



Culture Notes

Chinese Menu:

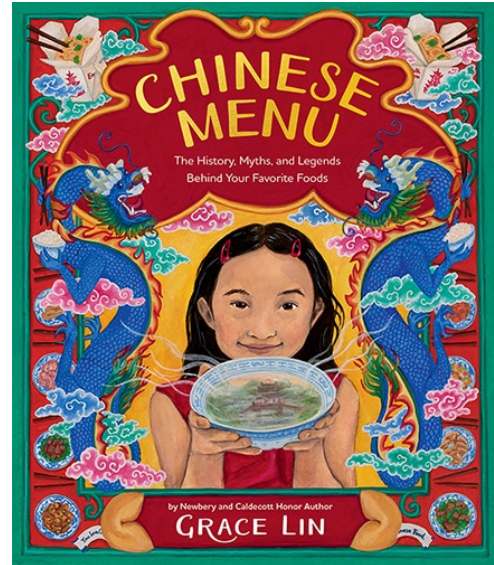
The History, Myths, and Legends Behind Your Favorite Foods
by Grace Lin

Little, Brown and Company Books for Young Readers, 2023

Nonfiction, set in China

2023 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / Middle School Literature

Grace Lin's *Chinese Menu: The History, Myths, and Legends Behind Your Favorite Foods* is more than a culinary history; it is a classroom-ready resource that demystifies Chinese culture through the dishes students may already know or love. It begins with an exploration of chopsticks—an essential eating tool whose stories anchor the book in everyday Chinese cultural practice. This culture note explores how *Chinese Menu* weaves Chinese history from ancient times to the present, integrating ethnicity, migration, religion, and festival traditions.



First, *Chinese Menu* moves beyond stereotypes to present Chinese culture as dynamic, diverse, and shaped by both ethnic multiplicity and internal migration. Too often, Chinese culture in U.S. classrooms is reduced to a handful of iconic symbols—dragons, chopsticks, Lunar New Year—without context about the people and movements that forged it. Lin's book counters this by emphasizing that while the Han people constitute the majority, China's multicultural tapestry is woven with contributions from numerous ethnic groups, including the Uyghurs, the Tibetans, the Mongols, and many others. Internal migration has long served to unify these groups into a cohesive cultural whole.

Familiar foods become windows into this process: for example, Lin's exploration of Hot and Sour Soup (Suan La Tang) traces its roots to a soup called Hu La Tang from Henan Province, explaining how "as people from Henan began to migrate to other provinces, they, of course, brought their recipes with them (Lin 106)." In Xi'an and Sichuan, local tastes and ingredients transformed the dish—Sichuan's love of bold flavors made it spicier, while a distinctive sourness was added to replace the original meat, renaming it Suan La Tang. This journey illustrates how internal migration drives culinary and cultural fusion, turning regional dishes into shared national heritage.



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Similarly, Lin’s discussion of dumplings reveals a key cultural connection. The shape of dumplings resembles ancient Chinese gold ingots, which ties to Lunar New Year prosperity rituals. “Sometimes families would even hide a coin inside one of the dumplings to bring extra luck to the family member who received it (Lin 70).” What’s more, dumplings have distinct regional variations—*jiaozi* in the north and wontons in the south. These differences further reflect China’s geographic and ethnic diversity.

Another strength of *Chinese Menu* for K–12 teaching is its focus on stories—rather than abstract facts—that weave together history, religion, and food, making complex cultural concepts accessible to young learners. A central religious influence Lin explores is Buddhism, which has profoundly shaped Chinese culture since its introduction during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE). Lin ties Buddhism to iconic culinary traditions, such as the origin of tea: she recounts the legend of the famous Indian Buddhist monk Bodhidharma, known in China as Da Mo, who is credited with introducing Chan (Zen) Buddhism to China. After meditating for seven years, he grew drowsy and tore off his eyelids to stay awake; tea plants sprouted from the spot where his eyelids fell, linking tea to Buddhist discipline and mindfulness.

Buddhism also informs dishes like Buddha’s Delight and Buddha Jumps Over the Wall or Buddha’s Temptation. Buddha’s Delight, a vegetarian dish popular worldwide and a staple of American Chinese restaurants since the 1960s, is deeply rooted in Buddhist principles of non-violence. In China, it is traditionally eaten on the first day of the Lunar New Year, symbolizing purity and new beginnings. Buddha Jumps Over the Wall, by contrast, is an elaborate, refined stew—so named because its aroma was said to be so enticing that even Buddha, who has renounced earthly pleasures, would be tempted to jump over a wall to taste it. This playful legend bridges Buddhist ideals with culinary creativity, showing how religion and food intersect in Chinese culture.

Crucially, *Chinese Menu* extends this exploration of migration to the global stage, tracing how Chinese food evolved as it traveled to the United States—topics that



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resonate deeply with diverse U.S. classrooms. Lin dedicates significant space to this cross-cultural journey, using iconic dishes to illustrate how Chinese immigrants adapted their culinary traditions while shaping American cuisine in return.

A vivid example is Chop Suey, whose origins are tied to the 1848 Gold Rush, when Chinese immigrants sailed to America seeking their fortunes. In 1896, when the Qing-Dynasty Viceroy Li Hongzhang visited the U.S., Chop Suey was falsely reported as the “national dish of China,” a misconception that helped popularize it among Americans.

Similarly, Lin demystifies two well-known dishes: Fortune Cookies and General Tso’s chicken. Fortune Cookies were influenced by Japanese cuisine and later adapted by Chinese immigrants in California. General Tso’s chicken was invented by a Taiwanese chef in New York. It was specifically tailored to fit American taste for sweet, crispy and savory flavors. These revelations are eye-opening for students, who may assume “ethnic food” is static and “authentic” to a single place.

In conclusion, *Chinese Menu: The History, Myths, and Legends Behind Your Favorite Foods* is an invaluable resource for K–12 educators teaching Asian culture, thanks to its rich integration of Chinese history—from ancient Han-Dynasty physicians and Buddhist traditions to modern migration and global cultural exchange—through the lens of food. Its focus on relatable dishes, engaging stories, and themes of ethnic unity, migration, religion, and festivals makes it accessible to students across grade levels, while its emphasis on diversity and resilience helps counter stereotypes. In a world where cultural understanding is more important than ever, *Chinese Menu* reminds us that food is not just sustenance—it tells a story of people, history, and connection, waiting to be shared as a bridge between cultures.

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