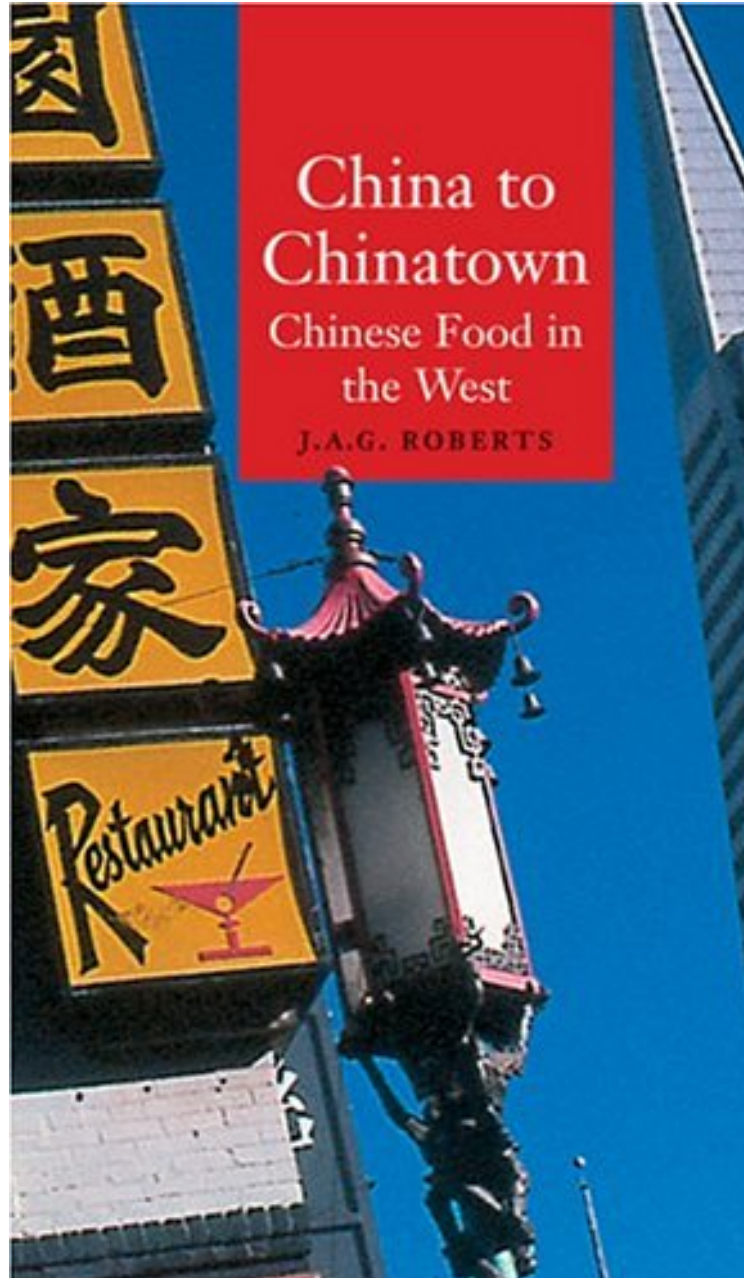


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## China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West (Globalities)

*J.A.G. Roberts*

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**J.A.G. Roberts : China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West (Globalities)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West (Globalities):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. How Fried Rice Spring Rolls Became Part of Our Diet By Stephen Jack I had been waiting for a book like this - a major addition to the canon on Chinese food. Lots of great stories from both the east and west. It focuses on the United States and the United Kingdom. Though it is not a problem, the author is oddly detached, from the stories he retells so well from historical records. It is a little repetitive in the use of examples.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Chinese Food in the West By Eva G. This book was informative and interesting about Western influence on Eastern foods and vice versa. If you like Asian fusion foods and want to know how it all began, this is the book for you.

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Expecting Too Much By Andrew K. Quan I was expecting too much. I love food. I'm Chinese-Canadian. I've always been fascinated with how food has played a part in my culture. So, seeing this book on sale at a favourite bookstore, I grabbed it, hoping that it would perhaps have interesting tales similar to Francis Lam's fantastic telling of how General Tso's chicken went from Hunan to Taiwan to New York City and back again, to Hunan, in an American form ([...]). Instead this book is a rather pedestrian academic telling of how Chinese food was viewed by Westerners through history, and then how it was received in the West. Roberts quotes from a myriad of sources, and it seems that is the point of the book: a review of how Chinese food has been recorded in various academic texts and historical documents. He's missing my passion for the idea of food as culture, and perhaps more sadly, I don't detect that he is particularly interested in food itself.

Still, I found interesting tidbits. That stir-fries came about possibly as a fuel-efficient way to cook in a fuel-short country (I'd read many years ago the small pieces of food were in order to serve chopsticks, which I now question). The different ways Chinese food has been marketed in the West. The way that political affiliations affected the way pro or anti-China visitors wrote and experienced the food of China. I was perhaps most amused to learn that the fatty pork gene, that my family jokes about - our propensity for the fattest parts of pork - bacon, roast pork, sausages - was commented on in 1565 by Portuguese adventurer Galeote Pereira: the Chinese 'are the greatest eaters in all the world, they do feed upon all things, specially on pork, the fatter that is, unto them the less loathsome.' Wow. Culture can sure stretch back...

On the other hand, the book records the Western repulsion and stereotyping of Chinese cuisine as dog-eating, over and over, ad nauseum, as well as long descriptions of how people don't eat what's unfamiliar to them. What else is new? I know Chinese people who could be travelling in the finest food cities in Europe - Paris, Rome, Brussels - and will still head for a second-rate Chinese restaurant to be sure they eat rice and something else familiar. At other times, minor anecdotes aren't differentiated between major observations. An exchange student in 1975 ate Mapo Tofu and Ants Climbing Trees (vermicelli and minced pork) in Beijing. So what? These are common foods - both in Chinese households and restaurants but Roberts comment that the student "did not explain further" what "Pockmarked Mother-in-law's Beancurd" was gives a sense that he's not particularly familiar with Chinese cuisine. A decade later, another foreign student is brought disks of pickled lemon peel (I suspect these are Haw flakes, which Chinese-American kids would know from childhood, as I did) and was told first that they were mushrooms and then dried meat. I'm sure this kind of cultural misunderstanding goes in both directions and has been similar over many decades - neither interesting or significant enough to make mention of.

The book was published in 2002 and I feel that it is dating already. The changes in food culture in China itself, and in all Asian food in the West, and how the West incorporates Asian cuisine, I think there's been an explosion of change in recent years. In Sydney, Australia alone there's a particularly interesting example: Neal Perry, a celebrity chef has opened a restaurant called "Spice Temple" that is serving at top prices, authentic, regional dishes from all over China. ([...]). A Western chef recreating authentic Chinese regional food (with a modern twist) for a predominantly non-Asian clientele? Now that's a far cry from Chop Suey, and the type of story I'm really interested in.

China to Chinatown tells the story of one of the most notable examples of the globalization of food: the spread of Chinese recipes, ingredients and cooking styles to the Western world. Beginning with the accounts of Marco Polo and Franciscan missionaries, J.A.G. Roberts describes how Westerners' first impressions of Chinese food were decidedly mixed, with many regarding Chinese eating habits as repugnant. Chinese food was brought back to the West merely as a curiosity. The Western encounter with a wider variety of Chinese cuisine dates from the first half of the 20th century, when Chinese food spread to the West with emigrant communities. The author shows how Chinese cooking has come to be regarded by some as among the world's most sophisticated cuisines, and yet is harshly criticized by others, for example on the grounds that its preparation involves cruelty to animals. Roberts discusses the extent to which Chinese food, as a facet of Chinese culture overseas, has remained differentiated, and questions whether its ethnic identity is dissolving. Written in a lively style, the book will appeal to food historians and specialists in Chinese culture, as well as to readers interested in Chinese cuisine.

"The book is a valuable and timely account of the West's strange love-hate relationship with Chinese food, and a stimulating read, provoking as it does so many challenging questions about how we perceive and adapt to other cultures."