

# Globalizing Asian Cuisines

## From Eating for Strength to Culinary Cosmopolitanism

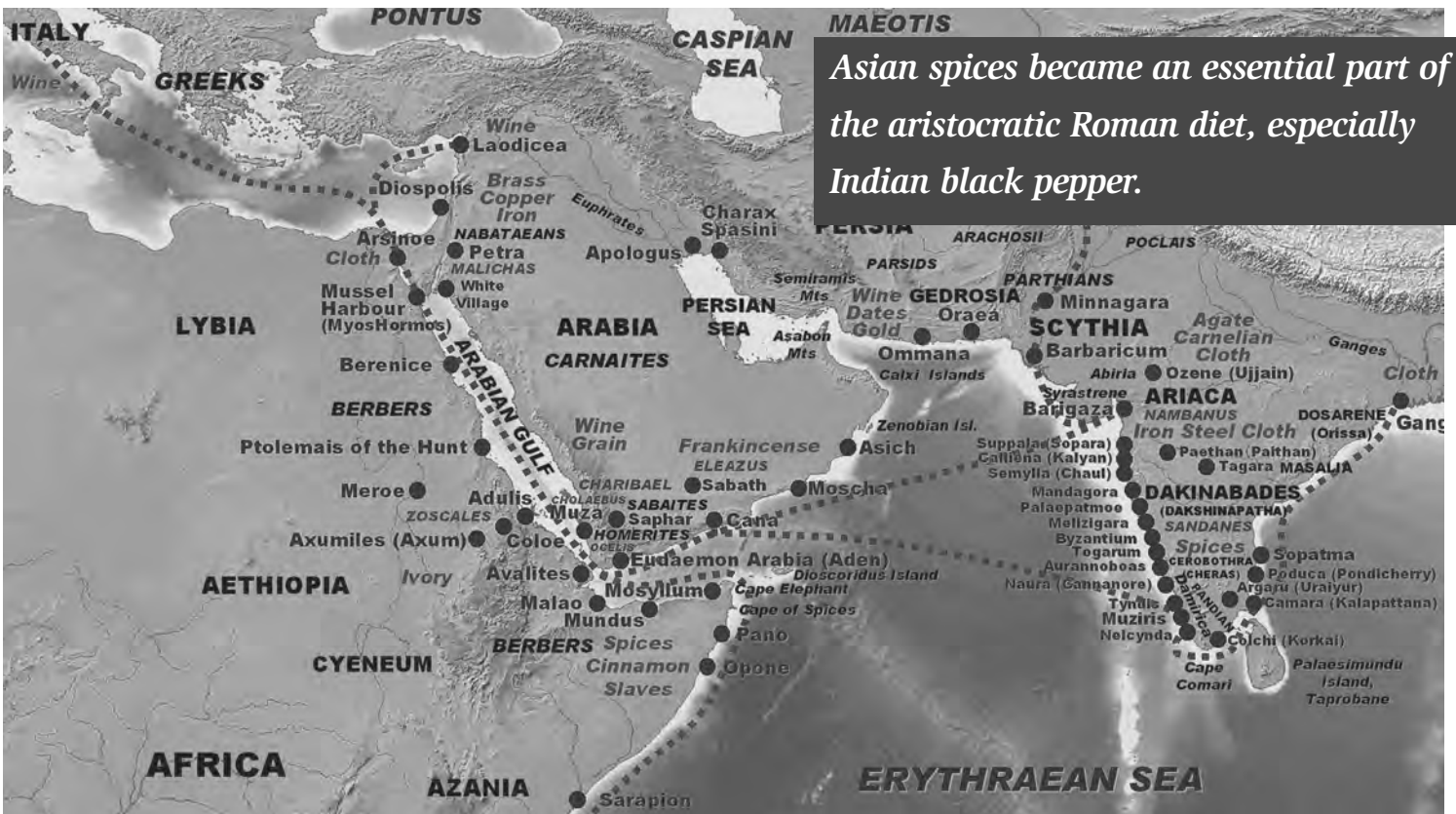
### —A Long History of Culinary Globalization

By James Farrer

Visit a restaurant or home kitchen in America or Europe today, and you inevitably find a salt and pepper shaker on the table or by the stove. While salt is a physiological necessity for human beings, pepper is a culinary necessity with negligible nutritional value. Its origins as a cultural necessity for Western peoples lie in very ancient patterns of culinary globalization. In 30 BCE Rome, under Octavian, conquered the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt. For the next five centuries, annual fleets of over 100 merchant ships would ride the monsoon winds across the Indian Ocean to transport pepper, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, and other spices to Egypt's ports on the Red Sea, eventually arriving at the central spice market in Rome. Asian spices became an essential part of the aristocratic Roman diet, especially Indian black pepper. In what can be described as the first wave of culinary globalization, even ordinary middle class Romans became addicted to these fiery seeds from southern India.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire, the volume of European trade in Asian spices dwindled, and prices of rare spices such as cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg soared to fabulous heights, but Europeans never lost their taste for the rare exotic flavors of Asia. Indeed, the banquets of medieval European nobles were heavily spiced, not, as later generations claimed, in order to disguise food spoilage but because of the high status associated with consuming expensive Asian spices. Black pepper, above all, remained central to European cuisines, and wresting control of the spice trade from Arab traders was a primary impetus for the early voyages of discovery and conquest by Portuguese and Spanish explorers.<sup>1</sup>

Globalization can be defined as the complex process in which distant and distinct societies have become connected and blended through ties of trade, cultural exchange, flows of people, and ideas. This is often described as a distinct feature of the twentieth century. Through the study of food, however, we can see that in a broader sense, globalization is a very ancient process of historical exchanges between distant regions with profound and persistent consequences. The ancient trade in luxury goods such as spices might be described as the first wave of culinary globalization. A millennium after the fall of the Roman Empire, Europeans looking for the spice islands of Asia headed West across the Atlantic and inadvertently reached the Americas. In doing so, they opened a second and much more significant chapter of culinary globalization, known as the Columbian exchange. Referring to Christopher Columbus, this exchange involved the transfer of New World crops to the Old Worlds of Europe, Asia, and Africa and the massive colonization of the Americas by not only Europeans but also European foods and food-related cultural practices.<sup>2</sup> Tied closely to the history of European colonization, the Columbian exchange revolutionized both European and Asian diets, introducing New World crops such as corn, potatoes, and chilies into Asian diets. Colonial cultural influences also resulted in a variety of hybrid or mixed food permutations, some of which are now enshrined as "regional" or "national" cuisines in Asian countries. With the rise of global capitalism and multinational corporations in the twentieth century, culinary exchanges between Asia and the rest of the world have both



Locations, names, and routes of Roman trade with India according to the Peryplus of the Erythraean Sea, first century CE. Source: <http://tiny.cc/46bbb8>.

intensified and scaled up, ushering in a third wave of culinary globalization based on the industrialization of food production and the globalization of retail trade in food. This phase has sometimes been characterized as “McDonaldization,” implying a wholesale Americanization and homogenization of the global diet, though studies of McDonald’s operations in Asia show that even this iconic fast food chain must adapt to local conditions.<sup>3</sup> This third wave of culinary globalization also has included the “Asianization” of the American and European diets, including the presence of ready-made Asian foodstuffs in almost any American supermarket.

This essay uses the examples of four cities in Asia to highlight the history of culinary globalization in Asia and its implications, not only for understanding how Asian people eat, but also the changing nature of Asia’s culinary engagement with other parts of the world. Through the lens of food, we cannot only observe processes of globalization or the growing connections and exchanges between distant places, but also processes of localization, that is, the ways in which imported foods and cuisines are incorporated into local cultures. Sociologists use the term “glocalization” to describe these simultaneous processes of globalization and localization.<sup>4</sup> Through food, we can see how the global has become the local in Asian food cultures.

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The Basilica of Bom Jesus in the town of Goa on India’s east coast.  
Source: <http://tiny.cc/clwuh>. (Photo: Unmadindu).

### Goa—An Early Example of Culinary Glocalization

An impressive cluster of large European churches ranging above the ancient and verdant shade trees greets tourists visiting the town of old Goa on India’s east coast. The most famous is the Basilica of Bom Jesus, where one can view the partially transparent coffin of St. Francis Xavier, the Jesuit father who ventured through Goa on his way to Japan and China. The incongruous visage of the ornate Portuguese-style church façade towering above the quiet Indian countryside is explained when one knows that in the sixteenth century, Goa was a bustling city of 300,000 and the center of the first European empire in Asia. Larger than either London or Lisbon at the time, Goa’s wealth was based on the booming

spice trade. The Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama, after a perilous journey around the tip of Africa, arrived in Goa in 1498 looking for spices, which he found in abundance. A subsequent expedition in 1503 established a permanent Portuguese base in Goa, the first of the European colonies in India and also the last to be incorporated into the independent nation of India in 1961.<sup>5</sup>

Those 450 years of Portuguese rule left an indelible mark on the contemporary culture of Goa, influences that are most evident in its cuisine. The most famous of Goa’s hybrid dishes is undoubtedly *vindalho*, a spicy stew, usually of pork, that derives its name from the Portuguese *vinho* (wine vinegar) and *ahlo* (garlic). Modern Goan cuisine is now recognized as a sophisticated regional cuisine of India, famous for blending East and West, including the ubiquitous Portuguese white bread, or *pao*, which alternates with white rice as a staple in the region.<sup>6</sup> For example, an elegant lunch served to the author on the veranda of the Palacio do Deao, a meticulously restored eighteenth-century Indo-Portuguese mansion in South Goa, featured both Portuguese appetizers of fried cheese with olives and Goan-style fish curry, a daily dish for most ordinary Goans. The Goan owners serve Indian white wine and tasty Goan pastries for dessert, featuring the inescapable Goan ingredient of coconut.<sup>7</sup> Not far from the Palacio de Deao, a working spice plantation attracts both foreign and Indian tourists, where they enjoy a view of the tropical plant species that brought European explorers to this region. These now include many imported species. Indeed, the most famous souvenir product for the many northern Indian tourists visiting Goa are cashew nuts and a fiery liquor called *feni*, distilled from the fermented juice of the waxy cashew fruit. However, the cashew, whose name *acaju* comes from the Tipu language of Brazil, was brought to Goa from Brazil by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. It is but one example of the vast number of new world fruits and plants that Europeans introduced into Asia, including maize (corn), potatoes, tomatoes, red peppers, peanuts, pineapples, passion fruit, squashes, and cocoa.<sup>8</sup> Like the cashew, these products have not only become integral to local eating habits but even symbols of regional identity—examples of culinary glocalization, making global culture into local culture.

### Manila—Hybrid Cuisine as National Symbol

At the far other end of tropical Asia lies the bustling modern metropolis of Manila, once the center of Spain’s empire in Asia and one of the world’s first truly global cities, connecting the seventeenth-century economies and cultures of Asia, America, and Europe. Like Goa, Manila was a major conduit for the introduction of Central American foodstuffs into Asia and also a major center for the transmission of Asian foods into Mexico and the Americas. Just as it would be hard to imagine the Philippines without the pineapple, originally from South America, it would be difficult to imagine Mexico today without the mango, a native of South Asia brought to Mexico through Manila. The US replaced Spain as the colonial power after the Spanish-American War in 1898 (after putting down fierce resistance from Filipino nationalists), also profoundly influencing the foodways of Filipinos. Moreover, since the sixteenth century, large numbers of Chinese immigrants have contributed to Filipino cuisine.<sup>9</sup>

As in Goa, the meeting of Spanish and native food cultures has resulted in a sophisticated hybrid cuisine with ties not only to Europe but also to other Asian regions, particularly China. Increasingly, this hybrid mix of Western and Asian influences is identified as a modern Philippine high cuisine. For example, as one of the most celebrated chefs in Manila, Gene Gonzales has defined a new Filipino high cuisine that avidly borrows from Europe, the US, and Asia, while



Chef Gene Gonzales.  
Source: <http://tiny.cc/aptcu>.



Tony Tan Caktiong, founder of the Filipino fast food chain Jollibee.  
Source: <http://tiny.cc/3cz0t>.

confidently reclaiming distinctive local culinary traditions. Dishes served at his fine dining restaurant Café Ysabel in suburban Manila include a Chinese-influenced *Pancit Molo* (Ilonggo chicken and shrimp broth with dumplings) and American influences such as vanilla ice cream with mango syrup, Manila style. And, of course, it includes Gonzales’s version of the Philippine classic *adobo* (meats stewed in vinegar).

For poorer and lower middle class Filipinos, a dinner out is much more likely to take place in one of the ubiquitous fast food restaurants in the city, rather than the pricey Café Ysabel. Manila commuters run a daily gauntlet of American quick service eateries, from McDonald’s and KFC to Starbucks and Baskin Robbins. However, the undisputed star of Manila’s burgeoning fast food scene

is not one of these American corporate giants but a local Filipino chain called Jollibee. Founded by Chinese-Filipino Tony Tan Caktiong as an ice cream parlor in Cubao City in 1975, Jollibee grew to be the number-one fast food restaurant in the Philippines, consistently beating out McDonald’s and KFC with its variegated offerings, ranging from hamburgers and fried chicken to spaghetti and ice cream.<sup>10</sup> It would not be an exaggeration to say that Jollibee has become a symbol of Filipino cultural identity as much as home cooked *adobo*. In different ways, both the mass-market Jollibee and the high-end Café Ysabel celebrate the cosmopolitan origins of Filipino national culture and foodways.

### Shanghai – Food for a Global City

While Manila and Goa represent the Asian global cities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Shanghai is a relative latecomer as a world-class metropolis and a center of globalizing cuisine. Like Manila and Goa, Shanghai opened up to Western culinary culture under the impact of colonialism. Shanghai’s rise as an international city was a direct consequence of the first Opium War (1841–1842) between Britain, the rising global power of the nineteenth century, and Qing dynasty China, a languishing empire. In the Treaty of Nanjing, the Chinese government agreed to open up ports along the coast to foreign trade and settlement. Shanghai, at the mouth of the Yangtze River, was ideally suited for development as an international port. During the subsequent century, until World War II, Shanghai was the largest and most international city in China with a steadily growing population of resident foreigners, living in foreign concessions that were effectively colonies operating outside the control of the Chinese government.

At first, the Shanghainese were not particularly impressed with the tastes of Western food, but they were impressed with Western military and economic power, and one way of appropriating Western power was through the consumption of Western foods. In the late nineteenth century, Cantonese entrepreneurs who capitalized on early associations with the West through the ports of Canton and Macau often ran Shanghai’s numerous Western restaurants, known as *fancaiguan* (foreign food

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restaurants). Fuzhou Road in the International Concession became a fashionable center of Western food consumption, also associated with nightlife and the culture of courtesans. The focus was on the “glittering décor,” “ornate,” and “elegance and cleanliness” of Western restaurants rather than the exotic and perhaps unpleasant tastes.<sup>11</sup> Like dance halls and department stores, Western restaurants also became an important feature of 1920s and 30s Shanghai’s jazz-age consumer culture, including Western restaurants run by émigrés as well as Chinese. Some Western cooking items even penetrated into everyday household cuisine, including *luosongtang* (Russian soup), a greatly modified borscht made with cabbage, tomatoes, and *dapai* (Shanghai big pork chops), a modified version of a European pork chop served over rice or noodles.

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### Spicy Food and Mao’s Revolution

By Hongjie Wang

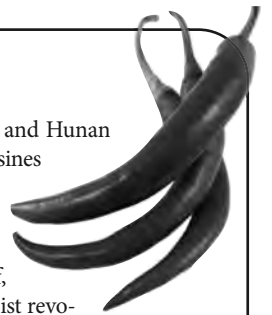
In today’s China, restaurants featuring spicy cuisines (mostly Sichuan and Hunan styles) attract many guests across the country. The popularity of spicy cuisines in China has strengthened a popular folk belief that people who love spicy food commonly possess characteristics such as courage, valor, and endurance, all essential for a revolutionary. “No spicy food, no revolutionaries,” boast the spicy food lovers of China. This popular belief, though not provable, testifies to the lingering memory of the Communist revolution that transformed Chinese society and culture in the twentieth century.

The belief in the hook of spicy food and revolution originated with Mao Zedong, whose zealous predilection for spicy peppers is widely talked about with admiration by Chinese people. Hailing from Hunan province in the middle Yangzi River, Mao loved spicy food and could not finish a meal without hot peppers, according to accounts of relatives and guards. Mao’s expression “No spicy food, no revolutionaries” has become the motto of some contemporary Chinese lovers of spicy food.

Mao was not the only hot pepper fan in his revolutionary party. According to People’s Liberation Army sources, among the 1,052 commanders in the Communist Party’s Liberation Army who received ranks of general and marshal in 1955, at least 82 percent hailed from provinces such as Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei, and Jiangxi (all famed for extraordinarily spicy regional cuisines). This included eight marshals out of ten and fifty-one of sixty-seven high-ranking generals. No wonder Mao proclaimed the role of spicy peppers in his revolution; “A man who dares to eat spicy peppers fears nothing; all Red Army soldiers joining our revolts love spicy food.” Deng Xiaoping, the political successor to Mao and the so-called “general designer” of China’s reform and opening since 1978, was also a spicy food lover from Sichuan, where the regional cuisine features the distinct flavor *mala* (tingling and spicy).

Though an unproven folk belief, the link between spicy food and revolution incites the public and has a lasting impact on Chinese society and food culture. Whether it is a real connection and whatever the scientific explanations are behind the “spicy characteristics” do not concern the Chinese that much. Instead, the taste of chili peppers, the interplay of regional food tradition, some peoples’ romanticized memories of the 1949 revolution, and a market-oriented consumer economy contribute to the persistent high profile of chili peppers.

HONGJIE WANG is an Assistant Professor teaching Chinese History at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Georgia. He received his PhD in East Asian History from Brown University. He is the author of *Power and Politics in Tenth-Century China: The Former Shu Regime* (Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2011).



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Interior view of the Deda Western Restaurant.

Source: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2009-05/30/content\\_7953646.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2009-05/30/content_7953646.htm).

culture incompatible with the working class and nationalist spirit of the new People's Republic of China (PRC). Little of Shanghai's thriving Western restaurant culture survived 1960s and 70s repression. By the 1980s, Shanghai featured a few old names that were a shadow of their former glory, including the famous Deda Western Restaurant, in operation since 1897. Still operating as a state-owned enterprise in 2011 (though in new premises), Deda retained some of the recipes of a bygone era, including *puguoji* (Portuguese-style chicken), a baked curried chicken casserole in cream developed in the Portuguese colony of Macau with influences from Goa. Broad elements of Western culinary influence survived in everyday practices such as having milk and bread for breakfast, uncommon products in much of China but plentiful in Shanghai.

Shanghai's rebirth as an international cuisine center began in the late 1980s. As in Manila, American fast food restaurants filled the low end of the market, with KFC emerging on top. In the late 1990s, foreign chefs and entrepreneurs also began opening high-end restaurants in the city to appeal to the growing populations of expatriate families as well as to Shanghai's growing white-collar professionals. By 2010, Shanghai boasted over 100 Italian and 500 Japanese restaurants. Shanghainese who had studied in Japan during the previous decade and often worked in Japanese restaurants to pay their tuition opened most of the latter.<sup>12</sup> Although socialist policies temporarily eradicated signs of colonial influences in Shanghai, by 2010, the city was on its way to reclaiming bragging rights as the most cosmopolitan food center of China (with the exception of autonomous Hong Kong). Like a century earlier, consuming Western cuisine was associated with modernity and fashion more than simply with tastes. Many young Shanghainese embraced culinary cosmopolitanism as an expression of their identity as residents of China's most international city.<sup>13</sup>

### Tokyo—Eating the Other for Strength

On January 24, 1872, the Meiji emperor sat down to a dinner that included meat. Henceforth, meat would be served regularly in the imperial household, and French fare would be served on all official ceremonies. For centuries, Buddhist Japanese had considered eating meat a barbaric and unclean practice; the sudden adaptation of a diet was based on a desire for self-strengthening and the belief that meat-eating was one reason for the strength of Westerners.<sup>14</sup> Eating Western style foods and adopting Western dress were seen as ways of impressing powerful foreigners with Japan's modernity and avoiding the fate of colonization and Western domination Japanese observed in nearby Asian countries. Starting in 1871, foreign dignitaries were invited annually to banquets at Tokyo's first Western-style hotel in Tsukiji to celebrate the emperor's birthday. In addition to its political and symbolic uses, the adoption of Western food items such as meat, potatoes, and bread was also a practical step toward increasing daily caloric intake, thus improving the stamina of both the military and civilian populations.<sup>15</sup>

Japan's new modern national cuisine had a strong Anglo-Saxon flavor. Although French cuisine was served at the finest hotels in Yokohama, Tokyo, and Kobe, British residents and their Chinese and Japanese household servants had the greatest impact on the development of Western cuisine in Japan. Japanese modified these Western foods in many cases, creating hybrid classics such as *nikujaga*, or beef and potatoes cooked in soy-sauce-flavored broth. By the early twentieth century, Western-style food, or *yōshoku*, had permeated all social classes, and versions could be found at all prices, ranging from the finest French restaurants serving set menus to more modest *yōshokuya* (Western-style restaurants) serving modified British fare such as fried fish and beef cutlets a la carte. By the 1930s, *yōshoku* restaurants in department stores attracted the increasingly affluent urban masses who were introduced not only to new styles of food but also to sitting at tables, eating with silverware, and Western styles of

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Japan is now famous for its beef. *Wagyu* (wa means "Japanese" and gyū means "cow") represents several breeds of cattle that are named for their regions of origin: Kobe, Mishima, Matsusaka, Ōmi, and Sanda. Source: <http://tiny.cc/q8s4s>.

restaurant service.<sup>16</sup> Japan's militarization and colonial expansion accelerated the Westernizing Japanese cuisine. Military planners and researchers strove to increase Japanese soldiers' and sailors' caloric intakes as well as introduce dishes that could be easily prepared in modern military kitchens. These included dishes such as curry rice and *yakisoba* (Chinese fried noodles) that would become post-war staples in household meals.<sup>17</sup> The US Occupation furthered the development of a national cuisine with strong Western (and Chinese) influences. US food aid focused on delivering wheat, which became the daily bread in school lunches, and ramen (Chinese style noodles) sold by street vendors. Eventually, this surplus wheat inspired the invention of instant noodles by Taiwanese-Japanese entrepreneur Ando Momofuku, founder of Nissin Foods Corporation.<sup>18</sup>

The early Westernization of Japanese cuisine has also contributed to the growth of a sophisticated and complex appreciation of Western food in Tokyo. The prestigious Michelin Red Guide for 2009 awarded city restaurants a total of 227 stars, compared with fifty-nine awarded to New York and forty to Hong Kong. Journalists rushed to proclaim Tokyo the "focus of the culinary world" or "the undisputed world leader in fine dining."<sup>19</sup> Beginning with state-led policies of self-strengthening, Tokyo is now fully integrated into global flows of foods, chefs, and entrepreneurial capital. Consumption of Western and Chinese foods began as a politicized practice of national strengthening and has now created a hybridized dining scene in which Tokyo residents regularly consume Italian and French high cuisine, American fast food, and authentic Indian and Thai dishes. At the same time, early foreign adoptions such as Japanese curry rice, *nikujaga*, and ramen now top the lists of common household dishes. Indeed, these dishes have become so much associated with Japan that Japanese entrepreneurs now operate Japanese-branded ramen chains in China and even export Japanese curry to India. The process of glocalization reaches full circle as Shanghainese include consuming Japanese ramen as part of the city's reputation for urban sophistication, while Tokyoites consume authentic Shanghainese *xiaolongbao* (steamed, meat-filled dumplings) as a sign of their own established cosmopolitanism.

## Glocalized Asian Cuisines as Representations of Modern Asian Identities

Asia's global urban hybrid cuisines of Asia's global cities are now symbols of a confident cosmopolitan modernity. This was not always the case. As described earlier, colonialism was central to the history of culinary globalization in East Asian cities. Centuries of colonialism (Goa, Manila), a century of partial colonialism (Shanghai), and the threat of Western colonization (Tokyo) led Asian people to adopt Western foodways as a method of coping with and slowly absorbing the foreign interlopers' cultures. Asians also adopted some Western foodstuffs because of the taste or sometimes in order to absorb perceived Western power. Japan's own colonization policies in Taiwan and Korea also expanded the empire's food possibilities.

After World War II ended colonial rule in most of Asia, most people in former colonies had generally negative views of the cultural legacies of colonialism, including that of imperial Japan. Asians began looking to define their own regional and national cuisines, often rejecting foreign imports or even denying foreign influences. In the most extreme example, all Shanghai Western restaurants began serving simple Chinese fare during the 1960s Cultural Revolution. But more subtle examples abound. Filipino nationalists insist, for example, that *adobo* is a local invention with no Spanish influences. The Tokyo ramen museum fails to acknowledge the contributions of Chinese and Korean entrepreneurs to the development of postwar urban ramen shops.<sup>20</sup> By the 1990s, however, resentment over Western and Japanese colonialism in Asia began receding, and both food producers and consumers were freer to celebrate the cross-bred roots of local culinary favorites. Mumbai middle class Indians enjoy dining on Goan food, now considered one of India's cuisines, and Filipinos treat the Americanized offerings of Jollibee as a national success story. Residents of Tokyo and Shanghai take pride in the cosmopolitan offerings of

their own cities, seeing the number of high class foreign restaurants as a symbol of globalization and urban prestige.

Romans and medieval Europeans consumed Asian spices as a display of sophistication and wealth. Centuries later, under the threat of Western domination, Asian people consumed foreign food for self-strengthening. In the current wave of globalization, association of foreign cuisines with status and power continues, but for new reasons. Consumers around the world choose from a globalized menu of dining and home cooking choices. Local, regional, and national cuisines are still important, but increasingly are seen as one among many choices. In Asian cities, as in the West, international culinary cultures are new expressions of a worldly outlook and cosmopolitan sophistication. ■

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**JAMES FARRER** is Professor of Sociology at Sophia University in Tokyo where he researches and teaches about globalization, urban culture, migration, food culture, and sexuality in East Asia. He is Director of the Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture where he heads a collaborative research project on "Globalization, Food and Social Identity in the Asia Pacific."