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BOOK REVIEW

The Chile Pepper in China: A Cultural Biography. Brian R. Dott. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 296 pp. $24 (paper), $32 (cloth), $31.99 (ebook)

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The humble chile pepper is nearly ubiquitous in China. Certainly chiles abound in Chinese food, where they are central to the flavors of Hunan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Shaanxi cuisine. But they are also central to Chinese culture: they appear as household decor, and serve as metaphors and signifiers in literature and art and in popular songs like "Spicy Girls" (*la meizi* 辣妹子). But of course, chiles are not native to China. They arrived alongside maize, white and sweet potatoes, tobacco, and tomatoes as part of the transfer of American crops to Asia that is sometimes known as the "Magellan Exchange," the Pacific counterpart to the Atlantic's "Columbian Exchange." As Brian R. Dott argues in *The Chile Pepper in China: A Cultural Biography* (just reissued in paperback) the arrival and dissemination of chiles in China transformed the chile from something foreign, to something novel, and finally to something intrinsically Chinese, in the process transforming the very meaning of "spicy" (*la* 辣) in Chinese language and culture. Dott's cultural biography is divided into six chapters arranged both thematically and roughly chronologically.

Chapter 1, "Names and Places" takes up the basic question of when, where, and how chiles were introduced to China. As the chapter title suggests, this follows the thread of studies going back to Ping-Ti Ho's 1955 article "The Introduction of American Food Plants into China," in tracing different points of introduction through the terminology used for the chile. Dott identifies three different regional patterns of naming. Using evidence from "local products" (*wuchan* 物產) sections of gazetteers, he shows that *fanjiao* 番椒 (foreign pepper) appeared in Zhejiang by 1591; *Qinjiao* 秦椒 (Shaanxi pepper) in Shengjing by 1682; and *fanjiang* 番姜 (foreign ginger) in Taiwan by 1746. He argues for three vectors of introduction: to the central coast via Spanish, Portuguese, or overseas Chinese influence; to the northeast via Korea; and to Taiwan via the Dutch.

While the outlines of this theory are convincing, I suspect that Dott's reliance on sparse gazetteer evidence leads him to overlook other likely possibilities. In general, readers must beware that gazetteer records reflect a fraught compilation process that often copied earlier information, and in other cases may have taken generations to record major shifts in regional products. For example, I suspect that chiles were present in Guangdong prior

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to 1680 or Fujian prior to 1757—their earliest gazetteer records of the plant—since both regions had regular contact with both Europeans and overseas Chinese from Manila. Likewise, if the Dutch introduced chiles to Taiwan—a highly plausible argument—this presumably occurred during their period of dominance in the early seventeenth century, long before the record was made in 1746. More problematic is the theory of an introduction of chiles to northern China via Korea suggested by the appearance of chiles in Shengjing (1682) before they were reported in Shaanxi (1694), Shanxi (1696) or Zhili (1697). Not only are these dates close enough together to be well within the normal compilation cycles of gazetteers, so that differences are not meaningful, there are also two points of linguistic evidence that suggest otherwise.

The first evidence that chiles did not initially arrive from Korea is that *Qinjiao*—the name used throughout northern China—clearly means "Shaanxi pepper." To gazetteer editors of the late seventeenth century, chiles were associated with the northwest, not Korea. The second is that chiles, recorded in Korea by 1614, were not known as *Qinjiao* but as *nanmancho/nanmanjiao* 南蠻椒 ("southern barbarian pepper") or *waegyoja/wojiaozi* 倭芥子 ("Japanese mustard") and reported as a Japanese introduction.[1] Later they were also known as *Tangcho/Tangjiao* 唐椒 ("Chinese pepper") and their current *gocho/kujiao* 苦椒 ("bitter pepper"). In other words, Koreans thought that chiles came from China, Japan, or the "southern barbarians," while no Chinese source claimed that chiles came from Korea. In the absence of other evidence, I therefore suggest that chiles in fact came to northern and western China via Shaanxi (*Qin*) and ultimately Central Asia, rather than by way of Korea and Japan.

Chapter 2, "Spicing Up the Palate," is perhaps the richest in the book. Dott shows the variety of ways that chiles entered both the food system and the lexicon. In Shaanxi, chiles became "as indispensable in daily cuisine as onion and garlic" (29). They were used as substitutes for more expensive spices such as black pepper and Sichuan pepper (*huajiao* 花椒), from which they took their name; for ginger; and even for salt. They were used in pickles and sauces, and were cooked as vegetables. By the eighteenth century, *lajiao* 辣椒 ("spicy pepper") began to replace many other epithets, reflecting the nativization of the chile as fundamentally Chinese, rather than "foreign." Indeed, Dott argues that chiles not only displaced ginger and peppercorns from cuisine, but also increasingly became the primary signifier of "spicy" (*la*), which had previously referred largely to these flavors. This is a particularly rich and interesting result, and to me marks the book's most important contribution.

Next, Dott turns to "Spicing up the Pharmacopoeia," where he notes that chiles began to appear in *materia medica* as early as 1621. In keeping with Chinese pharmacological tradition, chiles were integrated through both inductive and deductive reasoning. In the first place, inductively, chiles were classified as *xin* 辛 ("pungent")—one of the five flavors associated with the five phases. Some uses, such as to "expel phlegm" and "remove damp" (87) were suggested by this classification. In the second case, deductively, observation of chiles' effects led to their use in medicines for severe diarrhea and topical treatments for hemorrhoids and snakebites. While—like other medicines—they had contraindications, chiles remained important in Chinese medicine into the contemporary period.

Unsurprisingly, new foods and medicines attracted their share of detractors, the topic of Chapter 4. Dott shows that many members of the elite connected chiles with the foreign, with the low class, and with the discomfort caused by the unfamiliar spicy

[1]By Yi Sukwang 李睟光, in *Chibongyusŭl* 芝峰類說.

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sensation. Chiles were also subject to Buddhist and Daoist avoidance of meats or strongly flavored vegetables (*hun* 葷). Perhaps most troubling to conservatives was the lack of clear precedent for their use in earlier pharmacopeias, which may have led scholars to deny that they were being consumed even when they were almost certainly widespread. Nonetheless, as Chapter 5 shows, chiles eventually became beautiful objects and emblems, even for the scholarly class. Indeed, Gao Lian's 1591 description attends closely to their aesthetic value, as do several other early descriptions. Gradually, chiles entered the visual lexicon, as described poetically, as depicted in prints and posters, and as potted plants and garlands of dried fruits.

Chapter 6, "Mao's Little Red Spice," turns to the strongest association many contemporary readers may have with chiles—with particular regional identities. Two regional cuisines—Hunan and Sichuan food—are almost universally acknowledged both inside and outside of China and are highly associated with the chile. In Hunan, Dott argues, the chile was (and is) used to counteract the hot damp climate and offset the difficulty of accessing other spices. Spiciness became associated with the local temperament, and with the centrality of Hunan in the Communist revolution. Neighboring Sichuan, which boasts the combination of chiles with numbing Sichuan peppercorns, is also widely known for its spicy food. In both places, regional identity has become thoroughly intertwined with this plant and spice.

Brian R. Dott's *The Chile Pepper in China* paints a clear and entertaining picture of how the chile went from a "foreign" plant to a core part of regional identity. He convincingly shows that the chile transformed Chinese food, medicine, art, and identity, and even the meaning of "spicy." While I disagree with Dott's interpretation of the evidence on the introduction of chiles to northern China, his book is otherwise both rigorous and convincing. It challenges students and scholars of food, agriculture, medicine, and art to consider how the humble chile acquired its present ubiquitous status in Chinese culture.

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