The Other Milk: Reinventing Soy in Republican China, by Jia-Chen Fu

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During China’s Republican Era (1912-1949), soy milk was reformulated from a commonplace locally-made drink to a factory-made, scientifically fortified—and therefore modern—dietary choice. In arguing this, Jia-Chen Fu explores far beyond national boundaries and
discourses. Fu assembles a comprehensive historical record of the scientific, commercial, and government discourse on soy milk from the 1920s-40s. It includes personal accounts of a New York born-and-raised Chinese food security activist, commercial advertisements from a Canadian-Chinese doctor marketing his soy-based baby formula, excerpts from an agricultural journal translated from Japanese and disseminated across China's district offices, as well as photographs from local newspapers. These sources illustrate China's rising hopes for nation-building and modernization through a dietary lens.

As Western nutrition science grew beyond caloric minimums toward a nuanced view of vitamins, proteins, carbohydrates, and fats, it became possible to compare diets across cultures. Many Chinese nutrition scientists educated at foreign institutions condemned the “Chinese diet” for its limited protein, arguing that it explained China's national weakness. This played into the trope that China was the “sick man of Asia.” By the 1930s, Chinese nutrition scientists had accepted cow's milk as “nature's perfect food.” Fu suggests that the popularization of dairy arose from its Western allure (associations with national wealth and power) as well as its now quantifiable nutritional benefits (particularly protein and healthy fats). In Republican China, war and incursion caused deep-seated instability, nutritional and otherwise. Growing tensions after Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 peaked with a refugee crisis in 1937. Displaced people were hungry, and a healthy source of protein was needed, but water and resource-intensive dairy from cows was both uncommon and impractical.

Enter China's “nutritional activists”: scientists, foreign-born Chinese returnees, and other citizens who contributed to famine relief by advancing soy-enriched diets. In doing so, they carried out efforts both humanitarian and colonial in nature. Fu enlivens history by shining the spotlight on some of these fascinating individuals who shaped Republican China's answer to their nation's “dietary dilemma.” These activists were influenced by transnationally flowing ideas about “modern” nutrition science, and each contributed to the scientific, commercial, and social discourses that promoted soy milk as China's unique national superfood. Fu shows how fortified soy milk products were marketed as a key to longevity, a tool for nation-building by feeding strong young citizens, and in darker times, a quick-fix to child malnutrition. Fu's centering of activist voices makes this book a great read for historians of modern China and anyone who is curious about how diets are shaped by historical actors.

The earliest group of nutritional activists are the scientists responsible for creating culturally appropriate and practical solutions to China's protein problem. The central figure of chapter one is Li Shizeng, a Pasteur-Institute-educated Chinese food scientist. As early as 1910, he experimented with, and argued for, soy milk as an alternative to dairy. Presented in chapter two, Boxer fellow and US-educated biochemist Wu Xian contributed to research on the “optimal” Chinese diet, or one with sufficient protein. Chapter three shows a number of these Chinese scientists—Wu Xian, Luo Dengyi, and Zheng Ji—all of whom supported research and development in providing protein via plants. Pediatric physician Ernest Tso is

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1 Jia-Chen Fu. The Other Milk: Reinventing Soy in Republican China (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 101.
the star of chapter four. He challenged the idea that dairy was a uniquely optimal milk by engineering a soy-based baby formula. Through a culmination of these scientists’ efforts, the modern technology of nutritional supplements combined with China’s homegrown protein source, soybeans, culminating in an indigenous solution to perceived or actual nutritional deficiencies.

Fu then shifts from the voices of technology-focused scientists to the communication-oriented nutritional activists responsible for spreading the “gospel of soy” across China. Most of these were social workers and businesspeople. Their efforts fell on a spectrum of appropriation and localization. This is illustrated in chapter five, when Fu calls attention to the “hybrid modernity”² of commercial soy milk advertising. For example, companies used the familiar nutritional logic of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), to promote soy as a food with medicinal qualities that contribute to longevity and well-being. This appeal to tradition occurred in conjunction with modern and hygienic packaging, and essentially rebranded these newly-engineered soy milk options as simultaneously traditional and modern.

Chapters six and seven share the story of Nellie Lee, an American-born and educated ethnic Chinese activist, to illuminate how aid organizations aimed to bring the nutritional boon of fortified soy milk to refugee camps in Shanghai and other regions of China, with varying success. Promoting the importance of the new soy milk to the masses proved challenging and context-dependent. Overall, the practical roadblocks to making scientifically-fortified soy milk a part of everyday life overcame the hopeful nation-building and nutrition-building agenda of China’s nutritional activists.

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² Fu, The Other Milk, 109
In her use of evidence, Fu is meticulous, candid, cautious, and even humorous. One hundred and sixty-two of this two hundred and seventy-six page book is spent on notes and citations alone. Fu concisely yet completely explains the nuance within her sources with impeccable attention to detail. Her selection of sources reveals a keen analytical eye and, at times, a zeal for entertainment value. Giving readers pause to point out a question of which the answer does not have an apparent solution, Fu also rightfully abstains from making unsubstantiated claims. Altogether, these mark a high-caliber of scholarship.

The book is a generous contribution to the fields of Asian Studies and Food Studies, sharing the previously underexamined history of soy milk as an attempt to elevate Chinese nationhood via nutrition. It subtly brings to light the ways that Chinese scientists and activists with Western educations rallied toward a colonially-shaped dietary shift which they hoped would combat the “shamefully poor” national diet. Now, by contrast, the people of China are among the world’s most affluent. And, as the country joined the ranks of developed nations, the “Chinese diet” has shifted toward meat and dairy. Animal agriculture is a powerful contributor to our shared global crisis: climate change. Renewed advocacy for dietary change and “vegetal solution(s)” in all of the world’s wealthiest nations might be just the sort of discourse shift that we need.

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3 See figure 1: “The Soybean Family Driving Madame Cow Into the Museum.” Fu, The Other Milk, 178.
4 “Greater female participation in the burgeoning workforce may have decreased breastfeeding rates, although further research needs to be done to substantiate this point.” Fu, The Other Milk, 103.
5 Fu, The Other Milk, 98.