In her new book, *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A taste of empire*, Cecilia Leong-Salobir traces the eating habits of British expatriates in India, Singapore and Malaysia between 1858 and 1963. There are two central, interrelated arguments which the author puts forward: firstly, that expatriates’ food tastes and habits developed from their reliance on indigenous household servants for food preparation; and secondly, that servants often played a crucial and active role in determining the colonists’ food choices.

These two arguments contradict much of the (admittedly rather scant) literature on colonial kitchens and foodways. Whereas many scholars have interpreted British expatriates’ food choices as a means of separating coloniser from colonised, Leong-Salobir contends that because colonists ate meals made from local ingredients, adapted to local climates and prepared by their servants, they typically consumed a combination of British, local and hybridised dishes. In the expatriates’ dependence on domestic help for food procurement and preparation Leong-Salobir also recognises an inherent contradiction in British attitudes towards their servants: contemporary racial thought prescribed the indigenous people as dirty, dishonest and intellectually inferior to the British, yet the colonists trusted their servants with one of their most basic human needs, food.

Leong-Salobir supports her claims with research garnered from a variety of primary sources including cookbooks and domestic guides, memoirs and travelogues, and a questionnaire distributed to ex-colonists. What becomes apparent throughout the book is that cookbooks and household manuals constitute a valuable medium through which contemporary attitudes towards food, hygiene and even gender and race relations can be determined. In its analysis of these hitherto under-examined sources, Leong-Salobir’s book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of British colonial life.

The book references the writings of many expatriates, both male and female, on issues related to food consumption and preparation. These snippets provide a fascinating insight into the language, customs and attitudes of the time and bring the voices of the people about whom Leong-Salobir is writing to the fore. In addition, the abundant quotations serve to make what could otherwise have been a fairly dense book accessible to readers, particularly as, read from a twenty-first century perspective, many of them are humorous. For example, in referring to the fact that expatriates living in the colonies attempted to replicate the culinary traditions and table etiquette of the British upper class, Leong-Salobir charmingly cites one author who instructs her readers to give their dishes French names to add sophistication to the menu (p.52). Such practices were intended to help colonists distinguish themselves as the elite of the new society, yet seem incredibly snobbish and out-of-touch with the reality of life in the colonies to many of today’s readers. In fact, as Leong-Salobir points out again and again, expatriates’ attempts to establish distance between the colonist and the colonised were
particularly futile in foodways; in relying on servants to prepare the food and in consuming Asian dishes, expatriates actually inverted their own structures of segregation.

*Food Culture in Colonial Asia* proposes new ways of looking at the colonial pasts of India, Singapore and Malaysia. Its conclusions challenge many widely-held assumptions about colonist-colonised relations and its primary sources provide an endearingly human balance to the book’s scholarly material. Particularly appreciated by this reviewer was the chapter devoted entirely to curry, which includes an analysis of the word’s etymology, the ‘appropriation’ of the dish by colonists, and the commercialisation of curry powder. I would recommend this book to anyone with an interest in personal narrative, colonial histories and, well, food.

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