxi political leaders actively promoted the elevation of a “Shanxi” identity in architecture, literature, music and cuisine. Wank details the rapid rise of Shanxi cuisine to a globally feted cuisine.

Eric C. Rath’s chapter also shows the intervention of Japan’s central government in determining food patterns for its people. Rath’s contention is that it is principally the government that is the driving force for the promotion of local cuisines, both in wartime and in the postwar era.

Government interference also resonates in Stephanie Assmann's chapter. She examines the notion of *washoku* – defined as Japanese cuisine – as an intangible cultural heritage as acknowledged by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Assmann notes that the globalisation of *washoku* stands in contrast to what Japanese people actually eat.

Sidney C.H. Cheung's chapter traces the transnational history and local significance of a spicy crayfish. The Louisiana red swamp crayfish was brought to China's Jiangsu Province by the Japanese in the 1930s and the dish has become nationally famous. The government promoted crayfish by establishing the Xuyi Lobster Museum and the International Lobster Festival.

Wank and Farrer's chapter on Fujian Chinese promoting Japanese cuisine in the United States demonstrates how immigrants adapt to competition and come up with innovative ways to serve exotic and fusion foods.

This slim volume more than delivers in investigating the multifaceted ways in which Asian cuisines have been globalised. A minor criticism is that the collection concentrates more on Japanese foodways. This, however, does not detract from the important objective of questioning the ways in which Asian cuisines are produced in transnational fields: of flows of culinary products and of food practices.

As Farrer puts it,

This is more of a "lunchtime set" (heavy on Japanese morsels) than a full "à la carte menu" of what Asia has to offer. Still, we offer this collection as a contribution to redefining the meaning of Asian cuisines in the age of globalization, while providing readers and researchers with some substantial ethnographic and historical case studies of the production and enjoyment of transnational "Asian" cuisines (p. 3).

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1148551>