

Review of Chinese Menu: The History, Myths, and Legends Behind Your Favorite Foods

Why I Chose It: This beautiful book, so elaborately decorated and evocative of Asian culture, caught my eye even before I read the title. I practically could smell the soup held by the smiling young lady at the center of the cover while blue dragons and Chinese takeout containers pulled me further towards the title. As someone who has taught both English Language Arts and Social Studies, I was immediately attracted to this nonfiction work, a compilation of history, myths, and folklore which is aligned with Social Studies standards for Ancient Civilizations. Myths and folklore also are taught in grades 6-8 English Language Arts classes to provide a foundation for literature studies in high school. “Chinese Menu: The History, Myths, and Legends Behind Your Favorite Food” thus is perfect for both content areas. It also features recipes and even a discussion of how foodways have shifted over time in response to geographic region, economics, and cultural taste. In the final analysis, this is a well thought out and illustrated book of cultural foodways and manners.

What I liked about it: Lin serves up the book as a feast of stories and a history set in a literary Chinese restaurant. Even the table of contents is formatted like a Chinese menu, a great way to organize key components of the text including the author’s note, endnote, bibliography and index. Essential cultural and Social Studies questions were made about the distinction between American Chinese and Chinese American and between stories, embellishments, and facts. The work also included a map of China with its regions, an illustrated timeline of Chinese dishes, and of course Chinese calligraphy. The practical, functional diagrams inserted throughout the book such as for Chopsticks Taboos, Tea Etiquette, and Street Foods were another delightful element so needed for modern life skills development. These illustrations made the myths come alive.

How teachers can use this book: Students can be challenged to think of a favorite snack, beverage, or other food they especially like and explain why they are favorites, detailing whether packaging, taste or advertising had a hand in their appeal. They then can research such marketing to understand how their perception of these foods is shaped by it. Teachers can do a short pre-survey to see how much the students actually know about Chinese foods including questions about whether fortune cookies are authentically Chinese, what are the actual ingredients in Chop Suey, are desserts part of Chinese cuisine, and how did Chinese food become popular in the United States. Their initial assumptions can be checked after reading the book. Students also can choose some of the wonderful myths and embellished stories Lin provides to rephrase them as dialogue or redraw them as graphic narratives. They might extend the adventures of Lin’s mythic characters, situating them for instance in a local Chinese restaurant or takeout place.

Lin raises and reflects on the issue of racism against the Chinese at various points in American history and even more recently during the Covid outbreak. Students can research these periods

and see how anti-Chinese legislation influenced the Chinese menu and restaurant industry. Moreover, Lin talks about how authors embellish myths with their own stylistic features, differentiating between facts and stories. Obviously, this is an important distinction to discuss with students especially given that many fictions are being presented as facts today. Finally, it is key to note that Lin in authoring this compendium of cuisine is also highlighting how Asian Americans and by extension people of all cultures can affirm their heritage through celebratory and informative storytelling.

This book is an inspirational menu filled with stories, history, myths, and legends that invite all readers to sample items on the menu and use them to create their own culturally affirming menus. To that future.

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