
**Fu Jia-Chen**

[Dr. Fu is a historian of modern Chinese history with an emphasis on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 2009-2010, she was a fellow at the University of California-Berkeley’s Center for Chinese Studies. Her current book project traces the social and cultural history of soybeans in Republican China. Contact: jia-chen.fu@case.edu]

It must be a curious stroke of contemporary myopia that despite the ubiquity of soybeans in our present-day lives, its impact upon our scholastic imagination remains inchoate and murky. Scientific investigations abound, but humanistic studies are rather more limited. We may know that the domestication of the soybean took place well over three thousand years ago in Asia, but such patterns of domestication do not explain how the soybean came to occupy its present position of global economic and political significance. The global diffusion of the soybean during the twentieth century harkens to earlier food diffusions under the heading of the Columbian Exchange. Yet the fact that the soybean knits together fields as disparate as farming, military, automotive, energy, and medicine, and has accordingly transformed the internal dynamics of not only agriculture but also industry throughout the world, suggests that the story to be told about the soybean is a indeed a much more complicated one.

The world of soy, as the sparingly titled recent collection of essays edited by Christine M. Du Bois, Chee-Beng Tan, and Sidney Mintz evokes, is large and variegated—so much so, that the editors readily admit that the primary focus of the book is limited to an exploration of the diverse food patterns associated with the soybean, how such patterns came about, and what factors facilitated or hindered such processes of change. The acknowledgement of limited scope, however, does no disservice to the final work. Indeed, it reaffirms how sorely we need detailed case studies exploring the different development and usage patterns associated with soybean foods throughout the world.¹

The structure of the collection is organized into two parts. The first section of *The World of Soy* sets forth the global and historical context for how

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¹ The essays included in this collection arose in conjunction with a 2003 conference in Chengdu, Sichuan (China) sponsored by the Foundation of Chinese Dietary Culture and the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation.
soy has become an accepted part of the modern diet and nutrition. Like other legumes, the soybean has served as a valuable source of protein for humans, especially those living in Asia. But also like other legumes, the soybean posed significant challenges to the human diet on account of the presence of trypsin (or protease) inhibitors that have to be inactivated or removed before the soybean is ready for human consumption. This structural hindrance, which could be fatal in its effects, was nonetheless tamed by human innovation. The use of fire in food preparation was a crucial step in unlocking the nutritive benefits of legumes and facilitating its domestication.

As Lawrence Kaplan neatly demonstrates, legumes have tended to accompany cereal grains as primary diet components, but such coincidence in and of itself does not clarify the specific relationship between legume domestication and cereal domestication, as it has developed in time and place in each region in which the combination has been found. Based on archaeological evidence, it appears that maize cultivation preceded beans by some two to three thousand years. For China, insufficient data from pre-agricultural and early agricultural sites limit researchers’ ability to draw conclusions about co-domestication patterns for legumes and cereal grains. These differences do not devalue the importance of legumes in local diets, but they do flag ongoing questions about processes of human-plant interactions over time and space.

As much as the soybean shares with its fellow members of the legume family, it is its human-inspired history that also distinguishes it from the rest. The soybean’s early history dates back at least two millennia and has long been considered one of the staple grains (wuyu or five grains) in ancient China. H. T. Huang, whose contribution on fermentations and food science to the Science and Civilization in China series remains the authority on the history of food science in ancient China, provides a short introduction into the uses of soybean in Chinese history. The earliest textual references dating from the Warring States period suggest that the soybean was made palatable by prolonged cooking in water, but though recognized as an essential grain, it occupied one of the lesser positions in terms of taste and enjoyment.

Its early less esteemed status seems to have owed much to the difficulty of converting soybeans into wholesome, attractive, easily digestible, and nutritious processed foods, but with the development of fermentation, sprouting, and grinding techniques around the time of the early Han dynasty (202 BC to AD 9), the early Chinese had devised simple yet effective

ways for rendering soybeans palatable and integrating them into local dietaries.\(^3\)

The success with which the Chinese applied fermentation to the soybean raises, however, a curious disjunction in the spread of fermented legume foods. Soy sauce, tofu, and soymilk in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam; *miso* and *natto* in Japan; and *tempe* (or *tempeh*, a cake made from boiled soybeans) and *oncom*, which consists of a cake made from pressed peanuts or soy pulp in Indonesia are all easily recognizable soybean-related foods that have emerged over time to occupy a central role in the formation of different regional dietaries throughout Asia. That we can find an almost near absence of fermented legume foods in western food systems, is, in Sydney Mintz’s estimation, somewhat curious. The absence cannot be attributed to a lack of legumes within these dietaries; nor can it stem from a lack of knowledge of fermentation, as the process was eagerly applied to cereals, vegetables, meat, and dairy products.

Mintz suggests that the key to understanding this disjunction may lie in the social and cultural context in which tastes are produced, sustained, and perpetuated. Because tastes “inhabit a social context: a fabric of cultivation, processing, kitchen lore, cuisine and folklore in which people learn from infancy on about the foods they grow to like,” some tastes, though replicable by the transmission and diffusion of techniques, fail to catch on and become a part of another society’s palate. Soyfoods were one such example, but whether this will remain the case is an entirely separate story that is only partially explored in Christine M. Du Bois’s contribution, “Social Context and Diet: Changing Soy Production and Consumption in the United States.”

The subtleties of taste formation is the primary subtext for the remaining ethnographic studies included in *The World of Soy*. The extent to which soy has become a part of local dietaries in China, Indonesia, Brazil, or Bangladesh owes much to its synthesis into the broader social and cultural fabric of local societies. In China, where its history is longest and most extensively detailed, the soybean in the form of tofu provides not only protein, but also a set of social and linguistic symbols ranging from humbleness and integrity to instability and corruption.\(^4\) In Japan, the combination of fermented soybean products (e.g., soy sauce or *miso*) with *dashi*, a kind of fish stock made from an infusion of kelp and dried fish, has constituted the standard taste of Japanese cuisine. Although the introduction of foreign foods and cuisines and fast food has broadened dining options for the Japanese, the emotional and cultural association of *shoyu/dashi* with

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“home cooking,” authenticity, and tradition demonstrates the persisting nature of the standard taste. In Korea, fermented soyfoods (chang) are the essence of the national cuisine, and though the spectacular growth of the Korean fermented soyfood industry from the 1950s onwards has steadily eroded the centuries-old home production of soy sauce, soybean paste, and red pepper paste, the cultural attachment to chang is stronger than ever. Indeed, both the making of chang and its distinctive taste has become a powerful signifier of national identity. As Katarzyna Cwiertka and Akiko Moriya explain, “In the Korean case, the role of food as a medium that evokes the feeling of unity is particularly pronounced because of its pungent taste (deriving from hot red peppers) and strong smell (deriving from garlic, spring onions, and fermented soyfoods), signals that have in the past discouraged non-Koreans from appreciating Korean cuisine.”

The question of taste formation becomes especially intriguing when we consider how the soybean has emerged during the twentieth century as an economically crucial crop that undergirds American and Brazilian agriculture and as a popular component of NGO and other developmental aid programs seeking to improve the livelihood and nutrition of various communities around the world. In her piece, “Soy in Bangladesh,” Christine M. Du Bois highlights the difficulties encountered in developing soy agriculture in Bangladesh. Despite its nitrogen-fixing qualities and high protein content, the process of developing soy agriculture has been challenged by a variety of agronomic and economic difficulties and problems with consumer acceptance. Bangladesh’s climate complicates the task of producing high-quality soy seed, which can be saved to germinate later. The paucity of soy-processing facilities and soy’s lack of competitiveness with other crops further limit its appeal to local farmers. Questions of taste and preparation persist, even as NGO groups actively lead cooking demonstrations and educational classes to help Bangladeshis come to accept soy as part of their local diets. None of these challenges has diminished NGO and governmental support for spreading soy cultivation and soy protein consumption in Bangladesh. Given the vital link between soy protein and improved Bangladeshi nutrition in the future, the continuation of such support is both important and noteworthy. And yet, the situation in Bang-

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5 Erino Ozeki, “Fermented Soybean Products and Japanese Taste,” 147.
6 Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Akiko Moriya, “Fermented Soyfoods in South Korea,” 176.
The World of Soy is a tantalizing collection of essays. If the various contributors succeed in raising more questions than are answered, their cumulative effort demonstrates how much more research remains to be conducted about the soybean and its social, political, and historical place in local diets.