
In *Food, Medicine, and the Quest for Good Health*, Nancy Chen offers a broad overview of the multiple ways in which the categories ‘food’ and ‘medicine’ overlap, both historically as well as in contemporary times, in various cultural contexts. Covering a vast range of topics from traditional medicinal uses of spices to nutraceuticals and genetically modified foods and medicines, the book provides an excellent introduction to several key issues and controversies in the emerging popular and scholarly interest in ‘food as medicine’. (A recent Google search reveals literally thousands of papers in sociology, anthropology, and medicine, not to mention popular articles and professional workshops, on the topic).

The book is organised into two parts, of two chapters each, with several recipes for traditional medicinal foods such as rice porridge, ginger garlic tea, and wolfberry soup, interspersed throughout. After an Introduction that urges readers to consider food and consumption as one of the major forces that ‘defines us as living cultural beings in the world’ (p. 5), Part One includes two chapters. The first, ‘Healing Foods and Longevity’, introduces the ways in which food was and is drawn upon in several major healing traditions, including Chinese, Greek, Hippocratic and Galenic humoral, Unani, and Ayurvedic medicine. While these subsections are brief, the effect of reading each of them alongside the others generates an overall sense of the critical importance of food as medicine in diverse healing traditions. Preceding a subsection describing the dearth of nutritional education in current biomedical programmes, the summaries of food in major medical traditions brings into stark contrast the ways in which contemporary biomedical ideologies of medicine exclude many of the traditions upon which it has been built.

In the following sections on spices, Chen focuses on cinnamon and pepper, both of which have a long cross-cultural history of use in the treatment of indigestion, diarrhoea, and menstrual cramps (cinnamon), as well as poor circulation, sluggish digestion, and the topical treatment of wounds (pepper). Concluding this chapter on longevity practices, Chen further covers a great deal of ground, ranging from a description of the role of diet in spiritual traditions in China and Greece; recent research on ‘centenarian diets’ in Pakistan, Ecuador, and Japan; and the history, preparation, and current fascination with food-medicines such as ginseng, gingko, and rhubarb in the promotion of longevity. Perhaps the most compelling insight offered in this final section is the importance of considering diets in context. ‘It is not possible’, Chen writes, ‘…to replicate the Hunza Valley diet elsewhere without consideration of the diet in a broader spectrum in which social contexts of consumption and activity contribute to longevity’ (p. 47).

The second chapter, ‘Dietary Prescriptions and Comfort Foods’, begins by approaching the historical and cultural significance of dietary practices within the framework of ‘defamiliarization’, which urges readers to take a step back from their current cultural beliefs about diet by examining the unfamiliar. Here, Chen describes the myriad ways in which beliefs about diet have changed over time and in different cultural contexts. Whereas Victorian health practices ‘intended to promote healthy living required abstaining from foods or stimulants that were believed to encourage overeating and sexual appetites’ (p. 56), for example, the shift towards current ‘fat-obsessed’ dietary practices in North American underscores ‘the ways in which science and medicine have [increasingly] structured meanings of dietary prescriptions’ (p. 60). This analysis, which derives from Chen’s transition from describing different dietary practices as they have become popular over time (‘Dieting and Everyday Life’) towards describing how government and religious authorities have dictated diet (‘Dieting and the Body Politic’), highlights the recent rise of medical authority in the prescription of diet. Additional sub-themes in this chapter include the history, cultural practices and controversies surrounding salt, sugar, fat and soft drinks. The final sections approach various fad diets such as the Atkins diet or raw food diets within the vast diet industry in the West, and discuss ‘comfort foods’ in various cultural...
contexts. ‘By thinking of dieting in social terms’, Chen writes, ‘as well as something an individual pursues, we can understand why dieting, so compelling for so many different reasons, most likely will continue to be Big Business’ (p. 75).

The second part of the book also consists of two chapters. Chapter 3 discusses the growing industry of nutraceuticals and ‘functional foods’, such as Omega 3-enriched eggs, vitamin-enriched drinks, and other foods that are supplemented in order to enhance their physiological effects. This chapter also includes sections discussing the historical consumption of foods such as green tea and garlic, as well as providing some current research examining the medicinal effects of these items. A compelling section in this chapter describes the rising popularity of ‘bioprospecting’ in the last 20 years, where pharmaceutical companies have become increasingly interested in ‘harvesting the rich knowledge of traditional healers about medicinal plants’ (p. 84). Although Chen writes that ‘the debate about who produces, buys, and consumes nutraceuticals will be critical to watch’ (p. 85), this section begs further discussion of the ethics of bioprospecting from an anthropological perspective (see Adams 2002). The final section of this chapter discusses ‘Harmonizations and Globalizations’, referring to recent UN efforts to ‘define and set guidelines on food standards and safety’ (p. 89), efforts which have stimulated a great deal of controversy, especially in the US.

Chapter 4, ‘Genetically Modified Food and Drugs’, offers a comprehensive overview of some of the food regulation issues and controversies surrounding GM foods in the US, including concerns over health risks, environmental hazards, loss of biodiversity, and worries about sustainable and secure food sources, all of which have led to fierce debates over food labelling. Here, Chen offers examples from Europe, where all GM foods must be labelled, and China, where GM foods are touted as being scientifically advanced, to provide contrast with the current US situation. Offering an anthropological, practice-based approach to the study of these controversies, Chen writes that ‘the debate is usually framed in terms of being simply for or against these foods, but it is more productive to consider different views of GM foods in relation to the corporate, national, and consumer interests that shape their production and circulation’ (p. 93). As in other chapters, this invitation to expand the horizon of analysis to include the actors in the GM food industry offers readers an opportunity to step outside of the usual debates. The final section of the chapter discusses ‘biopharming’, which combines plants and pharmaceuticals in technologically advanced transplantation of genetic material, an area that is growing increasingly more controversial as consumers raise their awareness.

The brief conclusion returns to some of the main thesis of the book: namely that the intersection of food and medicine must be considered in a cultural context. Overall, this argument is the main strength of the book. By providing such wide-ranging descriptions of food and medicine in each chapter, Chen is successful in urging readers to reconsider currently accepted beliefs about the relationships between the two. What the book lacks, however, are in-depth, ethnographic descriptions of these many compelling topics and issues. The various sections can be nonetheless generatively used to stimulate further inquiry and discussion. This book thus would work well as an introductory text in undergraduate classes addressing the anthropology of food as well as undergraduate and/or graduate introductory courses in nutrition and culture.

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References