CHINESE RESTAURANTS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF FOOD

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Master of Arts in the

Graduate School of the Ohio State University

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2004

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Chinese restaurants are often the most tangible representation of Chinese culture for non-Chinese people and for Chinese people, a visible forum for public expression of culture in arenas for limited ethnic expression. As a result, Chinese restaurants represent a contested site of negotiated symbols of ethnicity. Standards of authenticity are often used to judge a Chinese restaurant's quality but notions of authenticity about culture contain essentialist and static assumptions about what is traditional. However, traditions constantly change and adapt in response to several factors, economic feasibility being one of them. Chinese food is less monolithic but subject to a variety of regional and international influences. Contemporary restaurants in Columbus, Ohio speak of adaptation in the production of their food for general accessibility. Chinese restaurants must produce what sells well which then becomes known as the quintessential Chinese dish. Responses to surveys about Chinese restaurants taken by Ohio State University students show that many people do not seem to care about authenticity in Chinese food yet notions of authenticity are still maintained to describe what is "good" Chinese food.

Food carries intimate meaning for many societies and what one eats often carries symbolic value for social identity. Historically, eating at Chinese restaurants has maintained exotic imagery for non-Chinese patrons. It was greeted with suspicion yet the
consumer would be seen as an adventurer or exotic voyager. Survey responses by contemporary Ohio State University students still show glimmers of the historical exotification, but the definition of Chinese food is used not so much to describe the cuisine as much as it is a way to describe what is or is not American,

Chinese restaurant owners must tap into expectations of Chinese restaurants and its food and reproduce it in order to survive as a business. Restaurant owners often investigate other Chinese restaurants before opening their own to find out what is successful. Though the decorations in the restaurant contribute to the performance of an expected identity, they also represent unconscious displays of cultural identity. The ubiquity of Chinese restaurants has not yet allowed it to become "American" in mainstream culture, perhaps because of its propensity to exist in small family businesses rather than as large corporate chains of ethnic food such as Taco Bell. In the American context, Chinese restaurants continue to exist on an identity of foreign-ness which can allow for the definition of what is not foreign or what is to be considered American.
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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Comparative Studies
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapters:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Looking for Authentic Chinese Food</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Authenticity Issues</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Original Chinese Food</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Chinese Food in America</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Who Needs Authentic?</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Negotiating Identity and Americanization</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Chinese Food in the American Imagination</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Construing and Performing Identity</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 American Cuisine</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conclusion</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1972, Mark Pi moved to Chicago from Taiwan to work in a Chinese restaurant. Born in Korea to Chinese parents, he had been working in Chinese restaurants since he was fourteen years old. He had worked in several restaurants throughout Asia until a friend told him of an opportunity in the States. “I thought there was a lot of opportunity, land of opportunity. I thought, all over the street, you could pick up the gold around. Just like that. When you work hard, work real hard, and the American dreams come true.” An excellent chef himself, he wanted the opportunity to open his own restaurant that could serve the best Chinese food in America. He dreamed of being able to open several restaurants across the United States. “I’d like to open one in every city, internationally, all over. Just like a McDonald’s, a Wendy’s. They can do it, why not me?” In 1982, he opened the first of a series of fast food Chinese restaurants, “Mark Pi’s Express, Chinese Fast Food,” that would soon become known simply as “Mark Pi’s” throughout Ohio. Hiring executives from Wendy’s and McDonald’s and going on the advice of restaurant consultants, he was able to eventually open 77 Mark Pi’s at its peak in 1991. His secret to fast Chinese food? It’s in the sauce. Mark Pi pre-makes his sauces at a central kitchen and then ships them out weekly to each restaurant so that the cooking process each dish is

With his 77 restaurants, Mark Pi placed 77 more icons of Chinese-ness into the consciousness of Americans in a state with only 1.1 percent Asian and .3 percent Chinese (taken from www.census.gov).\textsuperscript{1} It was clearly not the number of ethnic Chinese living in Ohio that warranted 77 more Chinese restaurants in addition to pre-existing Chinese food establishments and it was obvious that Mark Pi was not aiming for ethnic Chinese as his target customer base.

The mere fact that Mark Pi could open even a fraction of the restaurants in his chain is not only a testament to his business acumen and his ability to read the American cultural landscape, but also to the phenomenon of Chinese restaurants in large and small towns across American. It presents interesting questions as to how and why such marked ethnic enterprises were able to gain widespread appeal.

How was Mark Pi able to fashion the sale and consumption of an ethnic cuisine into a multi-million dollar restaurant chain? In many ways, Ohio must have been ripe for the introduction of mass Chinese restaurants. In other ways, perhaps Ohio was not particularly amenable to Chinese style cuisine but Mark Pi somehow persuaded locals into perceiving Chinese food as friendly, accessible, yet new and tasty fare that they could eat again and again. Somehow, Pi successfully negotiated the sale and consumption of an ethnic entity in an American context.

\textsuperscript{1} Statistics are from the US Census 2000.
I open with Mark Pi’s narrative because it is but one story of how Chinese restaurants became part of the American landscape. Like many other Chinese restaurant owners, he was able to sustain a thriving business in a pre-dominantly white homogenous locale. He was even able to create a business chain that spanned several states. Although he eventually filed for bankruptcy, Mark Pi asserts that his reasons for closing were not for lack of business, but because they were growing so quickly that his current infrastructure could not support the growth and he could not hire enough people fast enough. Ironically, it was the demand for Chinese food rather than its lack that closed his restaurants.

Chinese restaurants are a ubiquitous phenomenon in the United States; they are not located only in the ethnic ghettos of Chinatowns but can be found from major metropolitan cities to the suburbs to some of the most isolated rural areas. Chinese restaurants have become so commonplace that it has become a familiar part of mainstream America, existing as an American cultural reference in movies, television shows, books, and jokes. For many people, the Chinese restaurant is very likely the most tangible or even the only representation of Chinese culture that non-Chinese people have.

As a window to Chinese culture, Chinese restaurants are not only in the business of selling food, it is also in the business of selling food as cultural representation. Restaurants are businesses, which means that in order to remain economically viable, they must provide a product that people must like well enough to pay for. In a restaurant, the product can be several things: a pleasing decor, commendable service, a dining experience, an educational experience, tasty food, or the right price. Whatever the reason,
a restaurant must negotiate the desires of the customers in their product in order to stay in business. Chinese restaurants therefore have a double burden of producing food that is appealing and edible to the customer yet expresses a sense of Chinese-ness at the same time. It must satisfy to varying degrees the expectations of ethnic Chinese identity for the consumer but also be an expressive cultural outlet for the Chinese owners as well.

For Chinese people, the Chinese restaurant can also be the most visible and often the only forum for public expression of culture and identity in spaces where there may be limited room for ethnic expression. These restaurants are sites of cultural interaction where Chinese people intermingle with other ethnicities in addition to their own. In this space, Chinese people construct and maintain a public display of identity for customers while conducting their everyday affairs with behavior that is to them, unmarked as cultural or ethnic. Its suggests that Chinese restaurants are negotiated symbols of ethnicity for they embody multiple identities that serve multiple purposes.

Thus, Chinese food and restaurants in the American context pose some interesting issues. To what extent is the expression of Chinese culture negotiated in Chinese restaurants? How do Chinese restaurants express their cultural identity as Chinese in a way that is unthreatening yet meets the expectations of its non-Chinese customers? Interestingly enough, Chinese restaurants have quietly become a part of the American landscape based on an identity of foreign-ness. What do Chinese restaurants mean and symbolize in the American context? I want to argue that Chinese restaurants in the United States are symbols of cultural negotiation and its products and physical environment are reflections of that negotiation. Chinese restaurants are a contested site,

In Chapter Two, I examine the role of authenticity in the representation of Chinese culture in Chinese restaurants. The authenticity of the offerings of Chinese restaurant is often subject to debate, yet what are the boundaries of authenticity and tradition? Producers of Chinese food may peddle the authenticity of their fare but is the food sold in Chinese restaurants authentic and does an authentic Chinese cuisine even exist? I discuss Chinese food in the context of its journey to an American context. How does the desire for authenticity alter the production of Chinese culture or the representation of culture? These questions illustrate some of the complexities of looking for authenticity in Chinese restaurants.

In Chapter Three, I look at how identity and Americanization are negotiated in Chinese restaurants. How is food linked with meaning and identity? I explore the ways in which Chinese food has been historically constructed in the American imagination and its lingering effects on present day interpretations and connotations of the cuisine. I also explore how is Chinese identity is constructed by Chinese restaurant owners through food and restaurant decor. What do these constructions indicate about the process in which an ethnicity becomes “American?” By what routes and on what grounds does a cuisine become considered American?

In my conclusion in Chapter Four, I discuss the dynamics of race construction and Chinese restaurants. If Chinese food is taken to represent an aspect of Chinese culture,
then what does its commodification indicate about the dynamics of constructing race, identity, the other, the self through the food produced in Chinese restaurants? How are Chinese restaurants situated in the American context?

For this thesis, I have limited myself to looking at contemporary restaurants local to the Ohio State University campus with references to Chinese restaurants in other parts of the United States. I visited several different Chinese restaurants and spoke with the owners/managers in varying degrees of depth in Columbus, Ohio. Although the restaurants I visited were all owned by people of Chinese descent, there are certainly Chinese restaurants that are not owned by Chinese people but they constitute a different story which I will not cover in this particular body of work. I also conducted surveys at Ohio State University that were taken by students in relevant classes or random students eating Chinese food at the university student union. Though restaurant “customers” or “patrons” or “Americans” can include people of all types of ethnic backgrounds, in this work it should be taken to mean the general public who are not of Asian descent unless otherwise noted.

Although I visited several restaurants in San Francisco and other cities and spoke with some of the owners or managers informally, they will only be referenced and will not be a significant part of this particular study. I have also limited my study to examine authenticity and Chinese identity in the restaurants. I have set these limitations in geography and topic in order to provide a workable boundary in a study that can easily be explored in several directions. This study is by no means exhaustive and I hope to
expand my research to include several areas I was not able to address. This thesis will hopefully provide some of the groundwork for a larger research project on Chinese restaurants.
CHAPTER 2

LOOKING FOR AUTHENTIC CHINESE FOOD

Authenticity is often a significant issue in determining the merits of a Chinese restaurant. Authentic, real, original, traditional, genuine: these are all words that are frequently used to describe an appetizing or legitimate Chinese restaurant. Authenticity is a benchmark for approval. The presence of primarily Chinese customers (or at least Asian faces as they are assumed to be Chinese) eating at the restaurant seems to be the litmus test, the logic being that such a restaurant caters to Chinese tastes because the Chinese patrons are presumed to know the difference between “real” Chinese food and the bastardized versions and they, of course, will choose to eat the “real” kind. Chinese restaurants with “too many” non-Asian customers are considered to be “Americanized.” However, this strategy of determining an authentic Chinese restaurant maintains several assumptions about Chinese cuisine and the dining choices of the Chinese restaurant customers. First, it assumes that the Chinese patrons agree that what they are consuming is in fact Chinese food whereas they may see it as something else, perhaps fusion cuisine or another type of cuisine entirely. Additionally, this strategy also assumes that the Chinese patrons are there to eat authentic Chinese food instead of, say, perhaps settling for just any meal. It also posits/locates the Chinese customer as the authority and arbiters
of Chinese cuisine with the knowledge rather than placing the burden of delineating authenticity on the restaurant chefs as the informers of authentic cuisine. Inherent in the idea of an authentic Chinese cuisine is the assumption it actually exists. However, there is no consensus on what exactly constitutes Chinese food, what defines its boundaries, what counts as “authentic” or “Americanized” or who has the authority to make the distinction. In this chapter, I explore the boundaries of authenticity and tradition. What are the ramifications of ascribing authenticity to abstractions such as food and culture? What is meant by authentic Chinese food? I look at how economic trends affect the production of Chinese cuisine and its effects on ideas of authenticity. What does authentic Chinese food mean for Americans and why is authenticity in food important to people?

2.1.AUTHENTICITY ISSUES

Folklorist Regina Bendix states that the crucial issues in authenticity lies not in asking “what is authenticity?” but “who needs authenticity and why?” (21). She writes that in the field of folklore, immigrants were often seen as a “potential vessel of genuine folk materials from the old country, coupled with the familiar folkloristic urge to save and document the authentic before the forces of modernity eradicated it” (206). Immigrant folklore was perceived as cultural heritage, stories of how immigrants lived in the old country before their lifestyles were adapted to a modern American environment. For Chinese culture in the United States (and for many other cultures not perceived as
standard or mainstream), questions of authenticity continue to appear in its representations. In conversations with non-Asian people about Chinese restaurants, it is striking how often the subject of authenticity comes up. Countless numbers of times, people relate their criteria for eating at an authentic-real-original-traditional-genuine Chinese restaurant: it must have mostly Chinese or Asian people eating there (or at least few non-Asians). Otherwise, it is often perceived as not genuine, most likely not tasty, and obviously caters to "Americans."

However, in the idea of authenticity is the assumption that there is a pure, essential concreteness of being on which authenticity is based. There is an implication that authenticity can be objectified with concrete boundaries that are immutable. The assumption is the idea that there are certain properties which define an object or entity as what it is, and an object/entity with those certain properties would be authentically that object/entity. However, if an object/entity did not carry all of the properties, perhaps lacked a few or even one, there is a suggestion that it would not be authentic and would be its dichotomous opposite: fake (Bendix 9). For instance, if one believed that authentic Chinese food utilized a stir-frying cooking method, included soy sauce as one of its ingredients, was consumed with rice, and prepared by Chinese people, would an egg roll made by a Vietnamese person count be considered Chinese food and for whom? Egg rolls are generally associated with Chinese food but in this case, its preparation method usually does not include stir frying, it does not necessarily use soy sauce, it is usually eaten alone as opposed to being an accompaniment to rice, and was prepared by someone
of Vietnamese descent. Would it then be an imposter of Chinese food? Questions of its authenticity on such a dichotomous framework leaves little room for nuance.

When authenticity is applied to notions of culture and representations of culture, it poses a problematic paradigm. Ideas of culture are complex, nuanced, and carry a multitude of layers and networks. Using authenticity in describing cultural expressions raises troubling questions as to what defines culture, what the parameters of a culture may be, and who carries the authority to define those parameters. There is an uneasy insinuation that certain types of expressive culture may not as legitimate or important if it should fall outside certain boundaries. Which aspects shall be deemed inside or outside the boundaries in the definition of a culture? There are no overall appointed arbiters of cultural boundaries which leads to the question of whether ideas, concepts or culture can be or should be associated with authenticity. These complexities indicate that authenticity may not be useful or relevant in describing culture and its nuances.

Bendix writes that claiming some forms of cultural expression as authentic and others as not authentic reinforces the erroneous belief that “cultural purity rather than hybridity are the norm” (9). Culture, tradition, and its markers, however, are not immune to social forces and historical events; they continually change and adapt to new environments and reinterpretations. For instance, curry is well known as an Indian spice yet it was introduced by British imperialists and adapted for many Indian dishes. The idea that culture has an authenticity denies agency to people for their own creativity and adaptability to new circumstances. Indeed, it denies them their own cultural
identification should their practices, values, and lifestyles stray from a static and essentialist notion of authenticity.

Tradition is often seen as a marker of cultural authenticity. What was continually practiced in the past and continues on to the present is often seen as a “tradition” of a particular culture. Practices that are believed to follow “tradition” are seen as genuine or authentic while innovations and change are often seen as its inauthentic bastardizations which do not truly represent the culture. However, Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin believe that “tradition resembles…a process of thought – an ongoing interpretation of the past” (274). Tradition is not a bounded object but is that which is continuously reinterpreted. This conception allows for the natural fluidity and movement of practices that denote culture and provides room to include several perspectives. Therefore, whether a tradition is genuine may be irrelevant when thinking about culture because authenticity would describe it much as if it were a physical object with specific properties and concrete borders when tradition is not physically concrete. Handler and Linneken writes that “genuine or spurious – terms that have been used to distinguish objective reality from hocus pocus - are inappropriate when applied to social phenomena, which never exist apart from our interpretations of them” (288). Traditions naturally change over time and are constantly reinterpreted; ascribing authenticity to it would freeze culture into a monolithic static and one-dimensional ideal.

Economics is one of many factors that affect changes in traditional practices which in turn may affect conceptions of cultural authenticity. Nancy Peake, in her article “Through Native Eyes: Pictorial Weavings from Spider Woman’s Loom,” describes how
weaving skills were not ancient skills in Navajo tribes as they were in Pueblo tribes, yet Navajo blankets became popular and highly demanded pieces of traditional Native art (32). Rosemary Joyce discusses Amish quilts and how certain quilt patterns became more popular than others. She explains it thus:

Many folk artist are indeed becoming attuned, as it were, to the symphonies of the marketplace. As a result, out of a need for economic support or psychological gratification (or both) they are changing process and product, all in direct response to the pressures of the buying public. I use the term 'buying public' for those who buy the 'idea' of tradition. (225)

In both cases, consumer demand for a particular type of cultural product reinforces notions that it is representative of the culture; it is the demand that decides the representation. It is in that way that the Navajo blankets became a part of Navajo culture even though it had not been a long continuous practice in the culture. What sells best becomes the product that is produced the most. Eventually, it becomes the dominant marker of the culture by which standards of authenticity and traditionality are measured. Anything that strays outside this mold of authenticity is subject to suspicions of ambiguous authenticity. Joyce and Peake’s scholarship refenced folk material culture, but their ideas on commodification can be applied to any expression taken to be a marker of cultural identity. The market indeed helps determine what is seen as a cultural marker.

Similarly, Chinese food is subject to the forces of popularity. Whatever sells best as Chinese food often becomes the defining dish of Chinese food. In past, chop suey became known as the quintessential Chinese dish. But economic trends also change and
redefine capricious boundaries of authenticity and tradition. Today, many dismiss chop suey as “inauthentic,” an Americanized version of Chinese food, and replace it with General Tso’s chicken as the principal Chinese dish.

The production of food is never completely the domain of the cook but influenced by factors outside the mere whimsy of a chef’s gastronomical creations. Gary Alan Fine, in his book *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work*, writes that “In restaurants, cooks must be aware of the demands placed on them by standards of customer tastes, constraints of time, and the economics of the restaurant industry” (14). A restaurant that is not popular, that does not sell food that appeals to a solid customer base, may not do so well. Susan Kalchik describes it as “we humans accept food most readily from our friends and allies and fear the food of strangers” (47). A restaurant that sells food that is unfamiliar, tastes strange, or tastes bad may not garner too much business. Therefore, Chinese restaurants must necessarily adapt its food to be comfortable, to be friendly and not too unfamiliar for its customer base, whether catering to a Western audience or not. Market tastes may weigh heavily on what type of Chinese food gets produced for public consumption. It may be the reason that the innocuous egg rolls, chop suey, and fortune cookies became standard fare in Chinese restaurants rather than tripe, thousand-year old eggs or chicken feet which are common enough dishes in China. Market demands influence restaurant cuisine in such a way that certain dishes become reproduced more often than others and by default, the taste or seasoning combinations of these reproduced dishes predominate because of their increasing familiarity as the basic taste of the ethnicity of the cuisine.
Chinese restaurant owners must certainly make these kinds of choices in order to survive. They modify the seasonings, the ingredients, the cooking methods in order to find what sells the best and as a result, these dishes gain publicity as Chinese food. But the public consumer has access only to a partial repertoire of a range of Chinese food. Each restaurant has a limited repertoire and rarely can one restaurant offer a large range of dishes (although there are, of course, exceptions where upper class restaurants may serve many more types of and more complicated dishes at a moment’s notice, but these tend not to be the average type of Chinese restaurant establishment). The “authenticity” of Chinese food becomes negotiated as certain dishes and flavorings become highlighted and others are not, depending upon the American market for them. As with all Chinese food historically, these foods are only part of a constant change resulting from various influences. These factors complicate and problematize the authenticity of Chinese restaurant food.

2.2 ORIGINAL CHINESE FOOD

There are widely varying opinions on what constitutes authentic Chinese cuisine among Chinese and non-Chinese alike. Some declare that Chinese food is spicy. Some describe Chinese food as being lighter, cooked with more vegetables or served with more steamed items. Conversely, another friend describes it as having many deep-fried items. Yet another considers food that is stir-fried to be Chinese. Others provide examples of Chinese cuisine in terms of dishes familiar to them: wonton soup, pot stickers, egg rolls,
fried rice, General Tso’s chicken. The characterizations range from naming specific
dishes to styles of cooking to ingredients for defining what Chinese food is.

How one characterizes Chinese cuisine is linked to one’s exposure to whatever
has been labeled as Chinese food. There are many varieties and styles of Chinese cuisine
that vary from region to region in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and
other countries in Asia. For instance, regional Shanghai food is quite distinct from the
southern Cantonese style of preparation or even the taste of food from the Szechuan
region. Thus, the description of Chinese food that a person of Chinese descent may give
is linked to their particular exposure to Chinese cuisine. The region in China that they
grew up in or that the family had ancestral ties to, the individualistic preparation methods
of food eaten when growing up, the country in which they have resided or currently reside
in, are all factors in influencing their ideas about Chinese food. What was eaten as they
were growing and what was marked as “Chinese?” A Chinese person’s description of
Chinese food may vary just as much as the description from another person who is not of
Chinese descent, depending upon their own experiences.

Given these variations, does a national Chinese cuisine even exist? According to
scholars David Wu and Sidney Cheung, for centuries, Chinese cuisine has incorporated
ingredients and preparation styles from all parts of the world. In major cities, the food
has always displayed characteristics of a transnational and multi-ethnic nature while
gourmets have long argued that Chinese cuisine should actually consist of several styles
of cuisines (4). Chinese cuisine is not and has never been a monolithic or static artifact of
heritage, for those looking for an authentic Chinese cuisine. The transnational and multi-
The ethnic character of Chinese cuisine continues to exist today. Yih-Yuan Li writes that "Chinese cuisine in the homeland has undergone a process of simplification, standardization, homogenization, and incorporation of non-Chinese food items and cuisines" (xi). Food in China and throughout Asia is quickly embracing western styles of preparing, eating, and dishes. He remarks that hamburgers and pizza have increased in popularity while traditional Chinese foods are not given much attention among the young people in Taiwan and Hong Kong (often the home of the top culinary Chinese chefs) (xiii). Young people, it seems, are much more likely to meet their friends at a cafe where they serve spaghetti rather than at a noodle shop.

Eating Western and sprinkling English words in their conversations has become very vogue. McDonald's and Pizza Hut are quite common and western-style eateries are growing in number in metropolitan Asian cities. For instance, in Hong Kong, some eateries may serve pork chops, meatballs, salads, and sandwiches with a distinct Hong Kong flair alongside noodle soups. Hong Kong spaghetti can come with ketchup or a pork chop. Pizza has the option of tuna, corn, or salad dressing as toppings. Sandwiches always have the crusts cut off and are lightly toasted. The western influence in Chinese cuisine has come back full circle in the cuisine brought over by the most recent immigrant Hong Kong arrivals. In the late 1990s, a new Hong Kong style cafe opened up in Chinatown, San Francisco. In this particular establishment, the diners and cooks were primarily Chinese. Its menu offered, in addition to congee, roast duck, and noodles, a long list of grills, sandwiches, and spaghetti. The grills, sandwiches, and spaghetti, typically seen as "Western" fare, becomes reinterpreted by Hong Kong cafes and then re-
imported back to the West in a Chinese restaurant. This re-location, a Hong Kong interpretation of a “Western” menu set in a Chinese restaurant located in the United States, makes for an ambiguous identity. Are the grills, sandwiches, and spaghetti now Chinese food because of its setting in a Chinese restaurant and production by Chinese chefs or does it remain “Western food?” It is not served exactly in the way one might expect in a diner that advertises itself as an “American Diner” yet these items are not what people may consider to be traditional Chinese foods. This example speaks to Wu and Cheung’s assertion that Chinese food has always been subject to global influences and it illustrates the difficulty of delineating the boundaries of Chinese cuisine.

2.3 CHINESE FOOD IN AMERICA

In America, the Cantonese dominated early Chinese immigration. From its earliest days, Chinese food in America was taken to represent a general Chinese cuisine, presumably a national Chinese cuisine rather than of one region. Thus, since the early Chinese population in the US was comprised primarily of Cantonese, the Chinese restaurants back then were likely run by Cantonese and served Cantonese cuisine. William and Yvonne Lockwood, in their article on Arab restaurants in Detroit, argue that it is only logical that immigrant communities are not able to replicate the old national culture in a new setting as certain selections processes are already at work which favor a specific cross section of the population for emigration (515). As a result, the Cantonese partiality to rice contributed to basic American perceptions that rice is a staple that
accompanies each Chinese meal as opposed to a northern Chinese’s fondness for buns and soup dumplings (and rice may or may not even be consumed during a meal except for at the very end of the meal as a palate cleanser). Certain ethnic dishes may also become favored in America as they were not in the old country, according to the Lockwoods. For instance, fried rice is indeed a dish in Canton, but not a particularly popular one in the same way it is in America. Egg rolls nor sweet and sour soup share the same popularity in China either, as they do in the United States.

Though Cantonese cooking dominated Chinese cuisine in the US, it was also susceptible to the limitations of available ingredients. How “authentic” could Cantonese cooking be in the US if the certain ingredients were not available? The Lockwoods acknowledge ethnic food constantly changes with substitution as one of the first changes. Rather than not make the dish at all, cooks find creative ways to continue culinary traditions (534). Similarly, Chinese cuisine is also continued in this way. Chop suey, egg foo young (fried egg patties mixed with meat or shrimp), and yat ka mein (noodles with soy sauce topped with a hard boiled egg or meat) may not strike some as Chinese food.¹ Though they were sold at my father’s Chinese take-out in Baltimore, Maryland, these items were never indicated to me as Chinese as my own family never prepared them for our own meals nor did we even order them when we ate out at Chinese restaurants. My

¹ The origins of egg foo young and yat ka mein remain unclear. However, there are several versions of the origins of chop suey. One is that the hungry miners wandered into a Chinese restaurant and the chef had nothing but leftover pieces which he cooked into a hash called “chop suey.” Another is that high-ranking diplomat from China visited the US in the 19th century and had his chefs prepare a meal for his hosts in reciprocation for their hospitality. However, unsure that the dinner guests would be amenable to more traditional fare, he instructed his chefs cook American meats and vegetables in a Chinese style and named it “chop suey.” In all versions, chop suey was an invention localized in the US. See Renqiu Yu's article "Chop Suey: From Chinese Food to Chinese American Food."
father explained that the proper ingredients were not available in the early days so they improvised these dishes.

There is a fear among some patrons that the food served in Chinese restaurants is not really Chinese, that it is adjusted for American tastes. It cannot be denied that some adjustments must be made for the target customer base. However, there are a variety of factors that may influence changes in the production of a restaurant’s dishes besides a deliberate dilution of the “Chinese-ness/authenticity.” As previously noted, the availability of ingredients and regional differences affect the outcome of Chinese food in the American context. In conversations with several Chinese restaurant owners on the food that they serve, none of them declared outright that they prepared food specifically for Western tastes or that their was not “authentic” although they did indicate that there was a degree of adjustment in their food for Western tastes.

Wong Gei, an inexpensive Chinese eatery in Columbus, Ohio, near the Ohio State University campus, serves mostly students or other university-related people. Lillian Qiu, the youngest child in the family that owns the restaurant, makes many of the major decisions in establishing and running it. In her early thirties, Qiu is clearly a capable and articulate businesswoman whose bilingual skills help her negotiate restaurant operations. Many of the customers at Wong Gei are Asian international students although other types of students are not uncommon there as well. In response to the question of whether Wong Gei adjusted its food for a perceived “American” taste, she replied that they tried not to add too much spice or herb, striving for a more bland taste in targeted dishes.

“You could say there’s more spice involved when you are cooking more of an authentic
dish,” she says. She is careful of not intimidating the non-Asian customers for she sees the restaurant as an opportunity for education and cultural exchange. “You don’t want to throw black beans into something like [an American dish]...with a light sauce. It would be like, are these flies?” she explains. At the same time, she stresses that she does not separated what might be considered an American menu from a Chinese style menu nor does she adjust. “You don’t want to assume what your customers like.... by doing that you just eliminate the opportunity for other people to learn about your culture.” She admits that planning a menu that suits a wide range of people is challenging, considering that people of different backgrounds have different tastes. From a business perspective, her restaurant’s adjustments are strategic, attempting to satisfy a broad variety of tastes for the restaurant’s own viability that includes the preferences of international Asian students as well as mainstream American palates.

Likewise, Mark Pi’s food is a balancing act to satisfy a broad range of customers and tastes. Before the Mark Pi’s Express chain, Pi owned, operated, and cooked for a Chinese restaurant of his own in Hilliard, Ohio where he wanted to produce the best Chinese food for Ohio. Many say that the food he served there was quite delicious. However, he wanted to expand his business on a more Western model and thus looked to how other American restaurants became successful. “They have professional menus, descriptions, training programs,” he says. Mark Pi felt that Chinese restaurants needed professionalization, a system that would not only add consistency in service but food as well. “I cannot say best Chinese food, but the consistency is ...no surprise to customer,” he admits. Given the trepidation that some may have when trying new things, it only
seems logical to provide a product that is not too far off from mainstream tastes: Chinese food that is accessible, tasty, and contrary to the exotic mystery-meat stereotypes. Choosing executives from American fast food chains and enlisting the advice of restaurant consultants to help him build his Chinese food enterprise, Pi was able to figure out what would suit the palate of the customers around him. However, the palate of the customers around him may have already had preconceptions of what constituted Chinese food and how much previous knowledge of Chinese cuisine the executives and consultants had is unclear. Therefore, Pi may very well have reinforced existing stereotypes of Chinese food in addition to producing what he called modern Chinese food with a twist. But without a doubt, the executives and consultants helped him negotiate a menu that could maintain an identity of being Chinese yet was agreeable to a mainstream palate.

2.4 WHO NEEDS AUTHENTIC?

What makes a dish “authentically” Chinese? When people speaking of wanting real Chinese food, are they envisioning the food that Chinese people from China would normally prepare and eat? However, as already discussed, what Chinese people eat has always had a variety of transnational influences. Tuna topping pizza may not seem like typical Chinese (nor typical Western) fare, but it is rather popular in Hong Kong. In American shopping malls, I often see self-described Cajun eateries that are operated primarily by Chinese staff. Could its dishes be described as Chinese or would it still be
Cajun? At what point do hybridized foods become rational, ethnic or in this case, “Chinese?”

It can be tempting to say that if Chinese people in China prepare, sell, and consume it, then it must be Chinese, yet what of McDonald’s Quarter Pounders sold in Beijing? The criterion for ascribing an ethnicity to a cuisine is uncertain. I rhetorically ask if the Chinese-ness of food lies in how it is prepared (are all stir-fried items Chinese?), who prepares it (if it’s prepared by non-Chinese, is it still Chinese?), what is being prepared (serving chicken feet vs. chop suey), how it is served (with bones unremoved and heads still intact or not), or who serves it (does a non-Asian server in a non-Asian-owned business diminish its “authenticity?”). As Bendix would ask, why this concern with authenticity and for whom is this authenticity so important? What does authenticity mean for the consumers of Chinese food? Perhaps when people seek authentic Chinese food, they are less concerned with authenticity than finding food that fits their conception and needs of Chinese food.

I provide some examples from surveys taken by Ohio State University students, primarily in their late teens and early twenties. In response to the question of “Is eating ‘authentic’ Chinese food important to you? If so, how can you tell if the food or restaurant is more authentic than another?” the following people gave affirmative answers.

“Authentic food is better prepared than fast food places,” declares an African American male. Although one Caucasian male admits that he does not know how to differentiate authenticity because “I have never been to China to try their real food,” he
still claims, “I just think it tastes better.” Another Caucasian white male states, “I prefer
more authentic foods. The more authentic foods are the ones that you can’t find on the
take-out board menus.” Yet another Caucasian male claims that authenticity is marked by
the “freshness and diversity of the items.” A Jewish-German male declares that authentic
Chinese food is “healthier because it is based more upon veggies and rice products than
fatty-fried Americanized food.” A Caucasian female agrees that “Americanized Chinese
food is very greasy and I feel nauseous after eating it.”

Authenticity equates quality, freshness, and variety to these respondents who care
about authenticity. However, what this quality means is unclear to them as they also
admit that they are unsure as to what authentic Chinese cuisine actually is. Underlying
this desire for authenticity is the belief that authenticity is, in fact, not easily accessible
which perhaps increases its desirability. Because it is something that is somewhat out of
reach, that is not standard, “real” Chinese food can easily fall into the realm of the foreign
and exotic. Lisa Heldke suggests that “That which is novel to me ends up being exotic,
and that which is exotic I end up defining as most authentic to a culture” (190).

Authenticity is a desirable quality simply because it is not familiar or common, which in
effect raises its value or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). In this way, for these students,
Chinese food maintains authenticity through exoticism, and authenticity becomes a
commodity.

The above examples were from non-Asians, but authenticity matters to Asians as
well but for different reasons. A male Malaysian Chinese student writes, “As a Chinese, I
tend to be quite particular about the taste. So far, I haven’t eaten in any restaurants here
in Columbus that could produce an authentic Chinese taste.” The taste that he understands to be Chinese is what he considers to be authentic. According to Elisabeth Rozin and Paul Rozin, most humans use a consistent culture-specific set of flavor combinations (flavor principles) for their food. “Although these components of the cuisine make up a very small percentage of the total food intake, their distinctive flavor and repeated use endow them with a major role in the identification of any ‘dish’ as being a typical production of a particular cuisine,” they assert (245). Therefore, the Malaysian Chinese student’s idea of what constitutes an ‘authentic Chinese taste’ (which may or may not be influenced by his Malaysian heritage) may not be what I, with my Cantonese heritage, would understand to be a Chinese taste. What I understand to be a Chinese taste is influenced by the meals my mother cooked for me as a child just as his conception is influenced by his heritage. Jeremy MacClancy writes that for exiles (or immigrants), “these foods represent the home life they are denied, and they pine for their familiar flavours” (18). For the Malaysian Chinese student (and perhaps for myself as well), authenticity may represent a sort of nostalgia or return to homeland, our own interpretation of the past. In the context of US, other cultures become symbolic and marked and categorized because it is no longer the standard as in the mother country.²

² Sylvia Ferrero raises interesting issues about the power dynamics related to ethnic food in America in her article “Comida sin par. Consumption of Mexican Food in Los Angeles: “Foodscapes” in a Transnational Consumer Society.” In her examination of Mexican food eateries in Los Angeles, she asserts that Mexican food is a mechanism that empowers Mexicans to challenge the power relations in a framework that places them in the position of the “ruler” because they may claim authority and cultural capital or questions of authenticity. Ferrero claims that Mexican food allows Mexicans to express identity and community and, as a strong source of employment, provides economic opportunities to rise in social status. Although her arguments are intriguing, I question whether the status of being the authority on one’s own culture provides any real power to shape one’s fate in the overall dominant structure as this authority can be tenuous even for the members of an ethnic community themselves on questions of what is the “real” culture. Additionally, restaurant work can
The idea of authenticity in Chinese cuisine is certainly comforting; it’s a human impulse to define certain boundaries to provide reference points and a certain sense of stability and centeredness. For immigrants or people of ethnic descent, the desire for authenticity in representations of culture may be nostalgia for cultural heritage and roots. For others, authenticity may provide a more concrete sense of what constitutes the “other.”

My initial belief was that most people viewed Chinese food as exotic and that most people cared about the authenticity of the Chinese food to be consumed. Much to my surprise, over half of the respondents who took the survey on Chinese food stated that authenticity did not matter. Several stated that it was not authenticity that mattered to them, but whether it tasted good. “I don’t so much worry about it being authentic as long as it has good food,” says a Caucasian female. “Taste is more important than authentic though I would assume authentic tastes better,” a Korean male agrees.

Despite their assertions that authenticity doesn’t matter, it still figures in their consciousness. The Caucasian female does not “care” about authenticity, yet she believes that authenticity is better. “But I do notice that the food is better at an authentic food place. You can tell it is authentic because the menu does not have the common foods.” In her statement, authenticity, like the respondents for whom authenticity did matter, was in the realm of the less accessible, located in the menu that did not have the “common foods” or the exotic. “I would like to think that what I’m eating is authentic, but if I

often be a source of economic exploitation and limited opportunity in the form of low wages, long hours, and undocumented pay rather than an true economic stepping stone.
found out it wasn’t, I would still eat it,” declares one Caucasian male despite his admission that he has “no way of judging authenticity.” Another Caucasian male says, “I have no idea what is authentic, I just like what tastes good to me. The fancier restaurants usually have better food, and if that means more authentic, then that’s great…but I don’t care either way.”

For these respondents, authenticity is seemingly of little concern when eating Chinese food. They have little idea of what authentic Chinese food may mean nor do they care yet Chinese food still remains categorized as Chinese rather than simply as food. Perhaps for them, “Chinese” is just another category of food like a breakfast cereal, soup, dairy product, or dessert, devoid of ethnicity. However, the notion of authenticity still carries some weight in determining quality for them. It is an indication that even among those that claim their nonchalance, authenticity still matters.

Defining what constitutes Chinese food and its boundaries of authenticity is a slippery task. Food in China is constantly changing and adapting to new influences. Indeed, it is reflective of a negotiation with modern times and global exchanges. Modern consumer tastes in China are redefining what constitutes Chinese cuisine. The tuna topping pizza in Hong Kong is one indication of the changing nature of Chinese food to be what people would not expect to be Chinese. Thus, the “authenticity” of Chinese food is compromised even before it makes its way to the Chinese restaurants in the US. To ascribe an authenticity to Chinese food would be to deny it freedom to redefine itself in relation to changing circumstances. Though restaurants may negotiate the expression of
their food to suit different customers, such adjustments may not make their product less authentic but places it as a temporal incarnation on the continuum of Chinese cuisine as it develops over the ages.
CHAPTER 3

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND AMERICANIZATION

Food has social meanings and purpose beyond mere physical sustenance as evidenced in the choices that we make each day on what items to consume and what not to consume. What, how, when, and where we choose to eat is informed by a socio-cultural network that ascribes a range of possible meanings of food from moral ("eating meat is wrong") to medicinal ("potato chips are bad for you") to political (refusing to eat strawberries in support of striking strawberry pickers) to religious (taking the Eucharist). Michael Owen Jones states that "there are ways in which eating-related activities nourish and sustain us intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually" (238).

Food provides the nutrients and energy for us to maintain our survival on a basic biological level but its function goes beyond the mere physical. Other fundamental bodily actions do not carry the same types of symbolism in breadth or depth. Food, however, is intimate and intrical to our daily lives and rich with meaning for us. Think of the ways in which familiar foods comfort us. Imbued with memories of childhood and being taken care of, Mom’s cooking is the best. We ask for chicken soup when we are sick, perhaps less for its medicinal properties than for its psychological symbol of warmth and being cared for. There are erotic properties and romantic possibilities assigned to chocolate.
Coffee is a stimulant, appropriate generally in the morning. What we eat, how, when, and where we choose to eat have expressive value within our communities. Is hospitality shown by serving a meal to guests in the casual warmth of the kitchen or the formality of a dining room? Is it a sign of class whether one uses silver or plastic utensils or eats with one’s hands? Because it is so intimate to us, food can become so wrapped up in how we see ourselves or how we see others that it can be taken as a metaphor for ourselves. Food and identity are intertwined.

Sidney Mintz once argued, “it would be easier to make a radical change in a country’s politics than to change its fundamental diet” (“Food and Eating: Some Persistent Questions,” 25). The Soviet Union eventually collapsed, but it would be highly unlikely that anyone could persuade Russians to give up black bread from their diet, he believed. Because it is so intimate to us, food can become wrapped up in how we see ourselves or how we see others that it can be taken as a metaphor for ourselves. We are what we eat, the old saying goes. Hot dogs and hamburgers are part of the narrative of American identity. We are thus quintessentially “American” when we eat hot dogs and hamburgers on the 4th of July. However, we are even more American on this particular day if we grill them on an outdoor barbeque, as many Americans do, than if we just picked up a Big Mac. Similarly, on Thanksgiving Day, turkey is considered “traditional” American fare but a traditional American Thanksgiving turkey meal would include a specific method of preparation as well as specific side dishes: a turkey that is roasted, condiments of cranberry sauce and gravy, and side dishes of mashed potatoes and green beans. It is not just what we eat that matters, but how and when we eat it that all
contribute to this idea of identity. What we choose to eat symbolizes who we are to ourselves and to others.

Thus, in this light, Chinese food in the American imagination serves as more than fulfilment of hunger. Historically through the present day, what has Chinese food symbolized in the American context? I look at historical depictions of Chinese food and draw from survey responses to examine Chinese cuisine’s meaning in the US. In light of these answers, I look at how Chinese restaurant owners negotiate these expectations of Chinese food. To what degree do they perform their identity as opposed to providing an unself-conscious display of cultural expression? Finally, I look at the ways in which ethnic foods become absorbed into mainstream American culture and on what grounds does this assimilation occur.

3.1 CHINESE FOOD IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

If one is American when eating hot dogs and hamburgers, what is someone when eating Chinese food? Could one be Chinese, metaphorically if not ethnically, when eating Chinese food? Chinese food has always carried an image of foreign exoticism, mixed with fascination or distrust. Subject to a host of urban myths, the Chinese were accused of eating everything from rats to monkey brains, all prepared or served in an exotic manner. In the late 19th century, Louis J. Beck claims that the following menu was displayed on a restaurant door in Canton, China:

Cat’s flesh, one basin.................. 10 cents
Black cat’s flesh, one small basin .......... 5 cents
Wine, one bottle ................................ 3 cents
Wine, one small bottle .......................... 1 ½ cents
Congee, one basin ................................ 2 cash
Ketchup, one basin .............................. 3 cash
Black dog’s grease, one tael ................. 4 cents
Black cat’s eyes, one pair .................... 4 cents¹ (53)

Such a lurid menu would certainly excite the imagination of its American consumers.

However, because the menu was listed in English, it does pose some questions about its veracity. The prices are listed in “cents” rather than Chinese currency. Was this menu a translation and was there any misinterpretation or even exaggeration? China was certainly poor at the time and it is quite likely that hungry people would be creative in seeking alternative sources of food. However, details surrounding the actual menu are scant.

S. Wells Williams, an American missionary in the late 19th century, noted that cats and dogs were so often associated with the Chinese diet that visitors to China would immediately ask if the Chinese indeed ate rats as well. When the affirmative was given, these visitors would leave, believing it was a common staple in the diet rather than perhaps the result of poverty, thus perpetuating the belief that everyone in China ate rats as a matter of course (qtd in Roberts, 58). Indeed, famine in China most likely led to the saying that the Chinese would eat anything with four legs except a table. The menu offering cat eyes may very well have existed, born out of necessity and culinary creativity.

¹ J.A.G Roberts in China to Chinatown attributes the sighting of this menu to John Henry Gray who published a book in 1878 on his journeys in Guangzhou, China. Beck, being interested in things Chinese, most likely read Gray’s work and used it in his own.
Mintz writes that “it is possible that many Westerners distrust Han Chinese cuisine precisely because it is so open, and so unfettered by particular taboos” (“Food and Eating: Some Persistent Questions,” 26).

Chinese food was greeted with suspicion, yet it was the object of curiosity. However, curiosity eventually overcame distrust as people ventured into Chinatowns as a badge of bravery. One 19th century writer, Lucien Adkins, who often took friends to sample chop suey joint, describes the first-time experience of a novice chop suey voyager:

Take a friend to Chinatown for the first time and watch his face when the savory chop-suey arrives. He looks suspiciously at the mixture. He is certain it has rats in it, for the popular superstition that Chinese eat rats is in-bred. He remembers his schoolboy history, with the picture of a Chinaman carrying around a cage of rats for sale. He quickly puts aside the chop sticks, which are evidently possessed of the devil, and goes at the stuff with a fork. It is a heroic effort, but it is not sustained. The novice gets a mouthful or two, turns pale, all the time declaring that it is “great.” It is a long time before he can be persuaded to go again, but he is sure to surrender eventually to the enchanting decoction, and soon there are times when the knowing (sic) hunger for chop-suey, and for nothing else, draws him to dingy Chinatown, alone and solitary, if he can find no one to accompany him. For a while he half believes there must be “dope” in the stuff. He is now certain that there are no rats in it. He is a confirmed chop-suey eater (qtd in Beck, 296-297).

The passage is striking in its tone of trepidation and interestingly enough, its parallels to drug use. Adkins’ descriptions are noticeably similar to a foray into drug experimentation and eventual drug addiction. The novice chop suey eater is at first unsure, remembering his childhood associations of Chinese food and rats, like a new drug
user who remembers childhood warnings on the dangers of drugs. Both initially try it, undergo an ambivalent experience, and then later attempt it again with some reluctance. The novice eater eventually “surrenders” to chop suey and needs his fix which draws him to dingy Chinatown at the expense of being alone, much like a drug user who seeks out seedy drug havens at any cost to get a fix. In the end, both are “confirmed” users. As Chinatown was also seen as the site of furtive opium dens during this time period, it is not too surprising that Adkins would make subtle comparisons of chop suey to the opium addiction stereotype, especially with the direct comment of “there must be ‘dope’ in the stuff.” His tone is not disapproving or intentionally pejorative of chop suey. However, in this scenario, Chinese food is seen as an illicit addictive pleasure and the consumer is a brave explorer. Chinatown is the site of questionable repute to be entered into for a bourgeois adventure. A police inspector in the 1890’s described Chinatown as thus: “The restaurants are patronized principally by Chinamen. Slummers drop in occasionally to see the natives eating their food with their chop sticks, and generally order a native dish so as to be able to say they ate in a Chinese restaurant” (qtd in Beck, 326).

Approximately fifty years later, exotification continued, albeit in a more complimentary manner. “To dine in the Chinese manner seems to me the highest form of civilized dining in existence, from the kitchen to the cash register,” wrote Carl Glick in 1941 (158). “Chinese food is the best in the world,” he added (159). Glick became acquainted with the Chinese community in New York City as the director of the Chinese Athletic Club. Not having known any Chinese in his youth, Glick’s friendship with the Chinese became the basis of cultural exchange, a topic on which he wrote several
narrative books. Eating Chinese food for Glick thus becomes an adventure into another culture. “To those who have an adventurous palate, and a willingness to try anything once, no matter how exotic, dinner Chinese style with real Chinese dishes one experienced is never forgotten,” he enthused (165–166).

These historical examples demonstrate the ways in which Chinese food was situated in the realm of the ‘other’ and the people who were brave enough to sample them were adventurers. In the late 19th century, Chinese food seemed utterly foreign and strange. Almost fifty years later, the foreign nature of Chinese cuisine was still typecast as such although Glick’s descriptions reflect a less timorous curiosity.

Over a hundred years later to the present, does Chinese food still maintains that aura of mystery and exoticism to the general public? Yes and no. Today, there are thousands of Chinese restaurants throughout the United States from the metropolitan cities to the rural towns. It would seem that Chinese restaurants would have lost much of its exoticism and become a mundane eating option. In the surveys taken by Ohio State University student, many of the respondents appeared so blasé about eating Chinese food. “There are many restaurants so it is convenient,” says one Caucasian female. The convenience factor is an indication of just how common Chinese restaurants are. Even some respondents regard Chinese food to be part of American culture. “I consider people of Chinese ancestry to be American so I would say that it is. American food is a mixture of all kinds of food,” one Caucasian female declares. “Yes, as much as I consider Italian and French and German food. Americans eat it so it should be considered American,” states another Caucasian female. “Well, I’d guess that the majority of Chinese food sold
in the US is an “American” version of actual Chinese food,” another female suggests. For these respondents, perhaps Chinese restaurants have become so common that they lose the aura of inaccessibility and the perceived exoticness of ethnicity. Perhaps these respondents may also be indicative of a new generation that has a broader definition of American-ness.

However, for the most part, despite the purported nonchalance towards Chinese restaurants, many of the students still maintained strands of the earliest representations of Chinese food detailed by Louis J. Beck. “Some times I just have to have it,” states the 19 year old white female. Another 23-year old white female gushes, “I love Chinese food, I don’t know what it is but I just crave for it,” much like the cravings of the 19th century “slummers” who went to Chinatown to get their fix of chop suey. The survey respondents are unsure of what Chinese food may mean, yet they have definite ideas of the delineations between American and Chinese food. “Hamburgers and steaks are American. Rice isn’t. How many rice fields do you see driving through the countryside?” demands a 20-year old white male. Most of the respondents also believed that if a Chinese restaurant sold fries and sandwiches, it was no longer a Chinese restaurant. “Fries and sandwiches are American/British/French food. I do not go to a Chinese restaurant to eat such; I go for healthy Chinese or traditional third-world fare,” states a 20 year old Jewish German male. “Fries and sandwiches make it too American. A restaurant is Chinese if it has its regular chicken, beef, and seafood dishes.” Such statements indicate that there is an internal contradiction or unclarity about Chinese food. Respondents declare that authenticity is of low priority because they do not know what
constitutes authentic Chinese food, yet they have clear ideas of the line between Chinese and American foods. A restaurant that serves both is neither American nor Chinese. “Then it’s just a novelty restaurant,” a 20 year old white female believes.

Though there may be some understanding of issues of ethnicity, Americanization, and Chinese restaurants among some of the respondents, Chinese food continues to possess boundaries of ethnicity. The ubiquity of Chinese restaurants has not worn down historical perceptions of Chinese food as being different and “other.” Though some respondents saw Chinese food as part of the larger American culture, the ethnic overtones by and large remained intact for the majority.

In the US, though Chinese food adapts to its locale’s palate, it continues to be labeled “ethnic” as a demarcation of “foreign” in comparison to British fish and chips or spaghetti or hamburgers, says Sherrie Inness (4). Eating Chinese food becomes synonymous with eating the “other.” Lisa Heldke examines her own interest in cuisines from all different types of culture as a type of “cultural food colonialism.” She sees her attitude toward “culture hopping in the kitchen” to be very similar to Western colonial imperialism in that she could set out to explore “ever newer and more remote cultures to co-opt, borrow freely and out of context, and use as the raw materials for their own efforts at creation and discovery.” In doing so, she exoticizes these cultures as the “other” and in eating their foods, she physically imbibes this exoticism so as to become a little exotic herself, she theorizes (190).

For some, Chinese food represented sophistication and coolness. “Many Americans and New Yorkers found in Chinese food a symbol of cosmopolitanism,”
writes Gaye Tuchman and Harry Gene Levine (172). They describe one young man who would eat at a Chinese restaurant and then go to a subtitled foreign movie to show they were “artsy” during his youth in the 1950s in Seattle. Although the younger people I spoke with generally do not speak of Chinese food as symbolic of sophistication and coolness, there is an underlying sense of casual cosmopolitanism in eating Chinese food. It is just one of many ethnic foods to choose from. It is not enough to just simply eat at a Chinese restaurant; one must eat it frequently enough to speak about it as well. Barbara and James Shortridge cite John May’s observations of food as fashion in England:

Conspicuous consumption of exotic dishes is being used there as a way for young professional people to claim social status. The process involves knowing right and wrong ways to prepare, consume, and order various items; the difference between authentic and inauthentic ingredients; and which ethnic cuisine is about to become fashionable (3-4).

From being an experience of “slumming,” Chinese food has become a valued accessory of worldly knowledge. “We tend to try new foods, seeking novelty in eating, as we do in so many aspects of life. We are inclined to identify that novelty with knowingness, with sophistication,” states Sidney Mintz (Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom, 116). However, judging from the blasé answers from the survey, the respondents did not seem to think that Chinese food represented sophistication at all. Many wrote that they ate out of convenience, not because it was “cool.” What explains the contradiction between the survey and the scholars? My belief is that Chinese food does represent a difference. However, because Chinese food is so accessible (in the sense that you can buy it very easily), perhaps it has lost some of its glamour and novelty. It is so common that it is no
longer anything special, nothing that one should have to know about in depth. However, it is the authentic Chinese food that remains inaccessible and the non-authentic Chinese food can serve just as well. In this way, Chinese food remains somewhat foreign and not-American, yet no longer novel enough to warrant closer examination. The surveys show a mundane-ness with Chinese food, but my conversations with colleagues, friends, and audience members from presentations indicate that it still holds a degree of fascination. Perhaps the surveys indicate a mundane-ness that comes out of being so sophisticated and worldly that such things as Chinese food is already passé.

3.2 CONSTRUING AND PERFORMING IDENTITY

Chinese restaurant owners are undoubtedly aware of mainstream American public perceptions of Chinese food. Any good businessperson must know their customer base in order to supply a saleable product. A Jewish caterer states, “Your customer is the person whom you are serving – you must reflect your customer, not you” (qtd in Prosterman, 128). Therefore, Chinese restaurant owners must know what people want from a Chinese restaurant. A Chinese restaurant owner cannot simply open a Chinese restaurant and nor a Chinese restaurant chef simply prepare foods that he or she knows and call it Chinese for its customers to consume. Customers must be able to recognize the food as Chinese, according to what they know as Chinese food as well. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is part of the restaurant business strategy to tap into market desires, however it may define Chinese cuisine. Hence, most Chinese restaurants sell egg rolls, fried rice, and General
Tso’s chicken because those are popular dishes that people recognize as being Chinese food. Mintz calls such dishes “signature foods because they stand for something more than themselves” (Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom, 95). Therefore, an egg roll is not just an egg roll; an egg roll is also Chinese food. It symbolizes the Chinese identity for its consumers. Chinese food therefore must self-consciously be aware of and perform this identity in a restaurant. Expression of ethnic identity is self-conscious and negotiated.

It is for this reason that restaurant owners often check out other pre-existing Chinese restaurants to get a sense of what kind of Chinese food sells in the US. After opening a restaurant in Illinois, Mark Pi decided to invest some time into examining other Chinese restaurants in the United States.

I take off one year and I take my wife and to tour all of United States, tour the restaurants, look at their different menus, and I drove around thirty six thousand miles, whole year, and studied restaurant business and then I open the restaurant after I return to Ohio. It was 150 cities, restaurants, that was 1978, I think.

He drove from Portland, Oregon to Columbus, Ohio, eating his way across the country. In each city he stopped at, he would ask locals to where the best Chinese restaurant was located, try the food, check out the location, observe decorations, service, and cleanliness to understand why people would recommend the place, why it was a success. Armed with this information, Mark Pi opened his Mark Pi’s Express food chain in Ohio.

Jack Jang, former owner of Hometown Gourmet Deli which specializes in gourmet Chinese food, also investigated other restaurants before opening his own. “The
menu, everybody copies each other's. But we kind of collected menus from New York and Los Angeles. And also our head cook, he also has his own. So combine the three... the three sources together.” As a result of this menu sharing, menus evolve into a standard fare which perpetuates itself as Chinese cuisine. Thus, Chinese restaurants often have very similar menus, despite the variety of regional cuisines that can be found in China.

These restauranteurs must be very aware of the nuances of their customer's taste. The famous Empress of China restaurant in San Francisco often plays host to tourists, dignitaries, and movie stars who come to town. Steplian Chan, general manager who had been employed there for thirty years, went to great lengths in an informal conversation with me to explain how the restaurant served first-class Chinese cuisine with chefs hand-picked and trained in Hong Kong. However, it is Mr. Chan who makes the ultimate decision on how a particular dish should be prepared and what ingredients should be included because it is he, as the host, who is the most familiar with his customers’ tastes from years of experience. He first tests out the dish, decides whether it is tasty and settles on the recipe. Then he serves it to the customer who provides the ultimate opinion. Restaurants do not want to intimidate their customers. It is for this reason that Mr. Chan takes care to de-bone the fish dishes for his customers rather than leaving it whole and Ms. Qiu from Wong Gei is wary of adding Chinese black beans. There is an understanding that compromises will be made in the food based on customer reception.

Restauranteurs discover and sell back the expectations that people have of a Chinese restaurant. In addition to food, they sell an experience. Wilbur Zelinsky
contends that “the proprietor of an overtly ethnic restaurant provides, and its patrons expect to receive, not simply a nourishing meal but, to a varying degree, an exotic experience, an effortless voyage into some distant enchantments” (462-3). What matters less is any actual fulfilling exercise in self-expression than performing an expected identity in order to keep afloat. The Chinese yet very American contextual experience is encoded in the food, menus, and decor. The décor of Chinese restaurants contributes to the performance of ethnicity as well.

When I originally began this project in my first year of graduate school, I believed that restaurants that overtly proclaimed “Chinese-ness” through the display of golden dragons, red painted walls, fat Buddha statues, and what I considered to be other stereotypical images of China, were restaurants that catered to a non-Chinese customer base. I felt that restaurants that communicated ethnicity in such loud visual ways did so in order to provide its patrons with an experience that afforded them a trip to China without the inconvenience or cost of actually traveling. However, I contrast these ideas with my actual memories and find that they are somewhat contradictory. As a child, my family and I would often go to a Chinese restaurant, Golden Palace, on Sundays in Washington, DC, an hour’s drive from Baltimore where we lived, and have a Chinese meal. It had huge cast-iron Chinese dragons on either side of the entrance. Inside, the chairs were high backed with black and red silk fabric. In the back, there was an elaborate gold and red Chinese bench which my parents told me was used for weddings, and a large golden carved dragon hung on the wall behind it. It was an ornate restaurant and in the seventies, we rarely, if ever, saw a non-Chinese patron eating there. Perhaps it
was because I was young, but I never felt that the space catered to anybody but Chinese patrons despite its ornate décor.

Wong Gei, however, has a minimum of decorations. It is a small space with seating for a maximum of thirty people. There are no overt displays of ethnicity except for a framed depiction of sailboats made of shells with Chinese characters on the side and a few stylized green squares reminiscent of “oriental” style on the wall by the register which were left over from the previous owner. Ms. Qiu described her restaurant as a lower-end restaurant that did not need to focus on decorations:

Like I said, we’re more of a lower end restaurant and our main theme in a restaurant, of our restaurant, is taste and consistency and price so therefore we kind of have students come in just for lunch, not for enjoyment. They just want to fill their stomachs up. So basically that serves the purpose. Therefore, we didn’t really want to focus on, you know, on decorating it, because people like to have, spend time and enjoy the environment as well.

PF Chang’s, a local Chinese restaurant chain, on the other hand, is a higher class restaurant according to her, and though she does not directly state it, my impression is that she sees its higher class standing as related to its focus on the experience and presentation of food. The lack of decorations at Wong Gei implied a focus on food, she seemed to say.

There is no specific rule on what determines the boundaries of a deliberate performance of identity versus an unconscious display of cultural and personal meaning. The decor and architecture in Chinese restaurants carry a range of varied shades and nuances of meaning. “Those who created, maintain, and interact with this built
environment engender the site’s social meanings through a host of individual voices that complement, contradict, and sometimes contest one another,” writes Joseph Sciorra (204). Chinese restaurants also carry in its physical space a host of different voices that contribute different meanings to the object of Chinese restaurant. Chinese restaurants often have a succession of multiple owners and the restaurants themselves are frequently pre-constructed sites that the owners have bought, converted, and/or redecorated or left alone. Chinese restaurants are not complete mirrors of the customers. Rather, they are possibilities of a continuum of meaning, finely balanced with expectation and desire of the customer base and unself-conscious displays of self.

3.3 AMERICAN CUISINE

Is Chinese food American food? No, according to many of the survey respondents. Even the respondents who did not care about authentic Chinese food did not consider Chinese food to be American, such as the one who firmly believed that hamburgers and steaks were American rather than rice. One might think that a person who did not care about authenticity in Chinese food, who ate primarily for taste, would not have stringent ideas about authenticity in general. But perhaps the issue here is not that one does not care about the boundaries of authenticity at all if one did not look for authenticity in Chinese food. Authenticity may just figure more highly in issues that carry importance to a person. For the respondents, it was what counted as American food as
Chinese food obviously did not. There seemed to be a sense of proprietorship over what was considered American.

The ones for whom authenticity did matter also believed that Chinese food was not American food. They believed that some Chinese foods have been Americanized, but ultimately remained in the category of Chinese food rather than American. Perhaps there is a fear of dilution or bastardization rather than a proprietary sense of American food. If, as Mintz believes, people tend to constantly seek out novelty, perhaps situating Chinese food as not-American helps to distinguish its difference. Food may no longer be as interesting or fun if it is part of our own heritage, culture, or identity because it becomes too familiar.

Italian, Mexican, and Chinese have been the three major ethnic cuisines in America. Italian food has definitely become part of American foodways as pizza, spaghetti, and pasta are rarely associated with its ethnic pre-incarnations. Before World War I, Italians were seen as unassimilable for their spaghetti-eating ways and minimal use of milk (Gabaccia, 123-4). However, with the advent of war, Americans were required to sacrifice meat and deal with food shortages. “Patriotic eating required the substitution of beans for meat,” writes Donna Gabaccia (137). It became patriotic to eat Italian food and women’s magazines began to feature Italian recipes which concentrated on vegetables and nominal use of meat (Gabaccia, 137). It became American to eat Italian. It has yet to become American to eat Chinese food.

Chinese restaurants have traditionally been mostly grassroots oriented. They have been owned singly by families rather than in chains, reaching mass America in bits and
pieces. It can be argued that there may be just as many if not more Chinese restaurants in the United States as there are Taco Bells, yet Taco Bell has become an American icon while Chinese restaurants remain foreign. By 1996, there were over 6,800 Taco Bells in 17 countries and territories (taken from official website www.tacobell.com). However, without an overall corporate body to market and package its food and ethnicity, perhaps Chinese restaurants will continue to remain just Chinese. Perhaps this is what Mark Pi understood as he embarked on an attempt to open a Mark Pi’s Chinese eatery in every city and hired executives from Wendy’s and McDonald’s to help him grow the business. But Chinese restaurants are on their way to becoming corporate and national as well.

Panda Express, a Chinese food chain based in California, is one of the largest with 500 stores in airports and malls, mostly in California (takea from official website www.pandaexpress.com). Unlike Taco Bell and Olive Garden who were not created by respective Mexicans or Italians, these Chinese restaurant chains were created and run by ethnic Chinese. Both Mark Pi’s and Panda Express were headed by Chinese chefs but are not yet part of a major corporate conglomeration. It lends itself to the question if corporatization is indeed the key to becoming American in a nation that operates on a capitalistic system. As more Chinese food chains turn up, it may become the case.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Chinese food has long been the object of fascination and exoticism, from suspicion in the 19th century to cosmopolitanism with the consumer of Chinese food an adventurer. Kaliyik claims that “people tend to eat as they would like to be perceived” (54). Chinese food would serve the purpose of positing the white American consumer as open-minded and worldly for trying something out so foreign. Even for the survey respondents who seemed so indifferent to issues of authenticity in Chinese food clearly believed that it did not count as American food. Chinese food was so common and passé and they were already savvy enough about the world to take it for granted that it existed, but not as part of the American landscape. In this way, Chinese restaurants serve as devices to describe them as worldly.

Defining Chinese and Chinese food as “oriental” and “exotic” also allows white Americans to see themselves as the norm, the standard which the Chinese are not. Toni Morrison writes that the “construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only in the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me” (14). Blackness was found only by defining what whites were not: not-free. Likewise, Chinese restaurants are described as not American and
therefore American-ness is defined by the boundaries of what it is not. Many of the survey respondents were not able to define what Chinese food was but could say what American food was not.

Conceptions of self and the other are finely balanced in Chinese restaurants. If white Americans can conceive of Chinese food as "other," they are thus able to perceive themselves as worldly. Chinese restaurants are aware that these perceptions exist, as many of them investigate and observe other Chinese restaurants for ideas on menus, décor, service, and other aspects before opening their own. They investigate how other Chinese restaurants have become successful and perpetuate those aspects, which very well may include aspects of exotification, in their own restaurant. As a result, these pre-existing notions continue to be commodified into concrete markers of Chinese culture such as egg rolls or hanging red lanterns. Restaurant owners build on these constructions the general public has already had of Chinese restaurants in the hopes of creating a successful business. Self-expression is limited, as we have seen in the limitations of restaurant décor and in what the owners put on their menu, especially when the aim is less of an cultural outlet than a business venture. As Lillian Qiu is conscious of not intimidating her customers by including black beans, Mark Pi is aware of items that could turn customers away. "Authentic Chinese food is depends on what kind of meat you select.....and authentic Chinese food, like tongues and intestines, pig feet, and the duck feet, and all those different kind is authentic. But we cannot put this
menu in the PF Chang or with this. We’re going to put this menu there, American
people are going to run away,” he says.

There is no rule or criteria for the degree to which a restaurant is constructed by
the owner or by patron but it is a negotiated balance of what is seen as Chinese and what
Chinese restaurant owners draw from their own regional cultural heritage that they
understand as Chinese. As a result, there are varying interpretations ranging from the
ornate Chinese restaurant from my childhood to the minimal Wong Gei to the fast
Chinese food chain of Mark Pi. Chinese food is “modified, but still Chinese” according
to expectations and tastes of the environment. In this way, Chinese restaurants reflect
this nuanced construction of Chinese identity in America that reflect the tension and
balance of using expressions marked as cultural for the purpose creating saleable
commodities.

This thesis is by no means the end of my inquiry. My interest in the topic stems
from my own experiences of being a part of a Chinese restaurant family. My family
owned and operated a Chinese take-out in Baltimore, MD for a period of over thirty
years in which my siblings and I often pitched in to help out after school and on the
weekends. Located in an urban neighborhood where the wealthy once lived but which
had succumbed to urban decay, the take-out was the site of many tensions in addition to
the ones of cultural negotiation and dynamics of identity. Our customers were primarily
low-income African Americans and I frequently witnessed the oppression of the social
inequities and injustices brought on by racism and poverty. Growing up, I did not think
to realize that Chinese restaurants were situated in a larger historical context and shaped
by people's perceptions of Chinese culture along with other issues and factors. I had grown up thinking that there were only two kinds of Chinese restaurants: one type that was like own take-out which provided inauthentic Chinese food for non-Chinese customers; another type which was like the restaurant my family patronized on Sundays which served "authentic" Chinese food. As a child, I was surprised to learn that others had experiences of Chinese restaurants that did not fit either type. As I grew older, I became curious to understand how other Chinese families who operated Chinese restaurants expressed their idea of Chinese restaurant and how larger social dynamics affected its construction.

This project carries rich potential for exploration as there are few other scholarly works on Chinese restaurants despite its frequent appearance in American culture and the physical geographic landscape. I look forward to understanding the stories of Chinese restaurant owners and its implications for better understanding construction of ethnic and immigrant cultural icons in the American context.
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