Marshaling an impressive group of historians of medicine and nutrition, Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell’s edited volume, *Moral Foods: The Construction of Nutrition and Health in Modern Asia*, provides a comprehensive analysis of the modern history of nutrition and foods in Asia. At the heart of the enterprise is the understanding of how foods became variably perceived as “good,” “bad,” and “(im)moral.” Most scholars in the volume contend that experts (primarily nutritionists) and governmental actors (primarily colonialists and indigenous reformers) were critical in shaping discourses on the nature of foods and nutrition in Asia. Like many other intellectuals and officials, their desires were motivated by a search for wealth, power, and autonomy. Medical expertise, much of it imported from the West to Asia, became the bedrock of the social and cultural construction of moral food.

Part 1 of the volume explores how food became “good.” Francesca Bray examines how the state and society played a critical role in the valorization of rice in modern Japan and Malaysia, the latter particularly shaped by ethnic considerations. Wendy Fu shows how Chinese nutritionists challenged the modernist and Western promotion of milk by “querying which milk,” paving the way for the valorization of soymilk as an alternative (p. 60). Izumi Nakayama reveals that nutritionists played only a partial role in the valorization of breastmilk in Japan; the discourse surrounding breastmilk emphasized even more societal pressure for women to perform their roles as good wives and wise mothers in a modernizing nation. Michael Liu explores how the transnational support for nutritious food for Chinese soldiers during the Second World War was a result of the “complicated process of negotiation between Chinese dietary tradition, socioeconomic hardship, and Western biomedical criteria in building a modern state and a healthy Chinese body” (p. 90).

Part 2 of the volume explores how food became “bad.” David Arnold explores how British colonial authorities deemed foods bad in relation to their perception of the “broader social and materi-
al conditions of India that made the recourse to such deficient or harmful foods necessary” (p. 112). Tae-Ho Kim explores how vitamin B-deficient white rice in colonial Korea became valorized in modern South Korea. Kim takes a comparative and global approach in situating the growth of rice consumption with the fall of wheat and barley consumption in South Korea over time. Tatsuya Mitsuda explores the denigration of Japanese-style confectionery in modern Japan in favor of Western confectionery due to the “strong presence of animal-derived ingredients such as milk, eggs, and butter” (p. 150). Yet many Japanese, especially children, continue to patronize Japanese-style confectioneries, rejecting a biomedical and reductionist approach toward sweets. Robert Peckham explores how British colonial authorities justified their active intervention in slaughterhouses and other institutions to prevent “bad” meat and milk in Hong Kong.

Part 3 of the volume explores how food became “moral.” Regarding tea, Lawrence Zhang argues that “the discourse on the healthfulness of tea only changed decisively starting in the late nineteenth century, and this change is associated with the rise of scientific understanding of how food and drink influence the human body” (p. 202). Angela Leung discusses how vegetarianism became classified as immoral in the 1920s with the emerging discourse by nation-minded nutritionists who saw meat avoidance as harmful to the Chinese body. Volker Scheid analyzes the moralizing of Chinese medicine and dietetics in the mid-nineteenth century through the “writings of Fei Boxiong, as much as those of Manfred Porkert and his students” in moments of perceived crisis in modern China (p. 257). Hilary Smith explores how the construction of lactose intolerance in contemporary China came at the heels of both the period of long disinterest in cow’s milk in most of modern Chinese history by the Maoist state and the more recent history of reform-era state promotion of milk as critical to Chinese nutrition.

Most essays are deeply contextual and well researched. Leung and Caldwell’s introduction provides an excellent and concise overview of the importance of the volume. Two essays in the volume stand out in their approaches and findings. Kim’s comparative analysis highlights the importance of broader contingencies, such as how the trauma of the Japanese colonial period in rationing food, the excesses of the American export of wheat in South Korea, and Korean enthusiasm for green revolution helped to reverse earlier stigmas against white rice in Korea, dampening alternative consumption of barley and wheat. Smith’s longue durée approach reveals that Chinese eaters “rely on multiple sources of dietary advice, some of which contradict each other”; this exposes the long historical process and outcomes of moralizing, which complicates Chinese attitudes toward milk (p. 279).

Several essays highlight future research opportunities. For example, Kim’s and Smith’s pieces, alongside those by Arnold and Peckham, raise the critical importance of colonialism and semi-colonialism in shaping the morality of foods in the region, particularly in areas not as well covered in the volume, including Japanese Taiwan and French Indochina. Additionally, Zhang’s chapter on the healthfulness of tea—while to some degree overdetermined when articulating its epistemological shift—raises the critical question of how overconsumption of foods can shape perception of its healthiness. Zhang highlights the modernist intervention of scientific discourses in making tea drinking “healthful,” in contrast to the abundance of warnings of excessive tea drinking in the premodern period. While Zhang is correct in stating that premodern scholars (particularly Ming scholars) noted that excessive drinking of tea was unhealthy (in line with the general concept that excesses and deficiencies are problematic in classical Chinese medicine), as James Benn and others point out, a greater acknowledgment that many Song dynasty intellectuals thought that drinking the appropriate amount of tea was healthful might
provide a more balanced perception of the premodern history of tea.\[1\] Moreover, a few popular writers and physicians in contemporary China and Taiwan have begun warning against the overconsumption of tea, drawing on longstanding ideas that excess consumption of tea can be dangerous.\[2\] Zhang’s chapter, however, does raise a critical question of how the quantity of food shaped its perception of morality and health, especially with the growing research on consumption and the levels of obesity in rapidly developing China and other Asian countries.\[3\] Zhang’s essay points out the need to investigate more on whether trends of overconsumption shape the perception of moral foods in the region.

In sum, *Moral Foods* provides a critical window into how foods became “moral” beyond a narrow focus on the history of nutrition. Cosmological underpinnings of classical medicine, evolving consumer culture and anxiety over modernity, and the (colonializing) state-society relationship in Asia all contribute to the authors’ analyses and move beyond simply unpacking the discourse of nutritionists, federal guidelines, and pharmaceutical interventions. Scholars of nutrition, East Asian modernity, and food will find this volume helpful, fascinating, and thought provoking.

Notes


