

## Research Matters

# Modernizing Bananas

## Cookbooks, Literature, and Mass Entertainment

by Helen Huang, Instructor, Department of English

**M**y interdisciplinary project, “Modernizing Bananas: Cookbooks, Literature, and Mass Entertainment,” analyzes representations of the banana from multiple cultural sources to explicate the ways that Americans fashion it as a cultural artifact. I thank CSWS for sponsoring my research. On May 25, 2022, I gave a works-in-progress talk to discuss how the United Fruit Company used various marketing strategies to modernize the banana as a US staple fruit.

Researchers often use a modifier “octopus” to describe the ways that the United Fruit Company (UFC) has monopolized the economy in Central and Latin Americas from land, agriculture, transportation, etc. My project, however, switches the direction back to the US, elaborating how cookbooks and marketing tactics help transform the banana as a cultural artifact and staple fruit in the US food history. In fact, the US has imported bananas from Central and Latin Americas since the late nineteenth century. Once the supply cannot continue when Panama disease seriously hit the banana plantations in Central America in the 1920s, Americans have no bananas to eat like the song “Yes! We Have No Bananas” described.

If the US heavily relies on overseas supply of bananas, why has the banana dominated Americans’ fruit memory over the twentieth century? Here I argue that the UFC marketing strategies have “modernized” the banana from a tropical crop to a US “native” fruit so to best maximize its business profit. As my book title shows, I contend that “modernizing bananas” fabricates bananas as a cultural artifact by obscuring the exploitative plantation history this tropic fruit carries and inscribing new characteristics and imaginings in it. These “new” identities could be American womanhood, Caribbean tourism, or imperial expansion.

*A Short History of the Banana and a Few Recipes for Its Use* was a small cookbook published by the United Fruit Company in 1904 to promote this exotic fruit to the US consumers. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United Fruit Company had its own department of education, which was responsible for publish-

ing cookbooks or guidebooks to market their fruits and tourism business. This cookbook first introduces the plantation history of the banana in Central America and

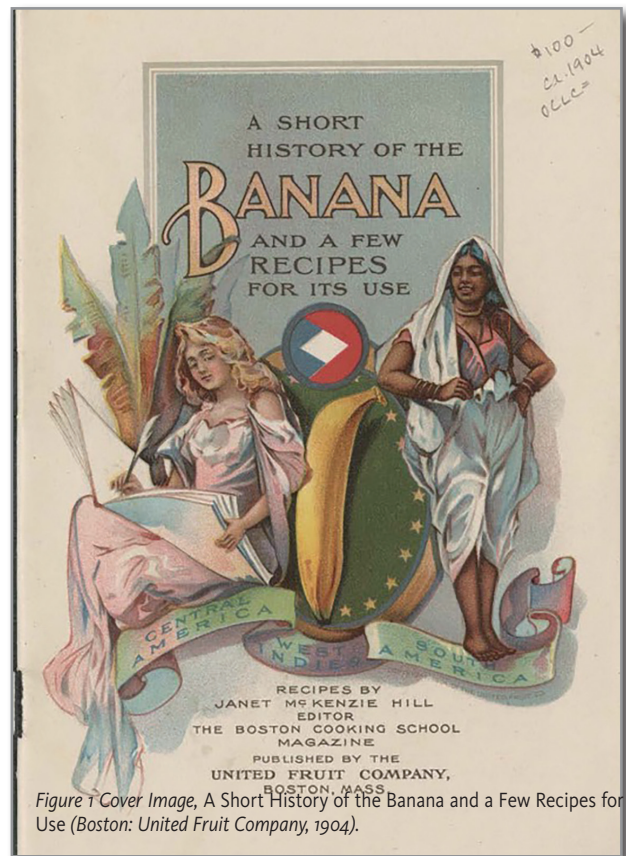


Figure 1 Cover Image, *A Short History of the Banana and a Few Recipes for Its Use* (Boston: United Fruit Company, 1904).

then presents recipes to teach readers about how to use the banana in different dishes. At the beginning of the twentieth century, these light-weight cookbooks were popular and easy to be delivered to American families. Publishers and advertisers mailed their printed materials at a lower cost, and consumers received their subscriptions quickly and easily. The convenience of sending publications to American families increased the circulation rate of newspapers, mass-market magazines,



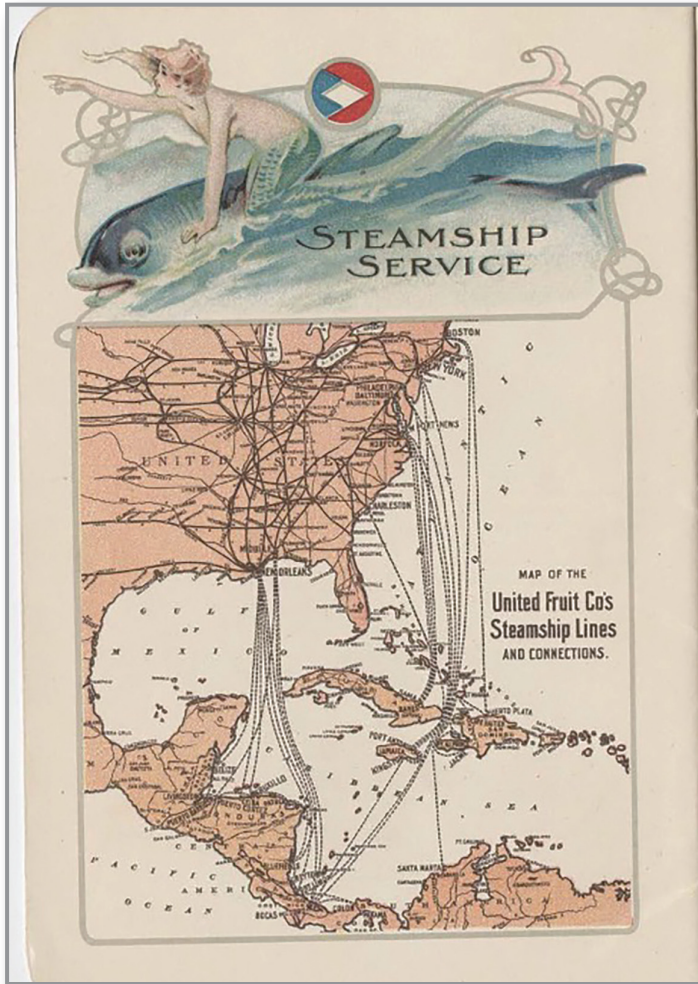


Figure 2 Advertisement for the UFC's steamship line to the Caribbean, from *A Short History of the Banana and a Few Recipes for Its Use* (Boston: United Fruit Company, 1904).

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and even cookbooks. For example, readers could obtain their own copy of *A Short History of the Banana and a Few Recipes for Its Use* if they sent “10¢ in stamps” to “A. W. Preston, President, 131 State Street, Boston” (29). However, when we are surprised at how easy American readers, especially for American middle-class housewives, received this cookbook, we cannot ignore how the US national discourse was represented in the illustrations.

The first illustration in the cookbook (see Figure 1) translates the imbalanced power dynamics between two Americas. A banana, crowned with the trademark of the United Fruit Company, stands on the banner labeled “West Indies.” Two women flank the banana; while a blonde female wearing a regal dress represents America, a darker-skinned woman symbolizes Central America, South America, and the West Indies. This image epitomizes how the US imagined Latin America—as the indolent and sensational Tropics. By comparison, people in North America have lighter skin and are better educated, since the blonde female holds her quill to the page of a book. Latin America is portrayed as a smiling,



Figure 3 Advertisement for the UFC's steamship line to the Caribbean, from *A Short History of the Banana and a Few Recipes for Its Use* (Boston: United Fruit Company, 1904).

standing, bare-footed woman of color. She holds no pen and reads no book, as if she were incapable of accessing knowledge and civilization. This racial rhetoric conforms to cultural stereotypes of the South as less advanced and slower-paced. It satisfies the Northern white fantasy that the South is a primitive haven still in a state of natural innocence. These stereotypical perspectives, however, subsume Latin America, which provides the US with raw materials and is vulnerable to economic exploitation, under the colonial dominance of the United Fruit Company. The consumption drive naturalized the way that Latin America was characterized as a supplier of raw produce for US buyers. The soft brushwork, gentle curves, and bright colors concealed the exploitative reality of how the banana was produced for, transported to, and retailed in the US market. Instead, the image transformed the act of consuming a banana into an enjoyment responsive to American consumer society and citizenship. The logo of the United Fruit Company, reminiscent of the US flag with its red, white, and blue design, exemplifies consumption as an American characteristic and signifies the economic control this transnational business exercised over its colonies.

*A Short History of the Banana and a Few Recipes for Its Use*  
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# Chinese Birth Tourism in Canada and the United States

by Arafaat A. Valiani, Associate Professor, Department of History

Since the end of World War II, women have travelled to the United States and Canada to give birth. Taking advantage of the Citizenship Act of Canada or the 14th Amendment to Constitution in the United States, these newborns acquired Canadian or American citizenship. In the United States, these children were pejoratively referred to as “anchor babies” and the term was invoked to stir controversy, usually around elections, projecting the image of countless numbers of foreigners giving birth in the United States purely to acquire American citizenship.

Since 2015, Chinese mothers and their families have travelled to Canada or the United States to give birth, referred to as birth tourism. Observers discussing the phenomenon identify the acquisition of foreign citizenship as the primary motivation for Chinese birth tourism in Canada or the United States. But isn't it possible that there is much more to childbirth and migration than instrumental gain?

With the support of a CSWS faculty research grant, I was able to coauthor “Reproduction as a Form of Aspiration: Decolonizing Medicalized Childbirth and the Case of Chinese Birth Tourism in the United States and Canada” with Brandon Folse, Ph.D. candidate in sociology. In this article, we draw upon feminist writing on reproduction to suggest that, indeed, childbirth is associated with larger “questions of state, race, freedom, individuality, and economic prosperity [which connect] the micrological with the transnational via embodiment” (Murphy 2012). But how might Chinese birth tourism be associated with these larger questions and why at this particular juncture in time?

One answer we found has to do with aspirations on behalf a new middle-class in China. After China initiated economic reforms which embraced a market economy around the 2000s, a wealthy new middle-class emerged with aspirations for different kinds of experiences (Otis 2012; Naftali 2016). Not only do these experiences have to do with capitalist production and consumption but also health.

In post-reform China, mothers we interviewed told us how challenging it was to have a natural childbirth, or have an epidural. Though they articulated these wishes to their (mostly male) doctors, their wishes were not always



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respected during childbirth in the new, yet under-staffed, private hospitals which increasingly dotted the landscape of Chinese cities. Medicalized childbirth in a modern hospital, something that many among a previous generation of mothers in the global North disavowed as disempowering, was a desired privilege for the Chinese mothers to whom we spoke. And as such, giving birth in a hospital in Canada or the United States seemed to offer Chinese mothers the prospect that the assertion of their agency in childbirth would be respected.

There is also a deeper cultural and historical story behind contemporary Chinese birth tourism to Canada or the United States. Writing

about mothers in China traveling to give birth dates as far back to that of the prominent doctor Wang Chong (27-91 CE) who wrote about the sojourn of pregnant women in Jiangnan who crossed rivers and forests, traveling far and in isolation. In the 20th century however, many mothers travelled to nearby villages, towns or even Taiwan or Hong Kong to avoid the One Child Policy which was imposed in the late 1970s after the Cultural Revolution in China. The Han tradition of “sitting the month,” involving a period of postpartum rest and recovery for the new mother, also contributed to contemporary birth tourism. Typically, a new mother would be attended by her in-laws during her month of recovery. In the 1970s, mothers traveling to Taiwan to give birth could “sit the month” in privately-owned and operated centers which offered them a commercialized iteration of the practice. ■

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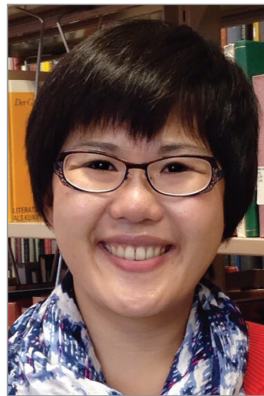
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*Use* also bears another promotional task, that is, the United Fruit Company tourist industry. At the end of this cookbook, there are three advertisement pages promoting the UFC's steamship lines to the Caribbean. The steamship lines, collectively nicknamed "The Great White Fleet," were designed to efficiently ship bananas to the US within one week and could ferry American tourists to the Caribbean for an exotic tropical vacation.

These advertisements sought to sell the idea of Caribbean travel. The top of the first advertisement page features a whimsical sketch of a mermaid with blond hair and white skin riding a blue dolphin on an azure ocean and pointing outside the frame of the advertisement, toward imagined adventure (see Figure 2). Underneath the image is a map recording the steamship routes operating between the United States and the greater Caribbean: some connect Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore to Havana, Kingston, or to Bocas del Toro, while some shorter routes operate between Bocas del Toro and Mobile or Galveston in the South. To American readers, this map implied the geographical distance between the US and the Caribbean Basin had been shortened, and that overseas travel to the Caribbean had become possible.

Taking a Caribbean cruise was meant to feel like an extension of their modern life, with ships "furnished throughout with a perfect system of electric lighting and steam heating," and "everything is done for the comfort and convenience of the passengers" (SHB 31). Thus, comfort and convenience became the biggest selling points of the United Fruit Company steamship service. At the turn of the century, according to the advertisement pictured in Figure 3, the United Fruit Company had at least seventy ships operating on the Caribbean Sea. These ships weighed an aggregated 110,000 tons and were designed for "every possible safety



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and convenience" (SHB 31). Under the blue sky, this white ship with the United Fruit Company's flag sails on a blue ocean with the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor receding into the distance. The colors on the advertisement suggest coolness, ocean breezes, and pleasure.

Amy Kaplan in "Manifest Domesticity" argues women's action in the domestic sphere in relation to the empire-making process. She further asserts: "[w]hen we contrast the domestic sphere with the market or political realm, men and women inhabit a divided social terrain, but when we oppose the domestic to the foreign, men and women become national allies against the alien, and the determining division is not gender but racial demarcations of otherness" (582). The UFC cookbook interwoven with Caribbean tourism advertisements shows how the domestic sphere has already intertwined with national and entrepreneur interests. Between the 1900 and the 1930, cookbooks and consumerism has commodified the banana into a daily need for American consumers. However, what they could not know was: the more the banana was sold to American families, the more economic exploitation people of Latin America were vulnerable. ■

*Helen Huang is an instructor of English. She received a 2020-21 CSWS faculty research grant for her project.*

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