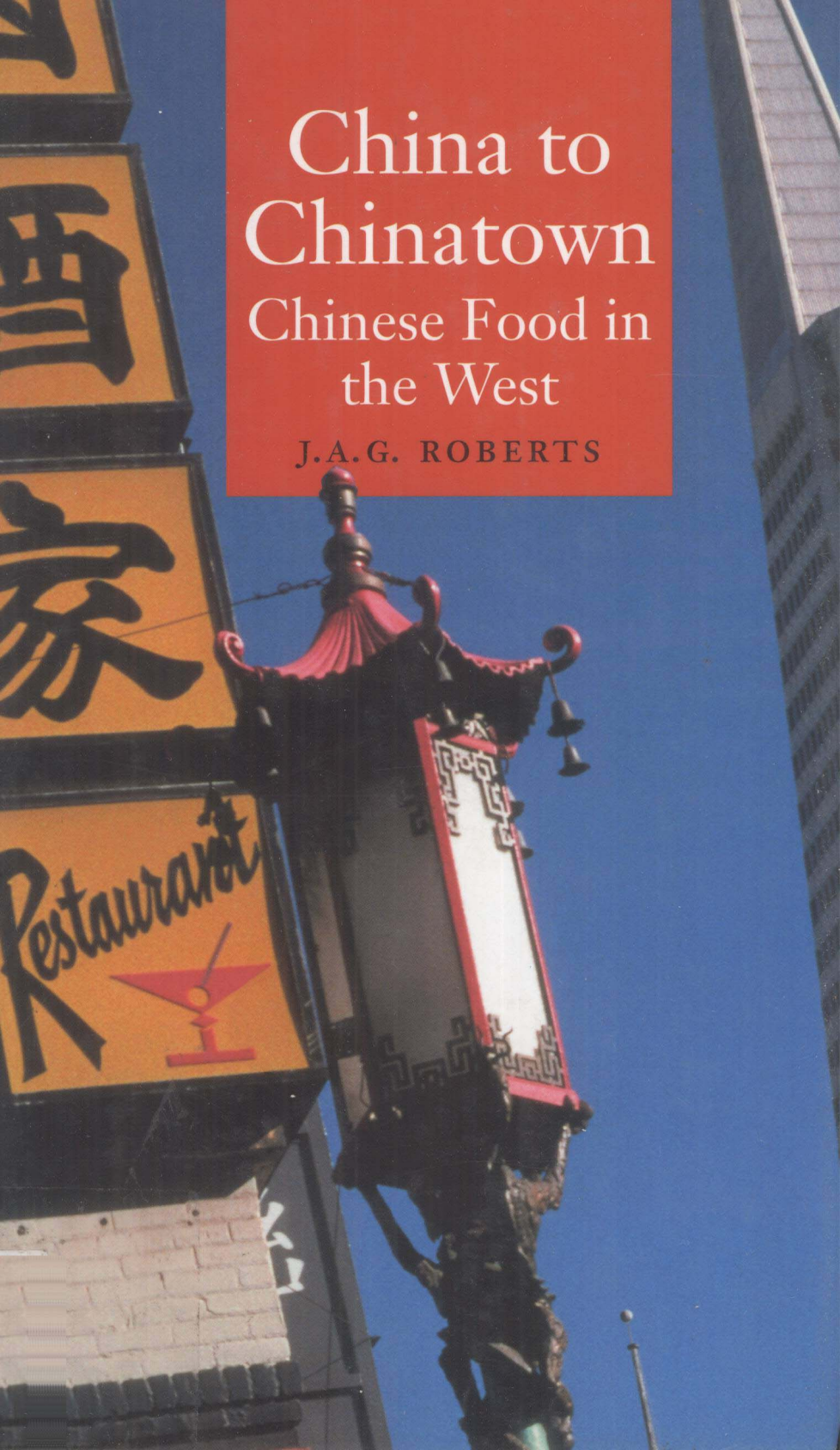


China to Chinatown

Chinese Food in the West

J.A.G. ROBERTS



CHINA TO CHINATOWN



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for her love and forbearance*

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Introduction

We the Chinese conquered the world – through our food.
Chinese saying

This book is concerned with one of the most remarkable social changes of modern times: the radical alteration in the eating habits of the Western world. This subject is so extensive and so little researched that I have confined my discussion to a single aspect of that transformation: the changing attitudes of the West towards Chinese food, which in recent years has led to the opening of a Chinese restaurant or takeaway in almost every Western town, and to the adoption, in a modified form, of many Chinese cooking techniques. As material on this theme is vast and scattered, the main emphasis here is restricted, in terms of literature, to the ways these changes have been perceived by Westerners writing in English and, in geographical terms, to the introduction of aspects of Chinese food culture to North America and to the United Kingdom.¹

The book is divided into two main sections, a division which reflects the distinction made by the food writer Kenneth Lo between 'Chinese cooking in China' and 'Chinese food abroad'. Lo remarked that Chinese food, like everything else 'suffers a sea change when removed from its native shores'. The same observation applies to attitudes to food, whether it is viewed through strangers' eyes as an aspect of a foreign culture, or whether it is perceived from the vantage point of home as an exotic or perhaps suspect addition to one's own foodways.² Part 1 investigates the attitudes of Westerners encountering Chinese food in China from the earliest records to the present day. At first Westerners – chiefly missionaries and merchants – regarded Chinese food as a curiosity and treated it as an aspect of the exotic character of the country. From the late eighteenth century Westerners' descriptions of Chinese food became more

hostile, and the Chinese list of foodstuffs, and their methods of preparing them, were sometimes dismissed with contempt or even disgust. By the twentieth century a more subtle range of attitudes had emerged: some Westerners recognized the achievements of Chinese gastronomy, some continued to find grounds for criticism and rejection, and others, heedless of personal taste, ate the food of the common people of China to demonstrate political support for their cause.

Part II looks at the reception of Chinese food in North America and the United Kingdom. It traces the opening of the first Chinese restaurants catering for foreigners, and the beginning of the appreciation of Chinese cuisine in the West. It then examines the phenomenon of the mass acceptance of Chinese food, with the proliferation of Chinese restaurants and take-aways in the cities and towns of the Western world, the increased availability of Chinese foodstuffs in shops and supermarkets, the injection of capital into the ethnic food market, the publication of recipe books for Chinese food and the use of the media to popularize its consumption. The final chapter sets these changes in the wider context of how eating habits have evolved and relates these changes to the globalization of food in general.

Two broad themes recur. The first relates to the analysis of images of other cultures and of attitudes towards other races. Harold T. Isaacs, struck by the contradictory notions of China and the Chinese shared by generations of Americans, once suggested the following sequence of attitudes: the Age of Respect (Eighteenth Century); the Age of Contempt (1840–1905); the Age of Benevolence (1905–1937); the Age of Admiration (1937–1944); the Age of Disenchantment (1944–1949) and the Age of Hostility (1949–). Isaacs was quick to admit that these descriptions were crude, that expressions from different ages coexisted, and that the views of individuals might vary. It would be presumptuous to suggest that this study answers the question how images of another society are formed and perpetuated. However, by concentrating on a single theme, that of food, it does reveal the complexity of attitudes towards what is perceived as foreign. Present-day attitudes to Chinese food may be manipulated by advertising and the forces of international capi-

talism, but the fundamentals of those attitudes were established over centuries of Western contact with China; it is for this reason that a study of the range of those attitudes and of the factors that shaped them remains relevant today.³

The second theme concerns how, when and why the eating habits of the inhabitants of the West have changed to incorporate Chinese food. This change is characterized by two qualities: it is cultural and comparatively recent. Although many books have been written about changes in American and British diets, their emphasis has been on gastronomical and medical developments rather than cultural change. However, the world-wide acceptance of ethnic foods is the outcome of a variety of influences of which gastronomical preferences and health considerations are only two. In Britain the most dramatic example of the incorporation of ethnic foods is the acculturation of Indian food – in 1997 a Gallup poll estimated that over 25 per cent of the British population ate curry at least once a week. This popularity must be attributed as much to cost and convenience rather as to aesthetic appreciation, and the same is true for much of the consumption of Chinese food, though other factors encourage the trend – to identify some of these factors I make a brief comparison between the assimilation of Indian and of Chinese food in Britain. My main theme, however, is that of tracing how Chinese food came to achieve widespread acceptance in North America and Britain. This has involved tracking down examples of moments when Chinese restaurants and Chinese food stores began to attract Western customers, when Chinese food and Chinese cooking methods began to be welcome in Western kitchens and on Western tables and when Westerners began to cook a version of Chinese food to eat in their own homes. In its early stages this change was the product of Chinese enterprise and a modification on both sides: Chinese dishes adapted to suit Western taste-buds and, later, the gradual alteration of American and British eating habits. The change accelerated when the media began to popularize Chinese food and when publishers began to include ethnic cookbooks on their lists. Recently heavy investment in the industrial production of ethnic foods and in the operation of up-market restaurants has initiated a new stage in the consumption of

Chinese food. To continue Isaacs's sequence of attitudes listed above, we are now perhaps living in an Age of Acceptance.

Whereas in the past the eating habits of a people or of a nation appear (perhaps misleadingly) to have been relatively fixed, in the modern world eating habits in the affluent West are subject to rapid and continuous change. This book considers one example of how that transformation has taken place.

Part I: West to East

Chinese Food¹

Which foodstuffs should be described as 'Chinese'? The range of foodstuffs consumed in China at present is much greater than that of the past. Much of this extension has come through the introduction of foodstuffs from America and the West in the late Ming dynasty and their dissemination in the Qing period. Maize, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes and peanuts became basic crops, and other introductions, for example the capsicum and the tomato, have also been cultivated. Many of these plants were described as *fan*, meaning foreign or barbarous. More recently Western foodstuffs, for example field mushrooms, have been grown commercially on Taiwan.

The basic food most closely connected with China in the Western mind is rice. Rice has been an important element in the Chinese diet for a long time. The plant *oryza sativa* may have been domesticated first in South China. The consumption of rice is so much part of the Chinese diet that a proverb states that 'even a clever wife can't cook without rice'. Of course rice is consumed throughout East and South Asia, and to label rice a Chinese food requires further definition. The preferred rice for main meals is the long-grained variety, whereas glutinous rice is used mainly for confectionery. Until recently the rice consumed by the great mass of the Chinese people was only lightly milled, thereby preserving a high proportion of its nutritional value. In modern times polished rice has been preferred by those Chinese who can afford it, and is eaten exclusively by Chinese overseas.

Much of North China is too cold, or too dry, to support rice, and there the main crop is wheat. Some Chinese minority groups, for example the Uighur, use wheat to make bread, but

most Chinese use wheat flour to make steamed dumplings and noodles. Steamed dumplings are filled with either a savoury or a sweet concoction. Noodles are made either by forcing the dough through a type of colander, or by manipulating the dough until it falls into strands, a technique sometimes demonstrated in Chinese restaurants. The provenance of noodles has been much debated. There is little evidence to support the legend that Marco Polo brought pasta, including spaghetti and ravioli, from China to Europe. Egg noodles are probably Chinese in origin, but meat-filled dumplings are more likely to derive from Central Asia.² Other grains, for example kaoliang (sorghum), millet and maize form an important part of the diet of northern Chinese. Neither sorghum or maize are indigenous crops, the former having been domesticated first in Africa, while maize, which is made into corn meal cakes, was introduced into China from America early in the sixteenth century. Sweet potatoes, which were also introduced from America, are counted as grain in statistics. They are grown on poor soils in the south and have usually been regarded as a human food of last resort, being ordinarily used as animal feed. These grain crops are also used to produce alcohol. Chinese wine is made from rice and spirits from kaoliang or millet. The fiery spirit *maotai*, named after the city of that name in Guizhou, is distilled from a liquor made from kaoliang and wheat.

Several pulses are important in Chinese food. The best known in the West is the soya bean, which was domesticated in Zhou times. The raw soya bean contains substances which inhibit digestion of its protein and so it requires considerable preparation before it is edible. When prepared it contains more protein than other common cultivated plants. Soya beans may be cooked down to a sort of porridge, but its better-known products are bean curd, soy sauce and black bean sauce. Bean curd, *doufu* (also known in the West by its Japanese name *tofu*) is produced by boiling the soya bean and then coagulating the liquid produced with gypsum, so creating a soft curd which can be used either fresh or dried. Soy sauce is made by fermenting a mixture of soya beans, flour, salt and strains of fungi. Black bean sauce was originally made from boiled soya beans which were then fermented with a fungus. The sauce sold commercially