Chop Suey, *USA* is an intriguing book. In many ways, it makes for an enjoyable read, and is as accessible to a general readership as it is to an academic audience. At the same time, the author, Yong Chen, a professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, also has an ambitious scholarly agenda. For example, the book provides a broad overview of the history of Chinese cuisine in the United States. Few other works do so successfully, and there has in fact been a relative paucity of scholarship on the history of food in general. Yet *Chop Suey, USA* is also more sophisticated than previous books that have covered the history of Chinese cuisine in the United States. The key difference lies in the attempt by Chen to “more directly and systematically investigate that fundamental question: How and why did Chinese food become so popular in the United States?” (p. 185). A previous reviewer of Chen’s book is “less persuaded” by his explanation, citing, for example, alleged factual errors in *Chop Suey, USA*.¹ My review offers a different interpretation of the book.

One of *Chop Suey, USA*’s key strengths lies in Yong Chen’s accessible writing style. I enjoyed reading about his fascinating personal experiences. He arrived in New York during 1985 as a doctoral student in American history bound for Cornell University, after which the United States became his “home for the next quarter century” as he continually searched “for Chinese food — first in Ithaca and later in cities across the country like Detroit, Honolulu, New Orleans, New York, Providence, San Francisco, and St. Louis” (pp. xi-xii). Chen also writes about his relationship with his mother, who “expresses feelings through cooking” and who “[l]ike other Chinese mothers . . . never verbalized the three common English words ‘I love you’ together and instead ‘just kept cooking’” (p. xiv). *Chop Suey, USA* additionally relates the stories of various people who are not often household names despite their importance in the history of Chinese food in the United States. Chen tells us, for instance, about the fascinating Lee Gain You, “a Chinese restaurant chef/owner . . . [who] arrived in the United States in 1922 at the age of twenty-four from the village of Mong Aye in the Pearl River Delta . . . [and who first described the] consistent and recognizable lines of dishes across the nation . . . as ‘Chinese-American cuisine’” (p. 138). Furthermore, the book contains several interesting recipes, both

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personal (which Chen learnt from his mother) and historical, for dishes like steamed savory pork belly with preserved vegetables (p. 5), fried rice (p. 17), and Kung Pao chicken (p. 115).

Through this book, Yong Chen makes an impressive scholarly contribution to both the historical study of food in general and the history of Chinese cuisine in the United States in particular. Indeed, as Chen notes, there has been a relative paucity of scholarly works on food despite “a marked increase in scholarly research on food within various academic disciplines,” with historians of food being “latecomers to the table” (p. 182). Chop Suey, USA is a refreshing book because it is not a culinary history but is instead a work of cultural history. For example, Chen begins the Introduction with the claim that “[t]he rise of Chinese food in America’s gastronomical landscape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is one of the greatest epic stories of cultural exchange in world history” (p. 1), and he proceeds to share this tale. Nevertheless, the book could have engaged better with existing scholarship. Indeed, Chen does not discuss in much detail the historiography of food until his short, six-page Afterword toward the end of the book. Additionally, analysis of three important recent publications on Chinese cuisine in the United States (Jennifer 8 Lee’s The Fortune Cookie Chronicles, Andrew Coe’s Chop Suey, and John Jung’s Sweet and Sour) is largely restricted to one paragraph (pp. 184-185). I would have liked to know more about these works and how Chen’s book relates to them, especially in the case of the Coe book, which shares a similar title.

What makes Chop Suey, USA a groundbreaking work, though, is its intriguing main argument. Chen convincingly suggests that the popularity of Chinese cuisine in the United States cannot be attributed to previous explanations. Indeed, he argues that the reason lies “not in the realm of gastronomy” (p. 181). As such, he rejects the Chinese food as “the best cuisine in the world” thesis, an argument which, as he points out, was espoused by Sun Yat-sen (regarded as the founding father of modern China, in both mainland China and Taiwan) (p. 2). Chen does not agree with Sun because the “notion of Chinese food's culinary superiority” is “highly subjective,” besides which “it was the simplest and least trumpeted dishes that won over the American palate” rather than “the exquisite dishes that Chinese epicures had cultivated over the centuries” (p.13). Chen additionally rejects the “cultural transnationalization” explanation because “curiosity about exotic cultures for vicarious pleasure” cannot account for why Chinese food became so popular in the United States since “cultural curiosity did not increase Americans’ appetite for Chinese food” (pp. 14-15). Furthermore, “there is no absolute correlation between immigration [an