

“Refusing Food”: Asia Pacific American Eaters in the World as Pedagogical Example

By Stephanie H. Chan

Stories warn not to eat anything on the strange land, or else you get trapped, fall under spells. But there are also consequences for refusing food – making enemies, insulting the worth of offerings, going hungry, not becoming part of the place.

–Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 103

After years of youthful tripping around his San Francisco of “clammy humors and foghorns that warn and warn” (*Tripmaster Monkey* 3), in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s trickster hero, Wittman Ah Sing, routes his family across the Pacific to make a home in Hawai‘i. From the moment of arrival, when Wittman’s son, Mario, discovers a Dole Pineapple juice dispenser at the airport and bounds over to make his first food experience on the island, it becomes clear that the Ah Sings’ journey is culinary as much as geographic and cultural. For Wittman, the journey is distinctly culinary because it prompts him to re-examine his attitude toward food and question how he will adapt his tastes while making a new home. Will he, as he ponders in the lines above, avoid new and unknown food experiences and rely on his familiar food habits, in order to stay out of trouble? Or will he attempt to adapt his food habits and integrate in the new environment? Caught between the desire to stay the safe and accustomed route which preserves familiar eating patterns, and the impulse to depart from that route in search of other ways to belong in Hawai‘i, the peculiar two-sided quality of Wittman’s hunger pangs remains stubbornly in tact through the narrative.

Kingston’s insistence on preserving this tension produces an especially uncomfortable sense about food – one that other Asia Pacific American experimental writings work to create as well – that is quite different from other, popular writings of Asia Pacific American eaters and cuisine. In contrast to experimental works, the latter writings frequently take less interest in exploring the difficulty of eating. The North American dining guide, *Asian Dining Rules*, for instance, suggests that “if you’re part of a restaurant’s extended family you don’t have to be Asian to be an insider– you just have to eat like you are” (5). Basing this know-how upon his own experience befriending the owners of his childhood haunt, Empire Szechuan, the author promises that insider status – ostensibly in Asian restaurants, and in Asian communities – is entirely attainable by cultivating the kind of cross-cultural eating practices illustrated in the text. Unlike Wittman, who questions the very possibility of integrating into Hawai‘i through food, this

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text's author easily promotes the idea that food provides access and integration into a place.

Another popular example of eating experience which is markedly less vexed than Wittman's occurs in the film adaptation of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. In the film, food provides occasions for inter-generational connection rather than disjuncture. A prime example of this suturing occurs when Suyuan, an immigrant from China, links her American-born daughter June's noble character to her food habits: "That bad crab," she says to June, "only you tried to take it. Everybody else want best quality. You, your thinking different. Waverly took best-quality crab. You took worst, because you have best-quality heart." A now famous and commonly recalled scene, several critics note its appealing suggestion that the right culinary habit effects inter-generational feminine reconciliation. We might further note that June's moment of connection with her mother through shared Chinese etiquette helps her to become more comfortable with her ethnic identity. The film and *Asian Dining Rules* thus share a belief that striking a close relationship with Asia Pacific American food is possible, and adopting the right attitude while eating can yield social benefits: a sense of connection with Asia Pacific Americans, or, if one is Asia Pacific American, a stronger sense of ethnic identity.

I want to suggest that experimental writings like *The Fifth Book of Peace* work to contest this faith in easily realized cross-cultural connection or ethnic identification. I use "experimental" here in reference to texts which self-consciously depart from popular understandings of food and its relation to Asia Pacific American subjects – as is operative in the dining rules and film – at thematic and formal levels. Wittman's food anxieties lend Kingston's text an experimental quality because they trouble the assumption that cross-cultural connection and ethnic identification occur in such a facile manner as popular Asia Pacific American texts purport. They critique food discourses which essentialize the relation between ethnic subjects and food and reduce it to a set of associations which represent the relationship between Asia Pacific American subjects and food as easily resolved. As alternatives, they begin to flesh out more historicized, nuanced accounts. Challenging food discourses which, as Anita Mannur writes, act in collusion with "liberal multiculturalist discourse that sees food as affirming ethnic and racial difference wherein the real import of food derives purely from its symbolic functions in expressing group or cultural identity" (12), experimental food writings advance narratives in which Asia Pacific American experience cannot be reduced to food symbols or untroubled associations which, though they are reductions, still proliferate in the name of multiculturalism.

Against narratives bolstering uncritical food discourse, Kingston, in self-conscious manner, acknowledges and works to distort the expectation of easy associations between food and Asia Pacific American subjects. The novel presents situations where the associations are anticipated, but not delivered. The resulting narrative is thus fraught with moments of contradiction in which subject's relation to food or to food culture is shown to be difficult to reconcile, or simply not reconcilable at all via familiar food trope.

This essay explores how *The Fifth Book of Peace* works through food themes and narrative form to complicate the relation between subjectivity and food cast in more palatable narratives. I suggest here that its engagement of food themes through the form of an improvisational journey enables a more capacious and critical view of how the

culinary relates to subjectivity. The disjuncture Wittman encounters in navigating culinary terrain produces fields of ambivalence for the Asia Pacific American subject, akin to those Wenying Xu reads in Asian American works like Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003).¹ Of the Vietnamese cook hired to serve Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in Paris in *The Book of Salt*, Xu observes the ambivalence between cooking as agency, and cooking as offering to the colonizer: "cooking seems to be the only site for [the protagonist, Binh] to enjoy some self-determination and dignity". On the other hand, "with his labor, his art... Binh becomes an allegory for the colonized vulnerable to the cannibalistic practices of colonialism" (140-141). Xu's study illuminates other sites of ambivalence, and the various psychic spaces produced by culinary tropes and representations. What distinguishes Kingston's work, and those like it, from those Xu treats in her study, are its formal features. I rely here on the term "form" to describe the general structure of Wittman's story that begins with a question of how one ought to adapt to a new place and culture, and then demonstrates a process where this question is explored through an improvised wandering with an unknown outcome. Wittman, ever the flaneur, quests and questions, motivated always by a search for an enlightened way of belonging to a new place which is not politically blindsighted, romanticized, or, as Kingston might say, "fake." His is a didactic quest, a narrative that chronicles struggles with questions of how to partake and belong, while at the same time, keeping view of his own position and beliefs as a Bay Area transplant, Chinese American, father, etc. The privileged position of the question, and the subsequent modeling of how to answer the question, imbues the text with a didactic quality. It suggests that the text intends to call attention to itself as a distinctive type of food writing.

Kingston's text provides occasion to consider how Asia Pacific American literatures are extending views of the culinary, as it appears in lived cultural experience, and also in food narratives. I focus this discussion on *The Fifth Book of Peace* for two reasons: first, it complicates tidy views of the relation between food and the Asia Pacific American subject; second, through its didactic form, it announces itself as an alternative to food narratives claiming to deliver this tidy view. Wittman demonstrates a desire to understand his relation to food beyond simple associations, as evident in the opening quote; what is more, he begins the very process of showing relations to food which are tangled and contradictory, but more representative of his entire experience. Kingston's text not only opens up to the complexities of food and subjectivity on a thematic level but it also offers itself as an example of what Asia Pacific American food writing *could be*.

The text's didactic streak – its deliberate question-posing followed by exploration narrative with no promise of conclusion – suggests that Kingston's experiment with the culinary is also pedagogical. Wittman's journey models a critical approach to food for the reader, insofar as it acknowledges the desire, and even expectation, for palatable, connective table narrative *and* the refusal to satisfy this expectation: it encourages a way of thinking about food that is open to contradiction and incommensurability. Reading Kingston's text, one encounters protagonists engaged in processes of discovering multiple and tangled significances of food, rather than static definitions. Kingston's work announces the question of how to eat on "the strange land" and leads the reader through a journey to negotiate the question; the work thus makes it the reader's project to grapple with the question alongside Wittman. I want to suggest here that *The Fifth Book of Peace* belongs to a body of Asia Pacific American food writings which are distinctly

pedagogical; they do not merely show the complexities of the food-subject relation as other works might. Their self-conscious form – involving question asking and journeying without guarantee of conclusion – allows them to push the expectations of food writing.

This discussion of culinary disjuncture in *The Fifth Book of Peace* garners energies from other studies of food in Asian American literature, including works by Sauling Wong and Jennifer Ann Ho, in addition to Mannur and Xu.² Wong and Ho center their studies primarily on the symbolic value of food images in Asian American literature. Wong's project, for instance, shows how "alimentary images...symbolize Necessity – all the hardships, deprivations, restrictions, disenfranchisements, and dislocations that Asian Americans have collectively suffered as immigrants and minorities in a white-dominated country" (20). Ho's study of coming-of-age stories similarly elaborates on the relation between food and the difficult processes of Asian Americanization. Analyzing the narrative representations, Ho notes that both food and negotiating Asian American identity involve efforts to "balance between that which can be assumed to be a stereotype...with the facts of Asian American cultural preferences" (5). To these theme-based food studies, I offer a view of how Asia Pacific American subjectivity, in works like Kingston's, means contesting the essentializing forces of food culture, not simply at the level of theme, but also at the level of form. This struggle constitutes a shared consciousness among Asia Pacific American writers, a shared commitment to inviting other connections into food discourse, beyond those called into popular circulation. Formal innovation – as in the didactic, pedagogical quality of *The Fifth Book of Peace* – enables works to comment upon the very practice of reading, or consuming, food narratives. These works self-consciously draw attention to the way food writings are read in order to unsettle habits and assumptions embedded in popular food culture.

Turning the discussion now to *The Fifth Book of Peace*, I highlight the text's formal and thematic innovations by considering how food shifts significance when the Ah Sings' move; how Wittman seeks to build Hawaiian culinary prowess through a fishing excursion; and how the excursion produces the less-than-conclusive results. Kingston's narrative of new beginnings explores the possibilities of locating fresh ways to articulate the relationship between Asia Pacific subjects and food. Wittman's discoveries, as I will elaborate, do not answer the question of how to adapt; they complicate the questions further. Indeed, complicating the culinary seems, in the end, to be the story's very aim.

From the very moments of leaving San Francisco, the Ah Sings wrestle with the question of how their food will change, and how they will adjust their eating habits in kind. By this time, their culinary habits are already shifting. Wittman's wife Taña initiates this process of questioning when she prepares the family's first meal in Hawai'i, atop Wittman's Gold Mountain trunk. This transitional moment indicates not only what the family ate, but also signals that their food habits are in the midsts of transformation: "Taña set the Gold Mountain trunk for dining. With careful artist's hands, she arranged their three plates, three cups, and three sets of utensils, and the food: Sacramento almonds from the plane, dried fruit, a loaf of San Francisco sourdough bread from SFO, candy bars, and water with Tang crystals" (89). The description of this particular Ah Sing meal comes loaded with the specific geographical origins of each food item. While it may not be surprising that the almonds and sourdough be associated with Sacramento and San

Francisco, what is distinct and self-conscious about this description is that “the plane” and “SFO” (San Francisco International airport) are likewise treated as geographical sources. Food’s connection to a single place is loosened here, and shown also to belong to transitional spaces of airports and planes. Instead of characterizing this first meal in conventional geographic terms – “California food” or “Hawaiian food” – the narrator insists on recognizing the meal’s airplane origins. The self-conscious qualification of the meal as such predicts more negotiations related to eating once the Ah Sings settle. Along with their physical transition to Hawai`i, in other words, the narrative makes clear that their experiences of food are also in transition – they come to Hawai`i bearing food habits formed in San Francisco, but register the need for adjusting these habits according to their new location.

Wittman accepts the challenge with zeal; and he sets out immediately to discover how to adjust his food habits. For Wittman the challenge is less about understanding the necessity of changing his ideas about food, and more about *how* to change them. He explores this in a series of wanderings around the island – some leading to moments of clarity, but many leading to miscommunication, confusion, and general discomfort. The depiction of such varied experiences with food, I suggest, highlights Kingston’s critique of essentializing food discourses. Instead of a narrative in which the relation between Wittman, the Asia Pacific American subject, and food is neatly captured in a culinary symbol, Kingston makes clear that this relation is much more complex. Wittman, therefore, makes for a model of developing a more critical awareness of food – one that is most concerned with allowing processes of discovery and change.

Though he is unaware of it at the outset, Wittman’s fishing journey provides the ultimate challenge in his quest to discover his new food habits. Black Pete, Wittman’s neighbor and a skilled fisherman, invites him on a fishing excursion, with the intention of collecting fish, but also of encouraging Wittman to “dive deeply into Hawai`i” (150), and to steep in local ritual and work. Approaching the excursion as an outsider and a new participant, Wittman relies on Black Pete as his fishing guide: “A school of silver-gray fish streamed by. Pete followed them, and Wittman followed him. This is hunting” (151). As Wittman tries his hand at hunting, a host of competing concerns crash upon him: how to reconcile the relationship between humans and fish, how to provide food for one’s family, how to be comfortable with the taste of the fish, and how to participate in a new culture. These reflections introduce unexpected, at times jarring nuances to Wittman’s experience of participating in a new food culture. Focusing intensely on unexpected nuances, the work debunks the notion that the Asia Pacific American subject’s experience is reducible to a set of predictable tropes or easy connections.

Wittman’s first food-related concern is the question of the fish: presences to be respected in this new environment, but also bodies for human consumption. Thinking about his relation to fish, Wittman finds tension between his connection with another creature, and his desire to hunt: “A blowfish came toward him, blew up round and spiny, and squirted away. Our human relationship to other creatures: We try to get close to them, and they recede. We’re always catching up to them, and they move away. We have to shoot them to get them to stay still” (151). Here, Wittman’s observation of the human inability to come close to fish, except through forceful means, suggests hesitation to kill – an attitude that clashes with his desire to hunt like a Hawaiian fisherman. Instead of resolving this dilemma for Wittman, however, Kingston preserves the tension, even as

Wittman ultimately attacks the fish: “Another puffer came right at Wittman, looked at him out of round eyes and made an oh-round mouth, and puffed itself up into a spiny round ball. A target. Wittman shot it – in its side when it turned about. Black Pete worked it off the spear and put it in his bag, laughing at the puny catch” (151).

Wittman’s frustrations spring from his deepening connection with the fish. While Wittman previously notes his inability to get close to a puffer fish, here the creature “came right at Wittman,” and “looks at him,” an unusual moment of inter-species connection. As his empathy for the fish grows, and as the conflict within him peaks, Wittman gives in to human tendency and shoots to make the fish stay still. Wittman’s troubles do not end there. To top off the anxiety in this scene, Black Pete makes great light of Wittman’s skills as a fisherman. Despite his small success, he has largely failed as a fisherman. In all, Wittman’s thinking with regard to food is a veritable mix of desire to partake of local fishing culture, of guilt for brutalizing the fish, and frustration for being a beginner without skill. Fishing in this story pulls up problems and contradictions which might very well be left out of a tale in which fishing represents the successful breach of cultural difference.

Food becomes even more complicated when Wittman brings back the fish to his family, and here Kingston makes certain to show his attempt to integrate his new knowledge for the benefit of his loved ones. When Wittman and Black Pete take the fish back to their families for a dinner together, Wittman must add to his consideration of food his family’s taste. While the gathering of the fish and Wittman’s experience carry a sense of discovery, the momentum is trumped when Taña and ‘Ehukai, their son, do not fully register the difficulty underlying Wittman’s fishing effort. Instead Taña and ‘Ehukai fixate on the descriptions of how to eat the blowfish, which Black Pete’s wife, Mary, offers up at the dinner table:

The blowfish had deflated; the spear popped it. Mary explained, “Black Pete one expert taking out the poison gland. Folks eat da kine, and die in torture but. It tastes so ‘ono, worth it. You like try?” Taña and ‘Ehukai said no blowfish please, thank you. But Wittman had killed it, he better eat it. Showing his family how round and cute the puffer blowfish had been, Wittman put the backs of his hands on his own puffed-out cheeks, opened his eyes wide, and waggled his fingers like fins. He shouldn’t have killed it. It didn’t taste so ‘ono-licious. (154)

Despite Wittman’s role in procuring blowfish for the meal, and despite his own resolve to eat it, Taña and ‘Ehukai refuse the fish because they cannot reconcile the risk of ingesting poison. Even when attempting to warm Taña and ‘Ehukai to the fish – to make it seem less strange and unpalatable by describing “how round and cute” it had been – he still ends up seeming like less than a skilled fisherman. The story only reinforces his guilt at slaughtering the blowfish. This guilt even compromises its taste. What remains is a cute fish which is dead, and not “ono” at all; and there is not one person convinced that Wittman is on his way to becoming a fine fisherman of Hawai`i.

If Wittman embarks on the fishing excursion in an attempt to learn how to adapt his food habits in Hawai`i, his experiences do not lead to easy answers. Instead what is elucidated is a field of food-related factors, a collection of loose ends to conclude a search for the ideal food habit. Ending the search on such tenuous terms places more emphasis on the search itself, rather than the outcome. By debunking the idea that an ideal food habit can be achieved, Kingston suggests that asking questions about food is

the way one can be most critical and politically responsible. For Wittman, the relation to food is qualified by multiple desires balanced by multiple realities: the desire to integrate with local food culture in Hawai`i, for instance, balanced against the reality of being a mainlander who brings a set of already-existing tastes and habits. Or the desire to experience new environments, balanced against the reality of dealing with dead bodies. However contradictory these impulses, Kingston shows that each plays a crucial role in how the subjects relate to food. Rather than relying on predictable, desirable narratives of reconciliation to convey the Asia Pacific American subject's relation to food, a more critical understanding of this relation registers and even multiplies points of tension and incommensurability.

Though he fails to seamlessly integrate into Hawaiian food culture, Wittman does find himself in quite a different place from when he first departed San Francisco. Showing the process of Wittman's questioning and change, and the critical sensibility it yields, I suggest, is Kingston's main goal. In depicting the family's passage over the Pacific, Kingston calls out the need and possibility for broader visions of food that extend beyond the local and the familiar. Wittman's culinary process also relates to his broader sense of identity as an Asia Pacific American. It is fitting, after all, that Wittman hails from California's Bay Area, the historic site of Asia Pacific American political resistance, but then departs from it. By sending Wittman, the eater, into the world and imagining the negotiations involved in adapting food habits, Kingston invites a revisioning of food discourses, and, at the same time, a revisioning of Asia Pacific identity, that focuses on processes of self reflection and eagerness to encounter anew. Through Wittman we learn how to keep the culinary self, critical— an active question of what one eats, and how.

Notes

¹ *Eating Identities*.

² For additional discussion of the culinary in Asia Pacific American literature, see works by Rosalía Baena, Monica Chui, Jeffrey Partridge, Eileen Chia-Ching Fung, Nicole Waller, Wilfried Raussert, and others.

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