Studia Orientalia Electronica

Paul D. Buell, E.N. Anderson, Montserrat de Pablo Moya & Moldir Oskenbay. *Crossroads of Cuisine: The Eurasian Heartland, the Silk Roads and Food.* (Crossroads – History of Interactions across the Silk Routes, II). Leiden: Brill, 2020. ISBN 978-90-04-43205-5 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-43210-9 (e-book). 340 pp.

Review by Sabira Ståhlberg (independent scholar)

When the title of a book gives an invitation to a sumptuous banquet of history, culture, traditions, and food, naturally the reader becomes hungry for new experiences, viewpoints, and facts. Expectations arise when the work promises to cover the manifold foodways in Eurasia and especially Central Asia, a region far too little explored in food literature. The discovery that the book contains photos from field trips and both ancient and new recipes only increases the appetite of the reader.

The reader's journey begins with a general overview of the physical and political geography, history, languages, cultures, and connections in Eurasia, along with a reconstruction of its foodways. The authors then discuss history once again and tell stories from different parts of Eurasia and beyond. The Yuan dynasty and the Mongol Empire function as the watershed between historical periods, but most of the information both before and after the Mongols in fact concerns China; while mainly regarding medieval times, some medicine and travel narratives from other regions of the world are also described. Then comes a presentation of contemporary food, including different types and categories of ingredients, from bread, noodles, and grains to meat, dairy products, vegetables, sweets, and spices, as well as cooking utensils. After hundreds of pages showing the interconnectedness of the Eurasian cuisines, the last chapter discusses national cuisines. Afghanistan is presented first and used as a matrix for the others. This is followed by a conclusion and an appendix of "Western" plants in medieval Chinese publications.

Entering the restaurant for the banquet, however, confusion sets in, and the reader becomes unsure that this is the right place. Even when a book is apparently written for a general audience, some methodology is useful. Many different approaches and instruments could have been utilised – anthropological, ethnobiological, historical, linguistic, etc. – or the materials could have been treated with a serious comparative analysis. Instead, the dishes are introduced without any distinction between appetizers, main dishes, side dishes, drinks, or dessert. The text is a mishmash with extended series of disconnected facts. Scraps of history, different periods, languages, cultures, traditions, anecdotal information, statistics, and other kinds of data are served and combined in such a chaotic way that even a seasoned reader starts calling for the waiter to explain what is being served. Already the geographical coverage is problematic: for example, Finland is mentioned as being on the edge of Central Asia (p. 183), while the authors largely ignore regions and historical

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periods that are far more relevant and more deeply connected with the food traditions discussed in the book (for instance, the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire).

The history chapters, which form the main bulk of the book, look more like a general history and hasty compilation of sources than actual analysis and research. Thus, instead of offering the reader a freshly baked flat bread, hot from the oven, stale slices are brought to the table. The many "mysteries" mentioned could at least have been partly cleared up through a more rigorous investigation, a stricter comparison of the different materials employed, and a tougher stance towards the sources. Source criticism is lacking throughout. Between (hi)stories, the authors mention their own field trips to different parts of Eurasia, but the results of these visits and highly interesting food experiments are scattered like mere seeds over the food when they could have been the focus and basis of the book. Furthermore, the text appears to be written for a North American audience in a popular style mixed with scientific language, with various references and allusions which tell nothing to readers outside the USA.

Anyone who cooks is aware that to prepare a tasty dish, training and skills are needed. Ingredients should be used for certain purposes and cooked for a specific time. If there is a distraction or accidental lapse of memory, and a consequent lack of ingredients or spice, the error can often be corrected, but adding too much is trickier to fix. This is also true for quoting and interpreting sources for a scholarly work. Misquoting, reading too much into a source, or generalising its results is always dangerous and distorts the argument. Moreover, in this book technical errors abound; for instance, one finds a repetition of facts and sentences, missing words and letters, and the same source quoted several times in different footnotes on the same page when once would have been enough. Mixing the birth order of the sons of Činggis Qaγan (Genghis Khan) is a minor mistake; there are many other more serious problems.

Politically tainted terminology does not belong in a book which claims to have some scientific value. The Silk Road is first dismissed as a myth (which it is), but then used indiscriminately throughout the book. The first mention appears already on page 2, where the heavily biased Wikipedia entry about the Silk Road is quoted as a source. It can be difficult for any university teacher to explain to students why Wikipedia and social media are unreliable and should not be used as sources in scientific writing,[1] but convincing them becomes almost impossible when scholars use such superficial web citations without distinction alongside real sources. Wikipedia is thus perceived as equal with Ibn Faḍlān, Berthold Laufer, or Peter B. Golden, to name just a few other sources used.

In addition, any cook knows that too much salt can destroy the taste of a dish. China predominates in this book, despite the fact that the authors (especially in the beginning) try to show some empathy towards the oppressed Uyghurs. The China-focused world view is problematic in many aspects – historical, cultural, political, and linguistic, among others; it starts already with the discrimination of all other languages except Mandarin. The reader may wonder why Chinese names, toponyms, terms, and so forth are provided in pinyin but with traditional (non-simplified) Chinese characters. Important and relevant vocabulary from other relevant Chinese languages, such as Cantonese or Hokkien, is seldom mentioned. The rest of the languages in Eurasia lack the privilege of being presented with their original scripts. Readers who have no knowledge of Chinese stumble over the characters in the text. Those who know Chinese and at least some of the other languages would prefer to have a list at the end with all the original

1 See Wikipedia's own disclaimer: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Citing_Wikipedia>.

scripts. In addition, although transcription of the languages is explained in the beginning, a great variety of forms for the same word appear throughout the book.

At the end of the banquet, the reader feels that although the table was richly laden with dishes, the restaurant could have done better. With the generous source materials, Eugene N. Anderson's personal experiments with the old recipes (mentioned on p. 161), abundant photographs and recipes, and the authors' field trips, knowledge, and experience of Eurasian foods, this book could have offered the reader both new data and fresh perspectives. It is a pity that the cooking and servings do not measure up to the quality of the ingredients. Eurasian cuisines and food-ways are a highly interesting and probably inexhaustible topic, but here the subject needs a more systematic approach and deeper linguistic, cultural, and historical analysis.