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Title: Review of “Dubious Gastronomy: The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA” by Robert Ji-Song Ku

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out on interesting evidence of ramen on the Japanese black market—a facet of the ramen story that is only alluded to and never discussed. Solt seemed to be stretching his evidence about wheat rationing in order to relate it to ramen noodles when records appeared to be much more about bread and other foodstuffs. He includes mere mentions of a black market for ramen but offers no further discussion of the cultural implications or history of this time period. Further research in this vein would have supported Solt's argument and engaged the reader further, in contrast to his digressive approach, which appeared blind to an important part of Japanese culture in the inter-war period.

Overall, Solt's account feels well researched and easy to read. The book is accessible and appealing to scholars and interested readers alike. However, *The Untold History of Ramen* falls short in fully utilizing this evidence to enhance the author's argument about ramen as a marker of cultural change in Japan. Upon concluding, the book leaves the reader with a general satisfaction regarding ramen's role in Japan's cultural supremacy but without a thorough understanding of exactly how that came to be.

BOOK REVIEW | ROBERT MCKEOWN

Dubious Gastronomy: The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA Robert Ji-Song Ku

Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 2014. 304 pp.

The last decade has seen a boom of interest in Asian cooking as well as a parallel increase in its availability around the world. One consequence has been the rise of dishes and cuisines that are not just available in the mainstream but ubiquitous. Within the borders of the United States they have come to represent a new category of foods: those synonymous with Asia but entirely part and parcel of a culture that is representative of Asians in America. This category has risen at a time author Robert Ji-Song Ku labels as defined by “trans-national flows of labor and capital, shifting geographic borders, flexible cultural citizenships, and fluid ethnic identities”—in other words, an era that demands new ways to discuss and define why and how we eat (1).

Set against a backdrop of fear for the waning of “authentic” Asian cultures and cuisines—especially outside their natural borders—Ji-Song Ku's *Dubious Gastronomy*:

The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in America asks what, exactly, does the Americanization of Asian food culture mean? Rather than lamenting the bastardization and ruination of so-called authentic foods, Ji-Song Ku relocates the very focus of authenticity by positing that there is an entirely new set of cultural politics at work: one which he labels with fondness and energy as “the dubious,” or more specifically something which has undergone a doubt-inducing, disrespectful (in the traditional sense) process of Americanization and, finally, transformation. In a series of critical explorations of Asian foods in America, he questions: Is authenticity an illusion? Or is it a trap? By refashioning the idea of authenticity in certain globalized Asian foods, he sets out to prove that, while Asian-American food cultures may appear less robustly “authentic” in the traditional sense, they are also more subtle and pervasive in their complexity than we may think.

Ji-Song Ku compares the Americanization of Asian foods to the pidgin form of any language and the traditional Asian food culture to a mother tongue. He underlines that the elevated status of any form of language only holds thanks to a certain political economy of communication. Indeed, this structuring philosophy plays a key role in the way he discusses food in both a cultural and political sense. This type of discourse, he furthers, rules all forms of culture, with the edible variety being no exception. He calls upon the oft-cited Arjun Appadurai, in his Letter on Authenticity, to underline the constant state of transformation at work within the boundaries of his object of study: “all cuisines have a history: tastes shift, regional distinctions go in and out of focus, new techniques and technologies appear” (25).

Spotlighting the tension between trend-driven cultural status and historically-rooted patterns of identification, Ji-Song Ku argues that if “the health and vitality of a cultural practice are directly connected [to trends, then] food culture in Queens is as important,” as equally meaningful, as the very existence of a cuisine at its gastronomic root—say, a laksa cooked in Penang or a miso paste-permeated soup in Seoul (5).

Dubious Gastronomy focuses on three cultures—Japan, China, and Korea—and takes as a series of taste cases some of their respective entries into the psyche and landscape of consumption in North America. On one level, this book is a cross-disciplinary exploration of food and culture (Asian and Asian-American); on another, it is an intellectual yet personal yarn from a lover of all things edible whose background (Korean-American) and places of birth and residence (Los Angeles, Manhattan, and Hawaii) play a clear role in the choice of topic. Ji-Song Ku mixes ethnographic

research and field interviews with forays into linguistic origins, literary theory, ethnic history, and textual analysis, extrapolated for an increasingly complex time in which food culture has assumed a place in the populist pantheon.

Matching his culinary focus to the borders of the United States, Ji-Song Ku redeploys Asian-Americans from a position of cultural isolation to one defined by a “discursive fellowship” in their constant role as guardians of culture and politics for their native cuisines. There are three distinct sections in *Dubious Gastronomy*, and each examines a different aspect of “the dubious” through a case study and ethnographic exploration of a single aspect of Asian-American food culture. The first discusses “inauthentic gastronomy,” using California rolls and Chinese takeout as subjects; the second, “disreputable gastronomy,” focuses on kimchi and dog meat; the third, “artificial gastronomy,” tackles monosodium glutamate and SPAM.

Deep, ethnographic histories of his subjects are a strong feature of Ji-Song Ku’s work. He traces the historic development of the California roll, unpacking different creation myths and their meanings. American hegemony in culture takes center stage, as do discourses of authenticity. In his ode to kimchi, Ji-Song Ku traces the creation and path of a bottle of the fermented cabbage pickle that his parents gave him to take the reader to the extremes of the Korean homeland, through the history of the New World exchange of ingredients (most importantly, the chile) and to his childhood haunt of Flushing, Queens, the most diverse place on earth. He gives kimchi context as a product of certain ingredients; as a chile-laden dish; and as a food once considered shameful and stinky. He documents the dish’s battles with Japanese conglomerates at a CODEX hearing (meant to establish parameters for what can be called kimchi), tracing its path as it becomes a celebrated Korean national treasure with its own museum and a present-day superfood in the United States. Monosodium glutamate (MSG) follows a similar redemption trail, beginning with a Japanese scientist’s discovery and later finding its way into *Vogue* magazine and an enormous percentage of American foodstuffs. Once derided, he notes, MSG is now available as a table condiment in a generation of hipster-run, chef-driven restaurants.

If there are weaknesses to Ji-Song Ku’s approach, they tend to emerge from the same areas that are also his obvious strengths. His exclusive focus on a handful of Northeast Asian foodstuffs from three cultures excludes the dimensions of regional cuisines—fiery Szechuan food or delicate Kyoto cooking and tea culture, for example. Some of the East’s most celebrated cuisines, from Thailand to

India, are entirely without recognition here. What Ji-Song Ku’s book accomplishes, however, is not so much identifying questions and providing concise answers. His is a gesture that invites the likes of food adventurers, home cooks, professional chefs, and academics all to take a seat around a common America table—one on which Asian cuisine is served and constantly changing.

Bibliography

Arjun Appadurai, “On Culinary Authenticity,” *Anthropology Today* 2, no. 4 (August, 1986): 25.

BOOK REVIEW | LIZ BADA

Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader

Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur (Editors)

New York: New York University Press. 2013. 210 pp.

Eating Asian America addresses the question of why Asian and Asian-influenced food is an integral part of the American foodscape. Common posits for this are that Asians are naturally good cooks, Asian food is intrinsically delicious, or Asians are more devoted to entrepreneurship than other immigrant or ethnic groups. The editors of *Eating Asian America* consider a different, more complex answer. The overwhelming Asian presence in the American foodscape is the result of external forces and inequalities that have restricted and defined Asians into an alimentary role. Food is a permissible realm for Asian advancement and visibility in America, whether as indentured workers, famous chefs, or business owners. *Eating Asian America* works around the premise that food is a way to facilitate the process of racialization. This process essentializes Asians into a single gastronomic body and subsumes national and regional differences under generic headings such as “Chinese,” “Asian,” or “foreign.” This results in the term “Asian” being “not merely a descriptive category for a people and nation . . . [but] a commodity to be bought, possessed, and ingested” (3). The authors of *Eating Asian America* refute the idea of a generic multiculturalism that uses food to simultaneously and superficially celebrate diversity and unity. They argue that Asian American foodways are not the sole product of culinary tradition but