
DISSEPTION

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Nancy Yan

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Dissertation Committee:

Amy Shuman, Co-Director

Judy Wu, Co-Director

Patrick Mullen

Ray Cashman
Abstract

This dissertation investigates a key folkloric concept – authenticity – through an exploration of the Chinese restaurant. Scholars tend to be wary of using the term authenticity in conjunction with cultural expressions because of its association with dangerous nationalist movements, problematic boundaries, and potential for essentialism. Authenticity is often understood in the vein of continuity to the past; such an understanding implies singularity, stability and bounded concreteness rather than dynamism and fluidity in cultural expressions. As a result, in scholarship, claims of authenticity are often avoided or deconstructed as invalid or false. However, I argue that claims to authenticity can be valid and legitimate and that authenticity should be considered as multiple and flexible.

I examine one Chinese restaurant, one Chinese dish, and a small collection of vintage Chinese restaurant menus to investigate discourses on authenticity. Ding Ho, one of the oldest Chinese restaurants in Columbus, Ohio, embodies several features typical of Chinese restaurants but also contain anomalous elements in their operations which, according to some on-line restaurant reviews, mark the restaurant as inauthentic. However, I suggest that anomalies are not evidence of pollution of a Chinese restaurant’s authenticity but instead indicate variations within the category. Discourses on a Chinese restaurant’s authenticity include, for example, some patrons’ desire for access to the
Wor Sue Gai, the dish I focus on in my discussion, is a chicken dish often found in Chinese restaurants in Columbus, Ohio, and it is believed to be a local invention. While the actual origins of Wor Sue Gai are unclear, conversations about the dish on internet food discussion boards point to both Columbus, Ohio and Detroit, Michigan as its birthplace. Unlike chop suey, Wor Sue Gai’s Chinese-ness is not in question, although it is presumed to have been created in the United States. However, it still maintains a Chinese identity as well as a regional identity associated with both Columbus and Detroit. These multiple identities tell us that Wor Sue Gai, like any cultural expression, can sustain several co-existing identities. Authenticity is not about a single origin so much as it is about claiming a cultural expression as their own.

As cultural artifacts, Chinese restaurants menus serve as the public presentation of the restaurant’s identity. Earlier Chinese menus tend to have distinct separations of Chinese and American dishes, indicating the need to gently introduce Chinese cuisine and culture to an unfamiliar patron base. Analysis of the types of dishes, the transliterations of the names of dishes from Chinese to English, and visual images and illustrations on the restaurant menus reveal that authenticity is often contextual and negotiated to accommodate the restaurant’s clientele. Chinese restaurant menus operate as markers of social relationships.

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This dissertation argues that there are multiple authenticities in any cultural expression, that claiming authenticity is a valid act, that its authenticity can be based on claiming, and that claims of authenticity are contextual and relational.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family – my parents who worked at our Chinese carry-out for a livelihood, my siblings who “helped out,” and the extended family who also made their lives through the Chinese restaurant. I also dedicate this dissertation to all the other families who worked at Chinese restaurants everywhere to support themselves. Lastly, this dissertation is also for the women of color pursuing their dreams of a doctoral degree.
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Vita

1990................................................................. Dulaney High School

1994................................................................. B.A. International Affairs, George Washington University

2004................................................................. M.A. Department of Comparative Studies, The Ohio State University

2011 to present ............................................. Lecturer, Department of Comparative Studies, The Ohio State University Newark

Publications

“Wor Sue Gai and Claiming Local Identity.” *Digest*, the online journal of the Foodways section of the American Folklore Society, pending publication 2013.


Fields of Study

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Chapter 1: Introduction

How do we know if a cultural expression is authentic? This is a question that folklorists must consider in the study of practices that would represent a particular group. The concept of authenticity – that something is what it purports to be – has been foundational to folklore research. It has been a central dimension of the distinction between folklore and what Richard Dorson deemed “fakelore.” While claims of authenticity may be disputed, dismissed, or rejected as a valid concept, folklore as authentic is still very real to many people. Folklorists and scholars of other disciplines have often understood authenticity as a construct, that cultural practices that were once deemed traditional have in fact been altered, or have foreign or capricious origins, or have undergone a variety of modifying influences (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Bendix 1997). For example, Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin find that some cultural traditions in Hawaii were not as ancient or as indigenous as previously believed (1984). Because of such complicated and imprecise origins of so many claims of authenticity, many scholars have concluded that the notion that authenticity exists is a fallacy. In addition, scholars might have us dismantle the idea of authenticity, claiming that its use has been more harmful than helpful (Abrahams 1993, Bendix 1997). Concepts of authenticity have often been used as key instruments in perpetuating genocide as a result.
of nationalist conflicts, for example, the dissolution of Yugoslavia during the 1990s. It is not unreasonable then that scholars might view authenticity as a deeply troublesome and problematic notion.

Claims of authenticity have certainly been used to dominate and to disempower, as Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger have shown in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). Invented traditions, according to Hobsbawm and Ranger, are practices that seek to instill specific values and behaviors by implying that these practices have had a long, continuous, and unchanging precedence from the past. However, their definition does not address the idea that “invented traditions” do not necessarily mean that they cannot somehow become legitimate traditions that are accepted by a community as part of their culture. Of course, this is the very idea that Hobsbawm and Ranger seem to be challenging – that invented traditions should or could ever be legitimized. It is understandable, for the examples of invented traditions that they present are also examples of exploitation. Ultimately, the intent of their work is to deconstruct so-called traditions to shed light on what they really are: inauthentic traditions that should not be taken as legitimate.

While authenticity can be used to oppress, as in some of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s examples of invented traditions, it can also be used to legitimate and empower. For historically oppressed groups that have experienced colonialism and cultural erasure, claiming authenticity in certain cultural expressions or practices may be a tool of empowerment and resistance to oppression. Authenticity claims arise not only in situations of post-colonialism, but also when there is any change in cultural practices or a
shift in its context. Examples might include perceived outsiders influencing or practicing local or insider traditions or diasporic cultural identity that is influenced by multiple sources. Arjun Appadurai observantly states that “The concern with authenticity indicates some sort of doubt” (1986: 25). He was referring to authenticity in culinary traditions, but his observation is applicable to any cultural tradition. For a culture or tradition subject to erasure or displaced from its context, subsequent attempts at recovery or revival may involve doubt. Claims to authenticity can be challenges to that erasure. I would also add to Appadurai’s statement that in addition to indications to doubts, the concern with authenticity is also present where there is some sort of stake or investment in the cultural tradition. Authenticity matters when it concerns a subject that is important to us. People find value in authenticity because authenticity can confer legitimacy, whether it is for themselves or for outsiders.

It is a significant oversight that the empowering potential of authenticity is not given as much attention as the harm that can result from claims of authenticity where one particular version of a practice or expression of identity is considered pure in order to exclude other variations as contaminants. Negating the harm of such designations of purity as authenticity often means weakening the power that underly authenticity – usually claims that rely on longevity and origins. When authenticity relies on the idea of origins, then it becomes much easier for scholars to dismantle, for the cultural expressions or traditions that the claims of authenticity often rest upon can be hard to pin down. Cultural expressions and traditions do not operate as concrete or bounded objects with specific origin points; they are malleable and often have indistinct origins with
multiple influences. But scholars who focus on origin stories in claims of authenticity provide only a limited picture of authenticity. What their texts have missed is the changing and flexible and multiple nature of authenticity claims.

In my dissertation, what I focus on are the arguments which assert that there is no such thing as authenticity because it tends to rely on fixed origins and traditions, rarely have distinct origin points but instead have multiple or external influences. Instead, I wanted to explore how authenticity might be considered in cultural expressions in less high-stakes contexts such as nationalist movements where challenging claims of authenticity might be expected and assumed. I thought it would be useful to examine authenticity from a perspective of positive value rather than the standpoint of detriment. As a counterbalance to dismissals of authenticity, I wanted to explore authenticity as fluid and multiple rather than from a stance of origins and stability.

While the issue of authenticity is the overall subject, my case study/text is the Chinese restaurant in the United States. The Chinese restaurant compelled me as a research site to investigate authenticity. As Appadurai noted, the concern with authenticity indicates the presence of doubt. I was interested in how some Chinese restaurants could be considered authentic and why others were not, why was there doubt about the authenticity of Chinese restaurant. In addition, I wanted to know what the investment in the authenticity of Chinese restaurants, or why it mattered to some people. I initially chose to study Chinese restaurants because there seemed to be a dearth of scholarship on the subject. Chinese restaurants have been an important part of Chinese American life; it is an ethnic niche occupation that has been the mainstay for many
Chinese families. Anecdotally, it seems as if most of my Chinese American acquaintances or friends have had some type of tie to a Chinese restaurant business, either their immediate or extended family had owned one. Like Chinese laundries before, Chinese restaurants are an assumed part of Chinese American culture. However, there are already two scholarly books on Chinese laundries whereas there is none on Chinese restaurants. What does exist are cookbooks, restaurant reviews, and cooking shows. There is some scholarship on Chinese foodways, but much of what exists in relation to Chinese restaurants is generally related to food. They do not address the larger site of the Chinese restaurant or get at the richer questions of life in the Chinese restaurant or the place of Chinese restaurants in the American context. Considering its ubiquity on the American landscape, I expected to find more studies on the phenomenon of Chinese restaurants.

More recently, there has been an increasing interest in Chinese restaurants as evidenced by more mainstream books such as Jennifer Lee’s *Fortune Cookie Chronicles* (2008), the “Have You Eaten?” exhibit presented by the Chinese Museum of the Americas1, and a forthcoming traveling exhibit on Chinese food and restaurants at the Smithsonian. But again, the focus is primarily on food and they do not provide a theoretical framework in which to understand Chinese restaurants. As interest and studies on Chinese restaurants grow, I expect that the broadness of current approaches will develop into more detailed examinations that explore aspects other than food.

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1 [www.mocanyc.org](http://www.mocanyc.org)
Businesses that serve Chinese food can be found in almost every city, small town, and shopping mall. Chinese restaurants are part of ordinary life, seemingly integrated into mainstream society. It is a very familiar act to “eat Chinese” or order Chinese take-out. In popular culture, Chinese food is frequently depicted as a part of everyday normal life and Chinese restaurants are just another restaurant that people might go to. For example, in the sitcom Big Bang Theory, the characters are often eating Chinese take-out food together, but it is a backdrop and usually does not serve to move the main story along. In one episode of *The Mindy Project* sitcom, the main character Mindy’s surprise birthday party takes place at a Chinese restaurant, but the restaurant provides no further contribution to the story.\(^2\) Such pop culture depictions tell us that Chinese food and restaurants have become mainstream. In a sense, they are unmarked because it can stand out as something that does not have to be considered or thought about. At the same time, it is still marked as being “Chinese” rather than simply as food or restaurant and is recognized as not is what is typically considered to be “American.” “Eating Chinese” food is global in the sense that ordering Chinese take-out is also quite familiar in many countries outside of China. It can mean different things to different people in different countries. Is it cheap low-cost food simply meant to fill the stomach for not much money? Or is it seen as good quality fresh food that presents a healthy alternative to the local cuisine? It can also serve as an exotic foray that marks one as sophisticated and worldly. It is a relatively safe contact zone area, the space where groups that have

\(^2\) *The Mindy Project*: Season 1, Episode 17 Mindy's Birthday (19 Mar. 2013).
historically and geographically been separate encounter each other (Pratt 1992), that does not make threatening challenges. Overall, Chinese restaurants are more complex than the familiar backdrop status to which it is often relegated.

What strikes me in conversations about Chinese restaurants is how often the issue of authenticity arises. People are interested in knowing which restaurants are authentic, what distinguishes an authentic Chinese restaurant, and what are authentic Chinese dishes. My dissertation is thus the intersection of these two great and unwieldy topics: authenticity and Chinese restaurants. How does something so familiar that is also exotic carry many complex markers including the authentic, exotic, everyday, local and global at the same time, and how does it maintain all of these markers over time? The Chinese restaurant is a rich site for understanding phenomena in America that people may not give much thought to and may challenge mainstream understandings of how authenticity operates.

*Dictionary.com* defines authentic as: “not false or copied; genuine; real.” This admittedly lay source, perhaps reflecting common usage, operates on the premise that authenticity is based on fixed criteria for judgment. The idea that authenticity is “not false or copied, genuine, real” implies singularity. “Falseness” indicates the presence of a truth. “Copying” indicates that, perhaps, plurality is disingenuous. “Genuine” assumes that there is a consensus on what is genuine. Such a definition is simplistic, yet it also speaks to common understandings of what “authentic” means. Scholars seem to understand that authenticity is a construct but also tend to see it as something static – that

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is, that there is only one idea or expression of authenticity. While many may disagree about what this stable idea or expression of authenticity might be, they accept the framework that authenticity lies in singularity. But questions of authenticity are not just about origins; they are also about how people experience their social world. People make claims about the authenticity of their encounters with food, identity, traditions, or other cultural expressions, in order to make a statement about value and ownership. The question of what constitutes authenticity is pervasive, but it is also a limiting question, especially when applied to expressions of culture. Authenticity is expected to have concrete defined boundaries that will determine what can belong and what should not belong to a particular cultural category. But a concept as complex as “culture” cannot be reduced to simplistic categories of belonging or not-belonging. The idea of authenticity does seem to lend itself to stable boundaries. As a bounded notion, however, can it thus be used to describe a concept that is understood to be dynamic? Nevertheless, this desire to find or define authenticity in cultural categories persists. In examining Chinese restaurants, it is evident that there are various interpretations of what constitutes an “authentic Chinese restaurant.” Not only are there multiple definitions of authenticity, but for different people, the burden of authenticity is also located in different aspects of the Chinese restaurant experience – ranging from the type of food served, to the ethnicity of the employees, and the type of clientele dining there.

My work is based in the intersection of two fields: Folklore and Asian American studies. A simple and broad definition of folklore would be “human expression,” as labor folklorist and a chief architect of the American Folklife Bill Archie Green once told me.
Occasionally, I offer a slightly less general definition of folklore as the study of customs, traditions, and heritage. As Martha Sims and Martine Stephens acknowledge, folklore is not easy to define and there are several scholarly definitions (2005). However, they offer the following working definition:

Folklore is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures, and our traditions, that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors, and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people. (8, 12)

Sims and Stephens’ definition is a more precise explanation of the nuances that the folklore discipline examines in folklore research. Using this definition, my research on Chinese restaurants is about the dynamic processes that influence the perception and expression of the Chinese restaurant. I also consider my research to be part of Asian American folklore. Currently, Asian American folklore studies is still embryonic, mostly unheard of nor as established as a sub-discipline as the folklore research of other groups of color such as African American folklore or Native American folklore. Recently, at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, a panel discussed the possibilities of what constituted Asian American folklore. A solid definition did not emerge from that panel presentation but a special issue of the Journal of American Folklore will be devoted to Asian American folklore.

Unlike African American folklore or Native American folklore which have strong backgrounds in oral literature, the study of Asian American culture does not have a
strong oral literary element. Thus, I envision Asian American folklore as the study of practices, customs, and beliefs of people of Asian descent in the American context. It may be related to connections to the “motherland” such as adaptations of holidays or foodways. However, it is not restricted to ties or concerns with ancestral lands as some practices or customs are developed in the United States and/or have little connection with Asian traditions. For instance, one subject of Asian American folklore might be the study of rice burner culture – young Asian Americans in California who modify their cars so that they are or appear to be faster. Another subject might be the intra-ethnic jokes that Asian Americans tell each other about their own particular ethnic group or about other Asian ethnic groups. Another subject might be how Asian Americans celebrate American holidays such as Thanksgiving that includes what are perceived as traditional American traditions as well as customs from their own ethnic backgrounds. My contribution to the development of this field is my research on issues of authenticity in the Chinese restaurant.

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I review the major literature that has informed my understanding of authenticity. First, I address works that expressly deal with conceptions of authenticity and tradition in folklore and nationalism. As tradition is often associated with claims of authenticity, it is important to consider them hand in hand. These works explore authenticity in terms of tradition and origins and conclude that in

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4 I want to make note of the distinction between Asian American literature and Asian American oral literature. Asian American literary studies usually focuses on the creative written works of Asian American writers. There does not seem to be a strong oral literary component of Asian American studies that would be the equivalent of Native American folktales or African American folksongs. While Asian folktales and folksongs certainly do exist, I do not include them in the category of Asian American studies if they are not based in the American context.
light the complications claims of authenticity have wrought, society might be better served if its power was defused. Second, I explore the link between authenticity and ethnic identity and provide an overview of Asian American Studies scholarship. Third, I look at how food is an important marker of ethnic identity. I conclude that while authenticity can be used to suppress, it can also be source of comfort and that authenticity claims can be multiple.

In Chapter 3, I explain my methodology for my research. Because the Chinese restaurant is so complex, I explain the multiple possible approaches for the study of Chinese restaurants and how I have narrowed my focus to one restaurant, one dish, and a study of vintage Chinese restaurant menus. I discuss my interview techniques and the types of questions I asked. I also question the insider/outsider paradigm in conducting ethnographic research and consider the ways in which to broach the directed and specific question of authenticity to restaurant owners without being disrespectful or influencing the direction of the interview. I also address the value of examining vintage Chinese restaurant menus and how I acquired the menus.

In Chapter 4, I focus on one Chinese restaurant – Ding Ho, located in the West Side of Columbus, Ohio. I demonstrate that Ding Ho, as a Chinese restaurant, contains seemingly conflicting aspects that may mark it as an “inauthentic” Chinese restaurant. However, Ding Ho also maintains several elements that follow the trajectory of many other Chinese restaurants. I discuss the role of categories in claims of authenticity. I then discuss the “secret Chinese menu” as a bastion of authenticity and describe restaurant patrons’ desire for access to it as an Orientalist move. I conclude by arguing that Ding
Ho is an example of the multiplicity of authenticity in cultural expressions; its seeming contradictions are examples of the multiple ways that Chinese restaurants can be expressed.

In Chapter 5, I examine the dish Wor Sue Gai, a Chinese dish that is considered to be locally created but it still maintains an identity of being Chinese. I document my efforts to track down the origins of the dish. Unlike chop suey, it has not faced the same type of scrutiny about its purported authenticity. I challenge the idea that chop suey is inauthentic and explore its origin stories. I conclude that what Wor Sue Gai demonstrates that authenticity is about claiming the this status, despite murky origins.

In Chapter 6, I examine a series of vintage Chinese restaurant menus and make note of the common characteristic of offering a Chinese menu alongside an American menu. I note other characteristics of the menus and their values in providing information not only about the restaurant itself, but about the standing of the Chinese community in the larger sphere of American culture.

I conclude my dissertation with a review of my chapters and make the final suggestion that although authenticity is multiple and flexible, on an individual level, people have attachments to more static ideas about authenticity. Thus, on a macro level, there are multiple conceptions of authenticity as different people have different definitions of what counts as authentic in subjects that are important to them. However, on an individual level, people may have more defined boundaries. While authenticity is indeed multiple and flexible in the larger scheme of things, ultimately, authenticity is subjective and personal.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review is designed to present a fundamental conflict between folklore scholarship on authenticity and scholarship on Asian American ethnic identity. I will document how discourses about authenticity became central to folklore scholarship and how those discourses have been critiqued. The folklore field has clearly been uncomfortable with accepting arguments of authenticity as legitimate - some scholars outright rejecting it and others carefully qualifying its use. However, scholarship on Asian American groups finds that some communities use authenticity as a crucial legitimator in their discourses on belonging and identity. I present scholarship that explores the desire for authenticity in the search for a stable cultural identity among Asian American communities. As foodways scholarship has shown, food is often a medium in which to express cultural identity. I review several cases where food is closely linked to cultural identity and the authenticity of food is key to maintaining ties to cultural identity. This review thus highlights the conflict between an academic rejection of authenticity and the key role that authenticity plays in working out ideas of cultural belonging and identity as expressed through foodways as the medium of cultural
expression. I will conclude with my argument that authenticity is a valid claim and that there are multiple definitions of it in any cultural expression.

_Folklore, Authenticity, and National Identity_

The study of folklore in its earliest days was a move to define national identity which emerged out of the Romantic Nationalism movement that was occurring in Europe during the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries (Wilson 1989; Abrahams 1993). William A. Wilson describes Romantic Nationalism in the early days as “little more than the wistful dreams of scholars and poets who endeavored through constant education and propaganda to kindle the spark of national consciousness in the hearts of their lethargic countrymen” (1989: 23). As Wilson noted, it was Johann Gottfried Herder, the 18\textsuperscript{th} century German scholar, who concluded that nations were unique entities that developed individual characteristics based on the physical geography of the land. He proposed two major ideas that would become central to his ideas about German nationalist movements. First, he believed that each historical epoch was born out of the previous age, thus bearing continuity to the past. Second, he viewed each epoch as having unique individual elements that constituted the whole. From this he concluded that nations also operated in a similar manner – that nations were also unique entities that developed individual characteristics based on the physical geography of the land. He was troubled by the idea that Germany was losing its particular individuality, indeed, the very character of German-ness. But Herder believed that one could, as Wilson characterized it, “explain
the nature of a thing by studying its origin” (Wilson 1989: 25) and that the soul of nation could be found in the folk poetry of the peasants who had not mimicked the ways of the French as the German upper class had done. And thus began his call to collect the folk poetry of Germans as a move towards nationalism.

This project of collecting folk poetry to mine the essential elements of German nationhood seemed to be an early exercise in coupling authenticity with identity. Herder saw works such as Homer’s *The Odyssey* as the expression of the Greek soul (Wilson 1989: 28). Likewise, British literature was renowned because, in his eyes, it had maintained continuity with its cultural heritage from ancient times (Wilson 1989: 29). The Germans, on the other hand, accepted French cultural influence and ideas to the degree that even the writers of the day used French to write their poetry (Wilson 1989: 26, 28). These Germans writers, Herder felt, were not suitable for his project of national identity for it was too heavily influenced by other cultures. In keeping with his philosophy of continuity and purity, it is easy to see how the German peasantry became valorized as the repositories of German-ness. They were untouched by foreign influences, so he believed. In addition, they had continued to speak German, unlike the German elites who had by and large abandoned German for French. We can thus see how understandings of the authenticity of a nation rested on ideas of language and continuity to the past. This idea of authenticity as unspoiled, as un-influenced by foreign culture becomes part of the methodology of Romantic Nationalism and by association, part of the folklore field.
Wilson recognized that Herder’s Romantic Nationalism was essentially a folkloric undertaking, but that Romantic Nationalists “attempted not only to reconstruct the past, but also to revive it – to make it the model for the development of their nations” (1989: 34-35). However, for Roger Abrahams, that folkloristics is so closely related to Romantic Nationalism is a reason for caution, as he discusses in “Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics” (1993). If Romantic Nationalism was essentially a folklore project, then folklore projects were, in a sense, attempts to recover an essential past. Abrahams claims that folklorists have long been involved with nation-building projects as cultural advocates, but do not always recognize that “we have been involved in a politics of culture for a very long time” (Abrahams 1993: 4). This blind spot poses detrimental implications for our work if we choose to simply view folklore as a-historical for “if we neglect such political matters in the discussion of tradition and authenticity, we put political naivete at the service of tyrants and other power-seekers” (Abrahams 1993: 8). In the context of the reshaping of new national boundaries at the end of the Cold War era, Abrahams feared that “one people’s nationalism can be transformed into the means by which other people’s are disenfranchised” (1993: 5). Indeed, his was not an unfounded fear, His fear was that without more reflexivity on how folkloristics developed, “the kernel of racism that grew out of the perverted variations of Romantic Nationalism that have underwritten so many versions of genocide in the 20th century” (Abrahams 1993: 21) could easily be nurtured under the guise of folklore work. It is perhaps this fear that authenticity, so central to the work of so many national movements,
that modern folklorists have been wary of accepting claims of authenticity in cultural expressions.

Interestingly enough, it was another folklore scholar who made distinctions between the fake and the real despite rejecting the notion of national folklore. Richard Dorson, a mid-century folklore scholar who established the folklore department at Indiana University, coined the term “fakelore” which he used to describe those tales in printed magazines and books that masqueraded as folklore rather than existing among the “folk.” Behind the idea of fakelore was a strong critique of how America was envisioning itself, thanks to the works of James Stevens who published Paul Bunyan tales (1925) and Benjamin Botkin who produced a collection of American folktales (1945) which did not portray the multicultural society that Dorson saw. He wrote, “Folklore study builds bridges from the intellectuals to the unlettered, from the native-born to the foreign-born, from one nationality group to another. It can dispel our ignorance of America’s many cultural traditions, and restore faith and pride to “minorities” smarting under the stigma of alien backgrounds” (1950: 335). Dorson viewed the United States as very much a pluralistic society in which folklore was invaluable not only to build bridges but also to maintain this plurality. His critique was that “The exclusive nativism of the American folklore sold in anthologies and taught in schools does both social and cultural injustice” (1950: 339). While he rejected the idea that there was such a thing as national folklore or lore otherwise connected to regions, he still maintained the belief that there was still an authenticity to be had in folklore in the form of “oral vitality” (1950: 336). In Dorson’s eyes, true folklore consisted of “The tales, songs, sayings, crafts, pass down the
generations by word of mouth” (1950: 336). Of course, we may argue that his distinctions between folklore and fakelore were flawed, that print versus oral was a false dichotomy, that print could produce or perpetuate its own distinctive type of folklore, that the creativity in printed tales was a mechanism also to be found in those passed down oral tales that he so privileged, etc, etc. But Dorson seemed to see fakelore, instead of simply being a mechanism to separate truth from lies, as more of a condemnation of the narrow vision of American folklore in which he identified printed tales as the culprit. However, it is that dichotomy of fake versus real, the implied authentic versus the implied inauthentic that remains in understanding fakelore. The concept of fakelore as separate from “true” folklore remains one of Dorson’s enduring legacies.

Regina Bendix’s work *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (1997) examines how authenticity has been used to shape the folklore discipline. From its roots in the German Volkskunde, folklore has been used historically to search for the authentic - idealized as an escape from the artifice of modernity and to provide the uniqueness of a nation (Bendix 1997: 8). In Europe, the authentic lay in the “uncorrupted” pastoral peasantry whose songs and oral texts were its markers (Wilson 1989; Abrahams 1993; Bendix 1997). The interest in collecting these markers of authenticity led to an increased focus on the texts and actual objects as its expression rather than the people themselves as the capricious creative architects of authenticity. Coupled with the burgeoning efforts in the 19th century to use scientific principles for any academic study, authenticity was seen in terms of bounded-ness rather than fluidity.
America, without a volkskunde of its own, did not have such a ready-made source of its authenticity. As in Europe, song-collecting became key in identifying the distinctiveness of its national identity. Bendix notes that William Wells Newell, founder of the American Folklore Society, identified four areas where folklore studies should direct its attention: English relics, American Negro folklore, native tribe folklore, and other ethnic groups (Bendix 1997: 125-126). The field began moving away from song-collecting as its primary means of fieldwork in the mid to late 20th century towards performance theory in an attempt to legitimize the field and to address the politics of cultural representation. However, as Bendix writes, “Authenticity lingered in these efforts to legitimize and celebrate diversity” (1997: 189). In the US, folklore seemed to be less about the “common folk” as was the case in Germany, but more about capturing the essence of ethnic groups – the Native Americans, the African Americans, the new immigrants. Roger Abrahams describes American folklorists as having “long used folk to refer to a group that has developed traditions because of its perceived isolation or special interests and practices” (1993: 9). All this was cast in an urgency to collect and preserve before it was “corrupted” by modern society, much like the fear that was present in Europe’s folklore field.

This movement likely went hand in hand with the general perception that new immigrants to America sought to cast off trappings from the old country and assimilate into American culture. However, the desire to collect ethnic folklore in its “pure” state implied in many ways that modernity rested in America and primordialism/primitivism/pastoral was an intrinsic part of the mother country (as if
change and modernization were not global phenomena). But as ethnic studies grew in the 1960s, folklorists recognized that this paradigm was problematic in that it did not address the inevitability of cultural adaptations (Stern and Cicala 1991) or, as Arjun Appadurai noted, that localizations could be created by globalization (1996). Bendix writes that the “acceptance of ethnic innovation may have been hampered by ethnicity studies concentrating on narrative genres, for the study of narrative carried a large theoretical and methodological burden in establishing authenticity” (Bendix 1997: 208). The theoretical or methodological burden is presumably the difficulty in establishing the origins of a narrative or its veracity as the genuine article. Perhaps this was the case for the non-Native American folklorists interested in collecting Native American folktales or for the folklorists who forayed into studying ethnic culture. It is not clear what type of ethnicity studies she is referencing, but for Ethnic Studies as a field, this was not the problem it faced. Ethnic Studies sought to recover the overlooked and/or silenced histories of ethnic groups (Native Americans, Black, Chicano, Asian American) in America and provide education that was relevant to their lives and communities (Umemoto 1989; Wei 1993) rather than solely focus on narrative genres. The acceptance of ethnic innovation may have been hampered more by the academic constraints that narrative theory imposed on the study of ethnicity in folklore. In addition, as Bendix herself notes, guidelines that parceled public funds for folklore projects were informed by lawmakers’ understanding of “authentic folklore” which tended to be narrower than that of the folklorists (Bendix 1997: 210). Rather than an internal identity search, authenticity was often a descriptor that was externally imposed. Mary Hufford recognized that culture was far more
complex than the guidelines of federal heritage efforts and that, in many cases, led to an emphasis on certain traditions rather than others for their aesthetics in order to gain funding (1994: 3).

Bendix admits that “Ethnicity and authenticity have grown to be uneasy partners in areas other than folkloristics” (1997: 210). This uneasy pairing has led academics to often dismiss authenticity as a construct, perpetually shifting so that there is no stability to the idea of authenticity: “Authenticity thus proves to be contextually emergent, lacking the essence that human beings have wished to attach to it” (Bendix 1997: 210). This may be true, yet what is also lacking is the acknowledgment that despite the critical examination of authenticity and its contextually emergent nature, authenticity continues to be a powerful ingredient in the self-realization, identity, and political power into which ethnic groups are boxed. There is a history that has forced ethnic groups into identifying and using authenticity as a means of empowerment and power – the urging to collect folklore from the mother country before American acculturation has bastardized it, the use of academic disciplines to impose standards and ways of thinking that nurture ideas of authentic essentialism in the study of ethnic identity, the lawmakers’ notions of authenticity in deciding which projects to dole public funds to – these are unavoidable facts in the pairing of ethnicity and authenticity. While Bendix recognizes the complications and potential downfalls of ascribing authenticity to any cultural expression, she does not seem to support its empowering possibilities. In her concluding remarks, she writes that she “advocates laying to rest the uses of authenticity within scholarship, and it constitutes my effort to undermine the social and political power of
discourses on authenticity” (Bendix 1997: 227). In addition, she writes that “Rather than giving in to the temptation of constructing new, elusive authenticities, cultural scholarship aware of the deceptive nature of authenticity concepts may turn its attention toward learning to tell the story of why human search for authenticity and why this search is fraught with such agony” (Bendix 1997: 227-228). She is correct in thinking that scholars must be aware of the complexities, complications, and deceptions that authenticity may engender, yet we must resist the temptation to dismiss it and undermine it by simply because of these potentially harmful scenarios. Rather than deconstructing authenticity, we may be better served to accept that there are multiple authenticities and accept it as an unstable concept. As a powerful tool that ethnic groups have used to gain recognition and voice, it cannot be so easily dismissed for such a move would leave ethnic groups with less power to dismantle cultural hegemony.

*Invented Traditions*

   It may or may not be due to Dorson’s legacy, but it is quite seductive to understand claims of authenticity in terms of dismantlement. We question a cultural expression’s continuity to the past, we question its claims to group identity, we question its link to land and nation. We approach claims of authenticity with skepticism. To be fair, there are many historical examples of authenticity being used as tools of oppression. How people define cultural authenticity is often based on the idea of tradition – that a practice has been rooted in the past since time immemorial and bears continuity into the
The first area of critique of the concept of authenticity is based on 1) the awareness that traditions are often invented and 2) observations about the role of colonial and other powers in using invented traditions for purposes of control.

Bendix’s desire to undermine the power and authority of notions of authenticity is understandable as there are many historical examples of authenticity being used as a tool of oppression. How people define cultural authenticity is often based on the idea of tradition – that a practice has been rooted in the past since time immemorial and bears continuity into the present. However, as Hobsbawm and Ranger observed, many traditions have been invented and put forth as “authentic” by empires seeking to expand and justify their international forays. They may appear to be based on a long history, but are actually recent in origin or, in fact, “invented” (1983: 1). They state that “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1983: 1). In other words, “invented traditions” are those deliberate practices that imply deep historical roots in order to reinforce a specific set of beliefs. In many cases, these “invented traditions” are essentially a jockey for power, either to maintain or to resist it. For example, Terence Ranger, in “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa” (1983), describes the invented traditions of white settlers in Africa who emphasized those aspects in trade and professional occupations that would highlight and heighten their own authority as a means to establish and maintain dominance over the local people. Many of the white settlers who belonged to the lower classes of Britain found new social standing
in an Africa where social standing was based on color (Ranger 1983: 213). Ranger writes, “They drew upon European invented traditions both to define and to justify their roles, and also to provide models of subservience into which it was sometimes possible to draw Africans” (1983: 211). For instance, craft union rituals were revived or outright invented (such as the requirement of “blasting certificates”) in order to exclude Africans from joining (Ranger 1983: 213). The white settlers also saw themselves as “gentlemen,” whether it was as a farmer, shopkeeper, or policeman (though these were not upper class occupations in Britain by any means) and as gentlemen, they emphasized deliberate pageantry in official events and other “gentile” trappings such as having servants. Such “invented traditions” posed a framework in which “some Africans could become members of governing class” (Ranger 1983: 220) but only through relationships of master and servant where the white settlers, of course, were the masters, or by taking on white European conduct (Ranger 1983: 227). Ranger describes such practices as “invented.” Indeed, in one sense they are invented as they do not have a long standing history in the context that it was used. However, these practices were not completely new creations as the word “invented” might suggest. These customs did have a historical link to practices in Britain, whether they were dated, revived, or contemporaneous. What Ranger seems to want to do is deflate the oppressive power of these traditions by labeling them as invented and thus deconstruct its legitimacy, but the truth is that they were more or less manipulated rather than “invented.” This is an example of the power of historical practice as a legitimating factor for various purposes.
In the case of British colonial adventures in Africa, “ostensible” traditions were used to subjugate. On the other hand, “invented traditions” were also a means to claim power. Hugh Trevor-Roper in “The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Culture of Scotland” (1983) writes that the origins of the Scottish kilt were not as ancient as popularly believed, but a modern invention developed after Scotland united with England. Kilts were previously worn by the Highlanders in Scotland, but most of Scottish society generally considered Highlanders to be a rough low people rather than as proper Scots. In fact, Trevor-Roper writes that Highlanders were more of a population overflow from Ireland rather than a distinct group and that its culture was more or less a “retrospective invention” that occurred during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1983: 15-16). The newly emphasized Highland culture was a refutation of sorts in an attempt to claim that Scotland was the mother culture of Ireland rather than the other way around. Thus, the kilt was taken as a distinct identity marker to differentiate Scottish culture from England.

While it may be true that kilts were not “created” on Scottish land and in Scottish culture, the fact remains that it continues to exist as a distinctly Scottish concept in popular understanding. Trevor-Roper maintains that the kilt (or kilt-like clothing) had origins in Ireland and that the modern kilt was actually an invention of an Englishman – Sir Walter Scott – as part of a pageant for a Hanoverian king (1983: 19) For Trevor-Roper, it seems that the traceable, relatively modern, and self-conscious heritage of the kilt negates claims of Scottish authenticity for Trevor-Roper. However, such critiques ignore the processes that cultural traditions do make. There is no holy original starting
point of any tradition. Cultural expressions cross boundaries of place and space, are shared, exchanged, altered, adopted, subtracted, and built upon. Any tracing of any tradition would likely yield influences that are not purely native to the culture it is associated with. Though the modern kilt was self-consciously adopted in relatively recent times as a marker of Scottish heritage, it does not detract from its meaning and importance to the claimers. Perhaps not ancient as believed, but it did exist in some form previous to the eighteenth century as Trevor-Roper admitted himself (1983: 15) His premise for distinguishing between “invented” tradition versus a genuine tradition seems to be based on the idea that it cannot be deliberate, recent, or adopted from another form in another culture. Trevor-Roper and other scholars deconstruct specific examples in which certain traditions have been manipulated for political purposes; however, it is also potentially very damaging to apply such methods to all cultural expressions and thus conclude its inauthenticity. Such a move dismisses and dismantles the strength and power that a group might have invested in a cultural expression that means something to them. Trevor-Roper misses the point that authenticity need not lay in time immemorial – it’s about claiming a marker of identity, even if once rejected before, even if it had fuzzy or multiple origins. It is one thing to trace the origins to another culture; it is quite another to proclaim it as disingenuous for its less than exact origins. This leads to the question of how one should define tradition: how can a culture indisputably claim ownership of a cultural expression or use it as a marker of cultural identity?

In cases where authenticity is used as a tool of empowerment to challenge oppression, the skeptical approach becomes a bit more tricky. Richard Handler and
Jocelyn Linnekin’s article “Tradition: Genuine or Spurious?” (1984) seeks to move the understanding of tradition as “an inherited body of customs and beliefs” (273) to a definition that views tradition as “a process of thought – an ongoing interpretation of the past” (274). They argue that tradition is not an unchanging body of ideas with fixed boundaries and that understanding tradition as a completely symbolic construction is the only feasible option that can address its complexities. Yet, as they note, there is also a vagueness about the term. Should tradition be understood to be an unchanging body of ideas with fixed boundaries or is it a completely symbolic construction? The conventional understanding of tradition comes from a heritage of scientific thought that relies on the idea of an unchanging core; it treats cultural traditions as if they were concrete objects with actual boundaries. But Handler and Linnekin dismiss the idea that tradition can be treated as such and argue that understanding tradition as symbolic and constructed can address its nuances. Culture constantly changes as do traditions; attempted revivals of traditions change the very traditions they attempt to revive (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 276). Thus, there is no exacting fixed body that survives the ages but rather, tradition is adapted and altered as it is enacted in the present. They conclude that

Traditions are neither genuine nor spurious, for if genuine tradition refers to the pristine and immutable heritage of the past, then all genuine traditions are spurious. But if, as we have argued, tradition is always defined in the present, then all spurious traditions are genuine. Genuine and 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)
It is an admirable move, one that allows for a more nuanced interpretation of tradition and claims to authenticity. However, such a move can also be tricky territory. In the case of Hawaii, the authors find that several traditions that were believed to be ancient were in fact more modern than generally believed. The Hawaiian sovereignty/indigenous movement emphasized several indigenous traditions as a means to bolster their claim to native lands. Areas such as Keanae or other Hawaiian owned lands were seen as bastions of traditional culture, but the authors finds that many of its residents live a much more modern lifestyle. The residents are quite conscious of the reputation of the islands and attempt to live accordingly. But Handler and Linnekin maintain that “it is unlikely that Keanae villagers were ever pristine and unselfconscious, that is, that they ever failed to interpret their identity in terms of a wider social context” (1984: 285). Under such conditions, the authors believe that “The larger society’s notions of traditions and cultural identity thus become part of the rural community’s self-image” (1984: 285), meaning that outsider perceptions of the island influence the way in which residents choose to live. While many people might believe that the only genuine traditions are unselfconscious, Handler and Linnekin argue that “Tradition is never wholly unselfconscious, nor is it ever wholly unrelated to the past” (1984: 285). Despite such declarations, the authors do a disservice to such groups who attempt to challenge the status quo in the pursuit of sovereignty and self-empowerment. In the attempt to shift the framework of tradition to one that sees tradition as a construct, they also diminish the claims of Hawaiian sovereignists by focusing so much attention on how the Hawaiian traditions do not fit the prevailing definition of tradition of “an inherited body of customs.
and beliefs.” They trace the origins of specific traditions, pointing out the foreign origins or influences, note the deliberate adaptations for a larger intent, or explain certain aspects as “arbitrary.” (“It is not the pastness or giveness that defines something as traditional. Rather, the latter is an arbitrary symbolic designation; an assigned meaning rather than an objective quality” (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 286)). Despite such analyses of tradition, there seems to be a deconstruction of practices that groups hold dear. History carries grave weight and power, a tool that people base their legitimacy on. Thus, a historically oppressed group is left with less one tool to make their claims to resistance and empowerment. When scholars make a point to focus on how a claim does not exactly fit a linear model of historicity or is less satisfiably recent than ancient, they also lessen the legitimacy of a group’s claims to legitimacy and identity because the group may base its value on those pillars. This is not to say that some of Handler and Linnekin’s deconstructions are necessarily incorrect, but that their interpretation is limited and limiting. The social science mode of thinking about tradition – that tradition is something to be categorized and concretized rather than that tradition is assigned meaning – is still prevalent. Thus, such deconstructions without the proper emphasis is potentially damaging for the group’s purposes. Though Handler and Linnekin understand that tradition as popularly understood carries false dichotomies, they do not emphasize the traditionality and the right to self-identify traditions, “invented” or not. In fact, they also use the language of social science thought – arbitrary, reconstruction, etc. Of course, in these cases where authenticity has been used oppressively, we should view such claims with skepticism and dismantle the structures on which their power rests. But we also
must understand the circumstances in which authenticity arises and in which it becomes an important marker of identity.

*Asian American Studies, Diaspora, and Authenticity*

Asian American Studies has often focused on reclaiming silenced and lost voices of Asians in America who have participated in building the United States. It is a relatively young field, having been born in the 1960s as part of the Civil Rights movement as Black, Native, Chicana/o, and Asian American students in California fought for ethnic studies and the right to have their histories represented in the American educational system. Often historical in nature, Asian American scholarship seemed to frequently focus on themes of challenging US hegemony and stereotypes of Asian Americans. Given the ongoing stereotype of Asian Americans as a passive or submissive minority with little participation in the making of the American nation, it is not surprising that the scholarship has tended to focus on refuting these and other preconceptions.

Ronald Takaki (1989) and Sucheng Chan (1991) have argued that despite the many contributions Asian Americans have made in shaping the United States, their histories and stories continue to be marginalized in mainstream history. Takaki claims that the exclusion of Asian Americans in history contradicts the ethnic pluralism on which America prides itself (1989: 7). Meanwhile, Chan writes that many studies of immigrant groups and minorities have been written with an assimilationist or celebratory perspective and do not adequately address the exploitation faced by various groups.
In her overview of Asian American history, she consciously made the decision to review Asian Americans as simultaneously exploited and victimized groups but also as agents of history who made the best choices possible despite limited possibilities (1991: xiii-xiv). Both authors are pioneering scholars who sought to fill an egregious gap in American history. What marks their scholarship is their deliberate emphasis that Asian Americans have consistently struggled for justice and resisted power in many ways, in contrast to popular stereotypes of Asian Americans as passive and docile model minorities who affirm ideas of American exceptionalism.

So pervasive is this stereotype of Asian Americans that many other scholars continue along this vein of refuting and challenging it, no matter what their research topic. For example, in *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990* (2002), Lon Kurashige explores the Japanese American Festival in California as a vehicle for Japanese Americans to articulate their identity on their own terms rather than following the assimilationist model that is often assumed of immigrants. Xiaolan Bao’s study on garment workers (2001) and Renqiu Yu’s work on Chinese laundrymen (1992) describe Chinese workers who were not passive but organized to resist exploitation. All these scholars have made tremendous contributions in the work, but they are also reactive to the same specific perspective of Asian Americans as the assimilated model minority. However, there is a danger of being too limited in scope if research is only focused on refuting the model minority stereotype – the idea that Asian American have become the successful group in America in comparison to other minority ethnic groups. Other works have addressed assumptions
about Asian American immigration but have contextualized their research with broader implications. Dorothy Fujita-Rony’s book on Filipino/a immigration to Seattle, Washington (2003) and Madeline Hsu’s research on immigrants from south China (2000) reveal that immigration was not linear in one direction with the US as the destination, but was a series of transnational trips between the US and the country of birth. In *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion era, 1882-1943* (2003), Erika Lee focuses her study on Chinese immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts. However, she argues that Chinese immigration was in fact pivotal to shaping US immigration policy rather than a peripheral blemish, and has had a lasting legacy in transforming the US into a gate-keeping nation.

One might also make the argument that another very strong theme in Asian American studies is the exploration of identity. There are several studies of how Asian Americans negotiate the pluralities inherent with being visibly different from white Americans in the US context and deal with questions of heritage, assimilation, and identity. Monographs of specific communities are available such as anthropologist Aihwa Ong’s study of Cambodian refugees in America (2003) and sociologist Karin Aguilar-San Juan’s work on Vietnamese Americans (2006). Sharmila Rudrappa’s *Ethnic Routes to Becoming American: Indian Immigrants and the Cultures of Citizenship* (2004) provides a critical perspective of how immigrant activism that focuses on ethnic identity may actually encourage assimilation. The question of identity in Asian American studies is often linked to issues of authenticity – whether ethnic, cultural, or
national. More studies of specific communities are important and needed to explore such subjects.

In many cases, personal identity is often linked to markers of “groupness” or the characteristics that differentiate one group from another. That is how we mark identity – by listing characteristics as belonging to a particular group. In ethnic or cultural identity, we apply that same idea in order to define ourselves (or others). We say, this is what is means to be black or Native American or Asian or American and if you do not follow all or most of these characteristics, then you do not belong to that group. There is an implication that there is an “authentic” cultural identity, or at least criteria that will allow us to identify that “authentic” person.

The search for an authentic cultural identity seems to indicate that there is some question of what that authentic quality is, hence the search for it. Why else is authenticity even a question unless there some question about what it is, unless there is some threat to it? The desire for authenticity exists because there is some question or dispute of what that ethnic identity is. Americans, for the most part, do not question what it means to be American: they just are. This allows them to be fluid in their own identity and actions. This unquestioned belief in their own identity allows them to be the standard while the “other” groups remain essentialized and boxed in. For instance, Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka stated, “A tiger does not proclaim its tigritude. It acts.” Soyinka was critiquing the negritude moment (qtd in Jahn 1968: 265-6) that attempted to reach back to find an essential African character. Of course, negritude existed as a movement to reclaim the stolen histories of diasporic Africans who were forcibly taken from Africa to be slaves
abroad. One cannot deny that a “black” culture exists (Fanon 1952). This black culture has in its roots African cultural expressions. Therefore, attempts to trace them to Africa are certainly legitimate exercises in claiming authenticity, whether or not the cultural expressions have been influenced by other cultures. It is a search to reclaim what one feels connected to, to find where one comes from. Thus, the desire to discover an authentic cultural identity is an attempt at empowerment. In such cases, the desire and search for an authentic cultural identity in the “motherland” is a conscious move to reject and repudiate the culture that marginalized them. Soyinka later came to accept negritude as a useful political tool.

This search for an authentic ethnic or cultural identity seems to persist in diasporic communities. In her study on second generation Indian-American youth in New York city, Sunaina Marr Maira writes, “Conceptualizations of diaspora have ranged from strict definitions that emphasize a preoccupation with specific origin and a desire, or even a mythology, of return.” (2002: 22). Maira explores questions of ethnic authenticity and signifiers of ethnic belonging/exclusion that face the second generation as they create their own sense of ethnic identity through bhangra, dance, clothing style, and other markers of “Indianness.” Often, the search for ethnic identity is deeply connected to ideas of a “return” to a homeland (in this case, India), whether or not these Indian American youth were born overseas or on US soil. Maira writes that “underlying these cultural practices of second-generation youth was a collective nostalgia for India as a site of revered “tradition” and authentic identity” (2002: 12). The idea of past-ness is implicit in nostalgia, and thus the Indian American youth view India with the rose
colored glasses usually reserved for past memories. It is interesting to note, however, that this nostalgic India may or may not be rooted in actual past experiences, but is a created nostalgia gleaned from immigrant parents and communities. This nostalgia is source of “indianness,” perhaps a fixed nostalgia despite the globalizing influences India has and continues to go through that affects contemporary Indian culture.

Nonetheless, Maira notes that “Second-generation youth make a considerable social and material investment in these competing imaginings of Indianness, which are also sites of contradiction and dissent” (2002: 28). As the students maneuver through disseminating their ethnic identity, Maira suggests that ethnic identity is constructed yet dynamic as the youth critique each other’s performance of ethnicity in order to affirm their own sense of identity. In her interviews, she finds that certain markers are considered more Indian (language skills, socializing with other Indians, and interest in Indian films) than others (concern with political issues relevant to India and diaspora) (Maira 2002: 15). She writes:

These young people use symbolic markers of true Indiannes to construct and contest notions of ethnic authenticity, especially in the context of multiculturalism in high education and of ethnically and racially segregated social lives on college campuses. The ideology of ethnic authenticity is supported by rites of passage, such as journeys ‘back’ to India, and by popular performances that stage particular versions of ‘true’ Indian culture and that coexist uneasily with the hybrid popular culture of remix and dance music. (Maira 2002: 27-28)

This raises an interesting dilemma between postmodern ideas of unstable reality and a desire for authenticity and concrete practices that denote boundaries and essentializations (Maira 2002: 14). There is longing for nostalgia intermixed with the
performance of a contemporary notion of cool. Consumption is often used to negotiate 
etnicity and cultural ownership. The youth engage in a reflexive hybridity that 
compasses their self-consciousness about their experiences as 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation kids and 
ideas brought about by participation in ethnic studies classes (Maira 2002: 23). The 
Indian American youths’ search for authenticity is about belonging and place, but are rife 
with ambiguities and ambivalences. However, Maira illustrates very well what is 
invested in ideas of authenticity for the desis. Despite the postmodern gaze of shifting 
realities, these youth long for something stable and fixed although their formulation of 
authenticity encompasses ambiguities and contradictions. Maira hints that the youth use 
nostalgia as a strategy to counter hegemonic narratives that distort their experiences as 
Asian Americans (Maira 2002: 193). The search for an authentic ethnic identity was a 
response to colonial-like structures of power where the self-identity of a group was 
threatened with assimilation or coerced into essentialization.

Like the Indian American youth in Maira’s study, the Chinese American youth in 
Andrea Louie’s \textit{Chineseness Across Borders} (2004) also look to a motherland as the site 
of authentic ethnic identity. In this work, Louie explores conceptualizations of 
Chineseness by youths who participate in the “In Search of Roots” internship program 
jointly sponsored by organizations in San Francisco and in Guangdong, China. A year-
long program, youths of Chinese descent ages 17-25 learn about Chinese American 
history, delve into immigration records for information about their forebears, and travel 
to Guangdong, China for a two-week visit to ancestral villages. But in her study, it is not 
only the Chinese American youths who attempt to define for themselves what it meant to
be Chinese; the Chinese in China also attempt to redefine Chineseness in a rapidly changing China. Louie observes that “While Chinese Americans sought to find roots in China in order to place themselves within American society, mainland Chinese were struggling to stake a new position for themselves as modern Chinese after the Open Policy” (2004: 18) Ultimately, Louie finds that conceptions of Chinese identity by both Chinese Americans and the Chinese in Guangdong are constructed relative to external influences and are ultimately dynamic and multiple.

The Chinese American youths who participate in the program are primarily 2nd generation and beyond. Louie describes them as having given little thought to their origins in China. Most were somewhat disconnected from their Chinese ancestry, their families having moved away from the ethnic enclaves within San Francisco and the children having entered professional occupations that were unrelated to the ethnic newcomer occupations. Most spoke little Chinese, if at all, and were not literate in the written language. In fact, many had never even set foot in China. It might seem that ties to China were well on their way to being severed, following the general American sentiment and desire of immigrant assimilation into a mainstream America. But as Louie observes,

Willingly or not, American-born Chinese Americans are defined within U.S. society through their Chineseness. They are on the one hand cast as perpetual foreigners in a society where achieving status as a true “American” is attached to racial and class background in addition to legal citizenship. On the other hand

5 The types of occupations that the children of first-generation immigrants might generally require more training and education than the types of jobs new immigrants might take on, regardless of their own educational backgrounds. New immigrant occupations might include restaurant work, grocery stores, or other types of work to be found through ethnic community ties.
they are expected to have and display their Chinese “culture” in this era of multiculturalism. (Louie 2004: 24)

Despite the moves towards assimilation – throwing off the culture of the motherland (willingly or not), entering non-ethnic occupations, not focusing on maintaining the language of the motherland – Chinese Americans continue to be defined by external appearances. They are encouraged to be assimilated, yet encouraged to display (and maintain) markers of Chineseness. As a result, the Chinese Americans occupy a perpetual state of liminality where they are not authentic Americans nor are they authentic Chinese.

Thus, for the participants, the Roots Program is an attempt to make sense of this state and “to understand what seem to be idiosyncrasies and particulars of their family’s stories as part of broader historical, political, and social patterns” (Louie 2004: 13). It is interesting to note that the trip to China is called or referred to as a “return” trip though program participants may not have been born in China or have ever set foot in China. But as Louie quotes from Ien Ang, Chinese outside of China face a “pressure toward diasporic identification with the mythic homeland” (Louie 2004: 19). In the United States, that pressure takes the form of Orientalist perceptions of Chinese American as the “other” and the expectation of displays of Chineseness. Therefore, it is not unimaginable that the first trip for a 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 3\textsuperscript{rd}, or 4\textsuperscript{th} generation may somehow resemble a “return.” The “return” trip is not necessarily a literal return in the sense that one had previously been there and left, only to return again. Instead, the “return” is a symbolic return that speaks

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6 Louie references her own trip as a “return” [her quotes]
of the hazy space that Chinese Americans occupy in the U.S. It is a return to an imagined homeland to assuage a sense of displacement and an escape from the imposed identities that Chinese Americans do not feel that fully capture who they are. The return is a search to find meaning and evaluate their own identity in the context of American as a person of Chinese descent. Ultimately, the program participants come to understand that being Chinese, being Chinese American was “ultimately a subjective concept, created variously through experiences with family, political activism, investigations of family history, being informed about the history and current situation of Asians in the United State, visiting ancestral villages, and placing value on family” (Louie 2004: 120).

Chineseness, Louie finds in her study, is multiple and is constructed by transnational influences:

Chineseness is used as both an inclusive and exclusive concept, empowered as a racial discourse, used to reinforce a sense of rootedness, or turned into a commodity within the contexts discussed above. At times, Chineseness can be stretched to include the many people of the diaspora, and at other times to distinguish one group within the category from another. Chineseness, like all axes of identity, is not a fixed or bounded category, and its meaning only becomes relevant as people use it as a tool to define themselves in relations to others.” (Louie 2004: 21)

It is a dynamic formation that even the Chinese in China have contradictory definitions of. “The hybridity of Asian American identity must be recognized as authentic and complete, an act of cultural construction and an acknowledgement of heterogeneity.”
But what this says is not that there is no authenticity, but that there is not a singular one, that it is not monolithic. Authenticity has multiple meanings and multiple formations and they may or may not be dependent upon a singular crux such as geography. As Louise notes, “Chinese identities are increasingly constructed through influences not necessarily located in China” (Louie 2004: 210). Similarly, food may also have multiple influences that are not located in a single crux of origin, but can still maintain a distinct identity.

Foodways As an Expression of Authenticity

Food is more than physical sustenance; food is also emotional nourishment. As an everyday necessity, it remains an unmarked practice until, for whatever reason, the food habit changes. It is then that we notice the loss of its familiarity and we long for its recognizable flavors and the memories that come with the food. Because eating is repetitive, as Michael Owen Jones claims, it is likely to produce rituals, habits, and customs (which are often symbols and indicators of our own backgrounds) (1988). In this way, food can be understood as an important marker of identity. It is these rituals, habits, and customs that then become the markers of our identity and affiliations. The ways in which we eat, prepare, and socialize with food becomes tangled up in how we

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7 This use of hybridity is the same as creolization. These terms have different histories and different applications but that they are often used interchangeably. Most significantly for my work, hybridity often applies to a marketplace (Kapchan 1996) and therefore is relevant to my study of restaurants. Creolization defines an ongoing, often self-conscious process of making new forms in new contexts and therefore is very useful as an alternative to the critique of authenticity. Creolization models recognize how authenticity claims can be part of the ongoing process.

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see ourselves and others and how others see us. As food becomes intertwined with cultural identity, it also becomes an indicator of cultural authenticity. Thus, the authenticity of a particular dish might be is an indication of its legitimacy – its degree of belonging to the culture it purports to come from.

In Asian cultures, food is a lasting link to heritage and culture. Ji Yeon Yuh notes that food is “an arena of struggle between Americanization and adherence to native cultural ways, where the demands are often either-or, but the lives lived are more often constructed from pieces of both” (2002: 126). Her research on Korean military brides describes the importance that Korean food held for these women who were often culturally isolated in small American towns and attempted to lessen their loneliness with Korean food. Unfortunately, in the areas where they lived, the ingredients needed for familiar cuisine were often hard to find and many of the Korean wives were even unsure of how to prepare Korean foods. They were intimately familiar with the taste of Korean food and improvised the best they could with alternative products. For example, one woman concocted an imitation red pepper paste from the dried heels of bread, soy sauce, and red pepper. However valuable this imitation would become for some of the wives, it remained a simulation rather than a replication: “The taste was not the same as the real stuff, of course. It could not be used for making stews, only as a condiment for rice” (Yuh 2002: 132). It would seem that the authenticity of Korean food lay in the ingredients.

As the Korean communities in the US grew, Korean food and ingredients became more available though it was still the case that “many of the later arrivals also spoke
about food when they talked about missing home and being lonely” (Yuh 2002: 133). Despite its increasing availability in the US, Yuh writes that for the military brides, Korean food is still not the same. (Yuh 2002: 133). She describes one woman who claimed that Korean food in America did not taste as good as the Korean food in Korea, that even the pears and apples were more delicious in Korea. It would be easy to say that Korean food was somehow bastardized by being produced in the US whether through altered/adulterated ingredients however slight or by lack of expertise in making Korean food or by American influences. These are often the arguments made for the inauthenticity of ethnic food in the US. However, what Yuh has so insightfully noticed is that for these women, the dissatisfaction with the Korean cuisine in the US is not so much about its authenticity (though that is most likely a part of it), but that it is about place. Yuh states, “It wasn’t Korean food that tastes good and which they missed, it was food in Korea. Location was important” (2002: 134). Perhaps the even the finest Korean chef could not make a dish to satisfy these women because it was not so much about taste as it was about a longing for a past. “The issue here is a displacement. Displaced from its home, the food apparently loses a certain something. The women’s craving for Korean food is linked to a longing for a return home, to a time before their displacement as strangers in a strange land” (Yuh 2002: 134).

Even the presence of Korean food with perhaps all the right ingredients did not necessarily constitute a Korean meal for these women. Though their American husbands and children might be interested in Korean food, it was still served in the Western style as an entrée with two sides rather than centering around a bowl of rice and several side
dishes as meals are usually consumed in Korea. Yuh implies that the structure of a meal is also key to a meal’s Korean-ness and that the ethnicity of a meal thus is enacted through food habits rather than the actual food itself. Thus, the incorporation of Korean dishes into an American meal structure is less “Koreanizing” an American meal and more “Americanizing” of Korean foods because “the new foods serve to enrich, not transform, American culture, and eating them does not necessarily turn Americans into multiethnics” (Yuh 2002: 146). Yuh writes that the very absence of Korean food in the midst of American bounty was a powerful force in encouraging Americanization and discouraging the retention of Korean-ness (Yuh 2002: 128). For the Korean military brides, Korean food was not so much a physical sustenance as it was emotional and spiritual for they had few opportunities to eat Korean food or to connect with other Koreans (Yuh 2002: 152).

Valerie Matsumoto’s study on a Japanese American farming community in California examines the ways the dynamics that shape the identity of ethnic communities and the changing functions of the meaning of community as needed (1993). Though she does not address it in depth, food as linked to identity is mentioned here and there. For instance, rice was seen as a symbol of historic change and continuity, cherished yet embarrassing. People in Cortez have varying ideas of what constitutes Japanese tradition: language, food, sense of community. The preservation of collectivity is still very attractive because it gives personal affirmation and cultural grounding. Connections with a larger history and food may play a much larger role than Matsumoto give attention to. At the back of the book, she includes with pride the symbols of her family and her
heritage: a series of recipes collected from members of her family in Cortez as examples of the Japanese American Cortez community as not a fixed site, but an ongoing and flexible process.

Conclusion

As Abrahams noted, “Displaced populations often conceive of themselves as living in exile, and they artfully deploy their traditions as a means of maintaining their sense of self-respect and value” (1993: 5). This sense of displacement, whether through forced means, immigration, diasporic movement, or a sense of threat to identity or heritage, is enacted through these traditions. Food is often a central (though certainly not the only) part of this endeavor to maintain a sense of self-respect and value. Preparing and consuming Korean foods was certainly comforting to the Korean military wives. However, there is still that danger when attempting to re-create authentic traditional heritage. Of course, there is the possibility that claims of authenticity may be used to oppress others. However, it also serves as succor during times of perceived disconnection. As I have shown in several cases, the interpretation of what constitutes authenticity is subject to debate. But it is often subject to debate because there are multiple interpretations. However, there are multiple authenticities instead of a singular definition. In casting only a singular definition, we may dismiss the multiple interpretations by the displaced peoples that may not fit with that singular definition.
Chapter 3: Methodology

As an American of Chinese descent, I have always encountered questions of what it meant to be a “real” Chinese person. I encountered accusations from both ends of the spectrum – I was not really Chinese because of my non-accented English (from strangers) or my perceived lack of filial respect (from family, of course). I was also seen as very Chinese because of my “odd” breakfasts of rice porridge and my daily intake of steamed white rice for dinner or my friendships with Chinese peers. These external impositions of ideology is what philosopher Louis Althusser (1970) would describe as “hailing” in which a person is transformed into a subject by responding to a “hail.” In this sense, the hail or description of identity (in folkloristic terms) is not self-ascribed but other-scribed. Using William Jansen’s concept of esoteric and exoteric identity (1965), Martha Sims and Martine Stephens state that “Both insiders and outsiders define or delineate a group” (2005:26). However, the binary of self-ascribed/other-ascribed identity does not address the issue of the “realness” of these ascriptions and its different measures and contexts. My questions were not so much about privileging one part of the binary over the other, but about how the idea of “realness” comes into play.

But I was not the only one facing this issue of realness in identity nor was this issue relegated to Chinese ethnicity alone. African Americans also contend with issues of
what constitutes “real” blackness. Native Americans also confront issues of “Indian-ness,” especially in the context of the cultural genocide that was inflicted upon their history. In my work as a community and electoral organizer, I also witnessed heated arguments of what (and who) was a “true” radical versus a “sell-out” or an “armchair activist.” In many ways, these questions were about what people perceived as the “genuine” expression of an idea, an identity, or an allegiance. It is about how one defines a culture, whether it is ethnic or another type of grouping. In many respects, these attempts at definitions are efforts to legitimate identity. The conflict arises when people have different conceptions of what constitutes the most genuine representation or incarnation of that group. The question then becomes whose conception is right and whose conception ought to take precedence or speak for the group or be the face for that group. These questions of realness and genuiness-ness and true-ness are questions about authenticity. Authenticity is generally perceived as bearing legitimacy.

To examine questions of authenticity, I chose to investigate the site of Chinese restaurants. In my experience, Chinese restaurants have often been the subject of authenticity questions. Throughout my life, I have been asked (generally by non-Chinese people) for my opinion of whether or not a particular Chinese restaurant was authentically Chinese, whether a particular dish was authentic, or where one might find an authentic Chinese restaurant. These recurring incidences led me to believe that authenticity was an important issue in Chinese cuisine for diners and for the restaurant owners. Investigating authenticity in Chinese restaurants would provide insight on how authenticity operates in cultural expressions.
In my methodology, I wanted to explore how Chinese restaurant owners addressed the question of authenticity or realness in presenting Chinese identity. I also wanted to look at how some Chinese restaurant dishes might signal inauthenticity and for what reasons. I was also interested in what information vintage Chinese restaurant menus might present about Chinese identity in different time periods. Essentially, my methods investigate how authenticity is expressed and perceived in relation to Chinese restaurants rather than attempt to define the boundaries of an authentic Chinese restaurant. The results of my research may present insight on how authenticity operates in other cultural expressions.

In this chapter, I first discuss the multiple directions that a study of a subject as complex and broad as Chinese restaurants could have taken and why I chose to narrow my questions to address authenticity. I then discuss the methods in which I might have utilized to gather information and then move on to a description of my fieldwork to gather my information. I present a discussion on my interview questions - what insight I wanted to gain from the types of questions I asked and why I did not ask other questions. During the course of my research, I decided to focus my analysis on one restaurant, one dish, and a broader examination of vintage Chinese restaurant menus and I discuss why I chose to take this route. I conclude this chapter with what I hoped to achieve with the combination of field methods I used to conduct my research.

*Scope of Approaches*
A major challenge in beginning my research was the sheer number of directions in which I could take my research. When I first began thinking about the topic of Chinese restaurants in 2003-2004, there was not much scholarship on this topic. Chinese cookbooks were plentiful and reviews of Chinese restaurants were common. However, there was no in-depth examination of Chinese restaurants similar to the work that scholars Paul Siu and Renqiu Yu did with Chinese laundrymen (Siu 1987, Yu 1992) or Xiaolan Bao with the lives of Chinese garment workers (2001). Laundry and garment work were significant occupations for many Chinese in America as was (and still is) restaurant work. I wanted to give the same careful treatment to Chinese restaurants as Siu, Yu, and Bao did with laundries and garment work. However, because there was little academic literature on Chinese restaurants, the subject was wide open in terms of approach.

There were so many ways in which I could approach the study of Chinese restaurants that it was simply overwhelming and, at times, paralyzing. I considered investigating the origins of Chinese restaurants. How did the earliest Chinese restaurants begin in the United States and how might they have altered since then? Have expectations of Chinese restaurants changed and thus the restaurants have adapted accordingly? Another consideration was the geographic location as the site for study. Should this be a national study or a localized study? While I already knew that my research would be based in the United States, a broad study of Chinese restaurants in the entire United States might not be focused enough to provide much depth of insight. Would it make sense to thus look at Chinese restaurants in cities such as San Francisco,
Los Angeles, or New York City or perhaps all three since these cities have been the major centers of Chinese populations in the United States? But Chinese restaurants in these concentrated areas are likely different from the Chinese restaurants that are found in small town middle America communities. I considered examining the distinctions between Chinese restaurants in urban centers and Chinese restaurants in more isolated pockets of Chinese communities such as the Chinese community in Mississippi that scholars James Loewen (1988) and Robert Seto Quan (1982) investigated. If studying these distinctions, I considered focusing on the question of if and how restaurants might cater differently to Asian versus non-Asian customers and the strategies owners might use to adapt their restaurant accordingly. I was also curious if décor played a role in how Chinese restaurants expressed themselves: to what degree were the decorations an unself-conscious display of culture or was it a deliberate play into exotic expectations of a Chinese experience? Or in some cases, did a plain simple and matter-of-fact restaurant environment speak to another type of expectation? Should I conduct an in-depth study of Chinese restaurant décor, in which case I would come across the question again of location – localized in urban centers, small isolated pockets, or specific cities? Ultimately, I decided that a focused localized study of Columbus, Ohio-based Chinese restaurants rather than a broad general national study could provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Chinese restaurants.

Immigration and workers’ rights are also important elements in Chinese restaurants that also seemed to call for more study. Typically, Chinese restaurants in the United States usually offer Cantonese cuisine, which reflects the Chinese immigration
pattern in the United States. However, that has changed in recent years as Chinese from other regions of China arrive in the United States. The rise of Hunan and Szechuan cuisine reflects this changing immigration pattern. There are also rumors of Chinese restaurants as the sites of illegal immigration activity, facilitated by “snake-heads” who usher in legions of undocumented Chinese workers from the Fujian region in exchange for large sums of money and effectively locking the workers into years of servitude and exploitation. There are also stories of workers, even if properly documented, who suffer exploitation and attempt to unionize. While immigration and restaurant labor are very important and interesting subjects of study that raise questions of immigration reform and worker exploitation, it is not one of the major questions I wanted to pursue at this particular time.

One essential aspect of many Chinese restaurants that I considered investigating was family labor. Many Chinese restaurant operations are single-family owned with the children or extended family pitching in to “help-out.” Miri Song in her book *Helping Out: Children’s Labor in Ethnic Businesses* (1999) addressed the issue of children participating in the family business of Chinese restaurants in the United Kingdom and the impact it had on their lives and their outlook. As a child of such a family myself, this topic also held interest for me. However, an initial attempt to enter this direction suggested that this might take me into a different direction from the initial questions of authenticity that I had. Early in my research, I sent out an email to an Asian American student list-serve at the Ohio State University, calling for students whose family owned a Chinese restaurant and who might be interested in being interviewed. I was curious
about their experiences of race and food and hoped to eventually interview their parents in order to begin documenting their experiences as part of a Columbus, Ohio Chinese restaurant trove of documentation. However, students were not reliable in participating in interviews, and this became a side project.

Another way in which to approach the study of Chinese restaurants would be to embark on a study of genres within Chinese restaurants. Developing a genre-based study of Chinese restaurants would be a typically a folkloric study similar to the Aarne-Thompson classification system of tale-types for fairy tale narrative structures. A classification system of Chinese restaurants would acknowledge the immense diversity of Chinese and its development as part of the American landscape and identify unifying characteristics as well as the markers of each individual category. Some basic categories would include small family-owned single restaurants, large fancy Chinese restaurants, the take-out store, or the buffet. I could also make even more specific classifications by making a distinction for Chinese restaurants that offer a broad range of Asian cuisines from different Asian countries or may generally marked as found in different Asian countries. Another category might be the self-described Asian restaurant (which would mark it as a broader pan-ethnic type of establishment) that offers mostly Chinese cuisine and is clearly owned by someone of Chinese descent. There are also the Chinese restaurants who, in addition to offering general Chinese dishes, also serve cuisine from one specific ethnic Asian culture – perhaps Thai, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Korean, or even Japanese food such a sushi. These types of restaurants often indicate an owner who may be of Chinese descent but grew up in a different Asian country than China or has
some other type of affiliation with that other Asian country. There are also Chinese restaurants that offer both “American” and Chinese food, a very common characteristic of older Chinese restaurants. Chinese restaurants in shopping mall food courts might also constitute a category of its own as they have a different face than what one might typically imagine as a Chinese restaurant because these food court businesses are limited in their menu and may operate differently from a stand-alone business. Another genre might be Cajun food court establishments, which do not seem to be a Chinese restaurant at first glance. However, many of these Cajun food court businesses often have Chinese staff, and the food is often displayed buffet style, much like a Chinese buffet. In the same vein of food court Chinese restaurants, one might also consider Chinese chain restaurants such as Panda Express which is national chain or Mark Pi’s, a local Columbus, Ohio chain. A restaurant such as P.F. Chang’s might also constitute its own category as it is a stand alone chain restaurant and seems to have a business model that might be closer to other ethnically themed chain restaurants such as Olive Garden. Asian fusion restaurants also merit an individual category as they take elements of Chinese cuisine and apply them to Western cuisine or interpret Chinese cuisine with a new twist. There are many many other types of Chinese restaurants that one could identify and a classification system that could provide some structure and concreteness would contribute knowledge and insight towards understanding Chinese restaurants. Such a classification system would operate differently from the Aarne-Thompson tale-type system which addressed a pre-existing body of work that generally would not be addressing new creative works. A classification system of Chinese restaurants would be able to document the development
of Chinese restaurants and its facets such as the ubiquitous Chinese delivery, but it would also have to be continuously updated as cuisine constantly evolves, changes, and responds to social forces. This is indeed a worthwhile project, but at this time, it is not the direction in which I wanted to take my research for now.

One issue that is central to Chinese restaurants and that cuts across many other questions about Chinese restaurants is the subject of authenticity. I have encountered several Chinese restaurants that have advertised themselves as “authentic.” The fact that a restaurant advertises itself as “authentic” indicates that authenticity must be an issue of some concern or there would be no reason for it to describe itself that way. It is not uncommon for people to ask me where one might find an authentic Chinese restaurant. Others may ask for my assessment: “Is XYZ Chinese restaurant really an authentic Chinese restaurant?” Another common question is “Is chop suey/chow mein/egg rolls/fortune cookies/Kung Pao Chicken/General Tso’s chicken/XYZ dish really Chinese?” While these dishes often are or have been available on most Chinese restaurant menus, they are also the subjects of “dubious” Chinese authenticity. It was clear that authenticity was an important issue in considering Chinese cuisine in Chinese restaurants. To address the questions of the authenticity of Chinese restaurants, I considered embarking on a study of Chinese cuisine and culinary culture in China and then examine how dishes became transformed as they made their way to the tables of Chinese restaurants in America. I would have to make distinctions between regional Chinese cuisines and focus on Cantonese cuisine, considering that most of America’s Chinese immigrants hailed from that region for much of America’s history. It would be
interesting to investigate the origins of well-known Chinese restaurant dishes, similar to
the investigation that Jennifer Lee conducted on General Tso’s Chicken in her book *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* (2008). Then I could analyze the subtle influences and cross-
cultural mingling of culinary styles and tastes. However, I realized that a study with this
approach would be too simplistic for the nuances and complexities involved with cultural
authenticity. Furthermore, it approaches the question of authenticity with the intent to
define the boundaries of Chinese criteria and a list of criteria to categorize
belonging/exclusion/fusion with a presumption of static origins. But what interested me
in these questions of authenticity was not about defining the characteristics of authentic
Chinese cuisine, but about presentation of and perceptions about Chinese cuisine. I was
interested in how Chinese restaurant owners addressed the question of authenticity in
their restaurants and in thinking about how authenticity was a much more flexible
concept than generally perceived.

Ultimately, I was able to address many of these questions about authenticity
within the framework of an exploration of local attitudes toward Chinese restaurants in a
Midwestern town by focusing on one specific Chinese restaurant and one local Chinese
restaurant dish. My research investigates how authenticity operates within the framework
of one particular cultural expression (Chinese cuisine in a Chinese restaurant in the
United States) where authenticity designates legitimacy versus dismissal or exotic versus
acceptance.

*Methods*
Early in my research phase, one of the suggestions I received was to take a job at a Chinese restaurant in order to truly learn the ins-and-outs of how a Chinese restaurant operates. In the folklore and other humanities and social science disciplines, it is expected that the researcher immerses her or himself into the community that is the subject of study, especially if conducting ethnographic fieldwork. For example, Gary Alan Fine worked at four restaurant kitchens for his study on American restaurant culture in order to write his *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work* (1996). Carol Silverman associated closely with people of the Romani culture for her scholarship on the culture. Early on, she signed on as a tutor for the daughters of a Romani family, and she wrote about the process of moving from complete outsider to partial insider (1991). Deborah Kapchan, in the acknowledgements of her book *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (1996) explains her immersive experience, “And although I am now an analyst of culture, an ethnographer, I too have experienced multiple roles in Morocco – teach, researcher, wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, mother. My understanding of Moroccan culture arises from within these identities and from all the people who I have encountered and spent time with during the four years of my stay” (1996: xiv). These types of immersive experiences are perceived as being crucial to becoming an “insider” so that the scholar can represent the culture as faithfully as possible to extent that he or she can essentially speak *as if* an “insider” of the culture in study.
However, these fieldwork methodologies presume that the scholar is already an outsider to the culture in study who must do a considerable amount of work in order to gain the trust of the insider informants. For instance, Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw write that “Ethnographers are committed to going out and getting close to the activities and everyday experiences of other [my emphasis] people” (1995: 1). James Spradley in The Ethnographic Interview quotes Bronislaw Malinowski’s definition of the goal of ethnography as “grasp[ing] the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (1979: 1). Spradley continues on to claim that “Field work, then, involves the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different”[my emphasis] (1979: 1). Bruce Jackson in his book entitled Fieldwork claims that “A fieldworker doesn’t merely observe a context; the fieldworker close enough to observe it becomes part of it” (1987: 16). All of these texts on fieldwork write from the presumptive view that the fieldworker is already outside the culture in study and is a stranger who must gain the confidence of the insiders or somehow become part of the culture in order to portray the “native” view. These assumptions speak to the early days of the disciplines when American or European scholars would enter into “native” cultures to study the people and to seek out the information they needed for their scholarship (Boas, Malinowski, Mead) which James Clifford and George Marcus in Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (1986) and which Linda Tuhiwai Smith in Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples( 1999) both questioned and critiqued as problematic. The early ethnographic methods were perceived as problematic for its patronizing and
colonial overtones and the idea of scholars becoming “insiders” was seen as the remedy to disrespect and disdain that scholars often imposed on their subjects. In addition, as other scholars began researching their own communities, the insider/outsider balance shifted. Examples include Martin Manalansan who conducted research on gay Filipinos for his book *Global Divas: Gay Filipino Men in the Diaspora* (2003) and Sunaina Marr Maira who studied Indian American youth culture in the context of the bhangra scene for her scholarly work *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (1992). In some cases such as Kirin Narayan (who has conducted fieldwork on oral traditions in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora) ethnographers describe themselves as both insider and outsider.

While it might seem logical to work at a Chinese restaurant in order to conduct research, I decided that it would not be an appropriate method to acquire my data. I also stand at a gray area between insider and outsider in the world of Chinese restaurants. In one sense, I am an insider as my family owned a Chinese take-out in Baltimore, Maryland that I grew up and worked in for many years. From this experience, I have knowledge of how a Chinese restaurant operates and of the issues involved in presenting food that is seen as “Chinese” but is yet appealing to the local population. I am Chinese and more specifically, of Cantonese background which gives me insider knowledge of the background and cultural interactions of many of the Chinese restaurant in the United States. I am an outsider in the sense that I am not native to the Chinese restaurant community in Columbus, Ohio. While I frequent Chinese restaurants in Columbus, Ohio, I do not have intimate connections to this community in particular.
Even though I do not have these intimate ties to the Chinese restaurant community in Columbus, Ohio, I believe that working at a Chinese restaurant would be more of a hindrance than an asset for collecting data. My family had always warned me “not to work for Chinese people.” As problematic as their words might sound, it was grounded in their belief that Chinese people do not treat their employees well, especially Chinese employees, and I feared that there might be a conflict of interests. If I were to work there as an employee, it would be disingenuous not to tell the employer my motivations for working there. Indeed, even if I were to be forthright about my intentions to do conduct research while being as an employee, it would likely be difficult for me to find employment with a Chinese restaurant. As an employee, I feel that there would be a conflict in how the employer might view or treat me. They may feel awkward, knowing that I was there to “study” how they worked. The restaurant owners might be wary that I might discover information that they would rather keep private or portray them in a bad light or otherwise air out “dirty laundry.” There may also be issues of trust, assessing me on a very personal level about my own background or my personal life, especially if they viewed me in a different light outside the buffer status of being a scholar. I felt that it would be more respectful to approach a restaurant owner directly and allow him or her to control the information that he or she wanted to give me. I am not so interested in “penetrating” the hidden secrets of Chinese restaurants if they are not willingly given. I already have much “insider” knowledge of the Chinese restaurants and of Chinese culture that would allow me to navigate interactions and to understand what might be considered respectful or disrespectful. An employee may not garner the same respect as an external
scholar seeking to learn more about their business. I felt that I would be able to gain useful information without being an employee.

*Research Phase*

Instead, I began my research by visiting several Chinese restaurants in the Columbus metropolitan area to make observations and take notes. I chose restaurants that were already familiar to me because I had already eaten there before or I had passed by it frequently during errands or other activities. I also drove through major roads in Columbus Ohio and if I saw a Chinese restaurant that caught my eye with its décor or architecture, I would make note of it and visit for observation. My intent was to have lunch by myself and eventually initiate conversations with the servers or owners to find out more information. I usually visited these restaurants around 1:30pm to 2:00pm because lunch rush would be over and the staff would be more available to speak with me. I usually ordered simple foods such as fried rice or noodles. Sometimes I would ask for the more popular dish.

At first I was overwhelmed by the enormity of a possible thorough description that would take into account both similarities and differences across Chinese restaurants. For example, I could consider how close tables were to each other, how many chairs were at each table, what condiments were placed on every table, the type of lighting, the type of music (if any) that played, how servers negotiated the space, and how customers negotiated it, the size of the restaurant and whether it was divided, or how the entrance
was separated or not. Having completed this research, I determined that the factors I identified were sufficient for a general ethnographic description, but one could return to this topic to provide a more complete description of Chinese restaurants. My topic was specifically authenticity, so I didn’t undertake this work. In the end, I decided to focus on a smaller list of what I determined to be the salient factors in determining Chinese-ness:
décor, location, age of the restaurant, menu, patrons, and staff.

Décor: The décor of a Chinese restaurant often presents visual ideas about what constitutes a Chinese identity. I wanted to make note of the types of décor the restaurant used and whether or not it would code as “Chinese” for its customs. For example, does the restaurant utilize a lot of red color? Does it have lanterns hanging from its ceilings? Are there Chinese paintings on the wall? Is the décor obviously or elaborately or perhaps self-consciously Chinese? Or is the décor matter of fact, simple, or plain? There are things that people expect to find, such as soy sauce. On the other hand, there are assumed dimensions, such as the use of the color red, that might be recognized as familiar but not with awareness. The décor can give information on how it views itself or how it wants to be viewed by the public.
Age of Restaurant: How long has the restaurant been in business? Chinese restaurants tend to reflect the tastes and expectations of the time period in which it was first opened. Thus, a restaurant that opened twenty years ago may not be the same as a restaurant that opened in the past five years.

Location: Is the neighborhood an affluent one? Is it in a neighborhood of students, other Asian ethnicities, or a mixed neighborhood? A Chinese restaurant in an affluent neighborhood may reflect the tastes and expectations of its clientele. It may provide a more upscale dining experience with elements of a cultural experience. A restaurant in a mixed neighborhood might be in the business of simply providing food rather than a cultural experience.

Menu: There are two aspects of the menu – the actual physical menu and the dishes offered on the menu. While dining at the restaurant, I used the physical menu to order food. However, I often took a take-out menu with me for further study. The menu itself presents clues as to how the restaurant perceived it itself and the image it wanted to present to customers. What type of food is offered on the menu? Is it more Cantonese or does it include Chinese regional styles? Does it also offer “American” type cuisine?
Clientele: Restaurants operate with the motive of profit. To maintain profit, it must appeal to the customers’ tastes. But who are the customers that the must be pleased? Are the customers mostly of Asian descent and have specific tastes that remind them of foods they are familiar with and understand as Chinese? Or are the customers non-Asian who want a different kind of Chinese cuisine? For many people, the presence of Asian diners denote authenticity while a mixed clientele may be seen as an indication of inauthenticity where the restaurant must cater to American tastes rather than Asian tastes.

Staff: For many people, the presence of Asian staff is also an indication of cultural authenticity. Who owns the restaurant? Are the servers Asian or has the restaurant made accommodations to include non-Asian staff. Are the chefs Chinese or are they Mexican? Who is preparing the food seems to add or detract from ideas of cultural authenticity.

Some Chinese restaurants that did not have that many Chinese customers tended to be friendly and willing to talk, happy to see another Asian face. I usually spoke in Cantonese to them to establish a sense of kinship based on a similar Cantonese
background. My plan was to eventually ask the owners if they would allow me to interview them after establishing a relationship from repeat visits. I decided to focus on the owners rather than general staff for my dissertation research as the owners would likely be the primary decision-makers on how the restaurant operates, how it is decorated, and what dishes to offer on the menu. If I were to interview staff, I felt that it might be perceived as undercutting the authority or agency of the owners. I wanted to be careful to respect the owners as the proprietors of their business. The relationship between owner and staff would vary from restaurant to restaurant and if there was a strongly hierarchical relationship or any staff issues, I feared that the owners could be worried that staff would complain to me or otherwise mar the restaurant’s and/or the owner’s reputation, even if facilitated by the owner or conducted with the permission of the owners. The owners might then be less amenable to an interview with me. In short, I did not want to become involved in any internal issues that would detract from the topics that I was interested in investigating. Luckily, most places were small enough that the owners also worked as servers or were easily accessible so that I could establish a relationship with them directly.

While I visited about twenty restaurants and spoke with many staff and owners, the restaurants that seemed most open to more formal interviews were Sun Tong Luck, Ding Ho, Sunflower Restaurant, Wing’s, Hunan House, and Peacock Lounge. There were some restaurants that I did not feel comfortable requesting an interview and there were other restaurants whose owners outright refused. The restaurants whose staff seemed unhappy or curt were restaurants that did not seem as if they would be open to
someone interviewing them so I did not attempt to establish a relationship with them. Some restaurants I had requested an interview with seemed suspicious of my motives or intentions and refused to grant me interview. One owner seemed reluctant but open to persuasion but when I pressed him for a date when he would be available, he provided me a date but did not show up. Some of the restaurants granted me an interview through referrals. I was able to interview Wing’s because Ding Ho called them up to let them know I would be calling them. Hunan House granted me an interview only at the behest of Doral Chenoweth, a local food critic, with whom I had spoken about my research. One of the restaurants, Peacock Lounge, was interested and happy to speak with me but did not want to be recorded. Ultimately, I chose to focus my analysis on the restaurant Ding Ho, one of the oldest Chinese restaurants in Columbus, Ohio. I focused on Ding Ho because it was an intriguing mixture of contemporary and older ideas about Chinese-ness and Chinese restaurants. It was a slightly different restaurant from the others in that it had maintained much of its menu, décor and even staff from its beginnings during the 1950s. I felt that the restaurant was an interesting site to discuss ideas about authenticity because it reinforced yet challenged conventional notions of Chinese authenticity as static and immutable. In Ding Ho, there were elements that one would expect from a Chinese restaurant as well as unexpected features that challenged notions of what it means to be a Chinese restaurant. All the information that I had gathered with my fieldnotes and interviews served as supportive and supplementary information for my analysis of Ding Ho.
Interview Questions

During the interview process, while I was interested in the question of authenticity in Chinese restaurants, I did not want to immediately open the interview with such questions. I generally began by asking general background questions such as “How did you migrate to the United States?” and asking about their lives growing up in their native country or in the United States. While these questions were not directly related to the subject of Chinese restaurants, I felt that they were important to ask for several reasons. First, I felt that that background questions were innocuous enough that it might put the subject more at ease. Such background questions served as introductory small talk and it indicated a more personal interest in the owner as a person and set a tone that the interview was about them and their story rather than an expose on Chinese restaurants. Secondly, I felt that it was extremely important to have their origin story on record. The East and West Coasts of the United States tend to be the geographic sites for studies on Asian American culture while the Midwest tends to be less studied as the Asian American population is less dense in these areas. In addition, Chinese restaurants have been under-studied even though it has been a strong occupational choice for many Chinese immigrants. I felt that it was important to have documentation of how some Chinese immigrants came into the restaurant business so that their story would not simply disappear when they passed on. As I requested interviews with the owners, one of the reasons I stated for wanting to conduct the interview was so that the owners could have a record of their story not only for their legacy but that their story could also be part of a
larger undertaking about the study of Chinese restaurants. I believe that for the restaurant owners, especially the ones who had been established in the community and were familiar with operating a business in Columbus, also felt that it may also be a good opportunity for any type of publicity that might develop, whether it was getting the word out there about them or increase business sales. The other question that usually followed the background question was to ask the owners how they came to work or own a Chinese restaurant. While this question was not specifically related to questions of authenticity, I also felt that it was an important question to contextualize how some Chinese restaurants began their business.

Although I was interested in investigating the issue of authenticity, I attempted to avoid using the word directly itself in my interview questions unless the interview subject directly mentioned the word “authenticity.” I know that the word “authenticity” conjures up ideas about legitimacy and for many people, authenticity is conflated with quality and I did not want to put the owner in a position where they would feel as if they had to defend or justify their cuisine. In no way did I want to indicate that their food was anything less than delicious and I felt that bringing up direct questions of authenticity might lead them to think that I somehow questioned the Chinese-ness of the food their restaurant offered. Instead, I asked questions about their process for creating the menu for their restaurants. In doing so, I would gain information about what types of dishes they thought would represent Chinese cuisine and would be appealing to their target clientele. I asked them if they thought there was a difference between Chinese and American tastes in food. In general, I believe that most people would assume a
difference between Chinese and American tastes so I already expected that the restaurant owners’ answer would be affirmative. However, I did not want to make assumptions but wanted to use this question as an opening to further discuss any differences they may perceive. I then asked how they would characterize American tastes in food and how they would characterize Chinese tastes. With this question, I would get a sense of how they might interpret the style of food that would appeal to the local clientele and if they’ve made any adjustments or accommodations in their own restaurant offerings. I also asked them about they considered to be Chinese food. I wondered if the answer to this question would also be something that would be offered on the menu and in many cases, it turned out to be not on the menu. This omission of dishes that the owners considered to be Chinese food and what was offered on their menu indicated that Chinese cuisine was being interpreted in more than one way but still maintained a label of being Chinese. I inquired about their clientele – how would they describe their clientele? The answer to this question would give me a sense of how they may or may not adjust their, accommodate cultural differences in tastes, or why they chose to offer some dishes but not others such as the dishes they considered to be Chinese food. By asking these questions, I could get around the issue of asking them directly about authenticity, but still be able to gather information that would help me interpret how the Chinese restaurant owners understood and expressed Chinese cuisine. However, in the course of the interview, if the restaurant owner mentioned authenticity, then I would use the word and address the issue more directly.
In ethnographic interviewing, the style of asking questions is more conversational than perhaps a sociological method in which questions are standardized and uniform. Ethnography investigates the culture of a particular group, whether national, ethnic, or however one classifies the grouping (Spradley 1979: 3; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995: 1). The investigative style is more flexible, allowing the interviewer more leeway in allowing the conversation to flow more naturally or take a course of direction that the interview subject may wish to take. This is the approach I utilized for my interviews: using a few key questions and allowing the conversation to flow. However, even in the flexibility of ethnographic interviewing, there remains some “rules” in conducting ethnographic interviews. As Edward Ives wrote, “you are not [his emphasis] simply ‘having a nice chat’” (Ives 1980: 50). In other words, the interview is not simply a record of a conversation between two people. Rather, the interviewer is meant to step back and allow the subject to speak his or her own thoughts. The interviewer should not dominate the conversation (lest the interview consists primarily of the interviewer speaking) or insert his or her own perspective and ask leading questions which may compromise the kind of information the interview subject provides. Bruce Jackson emphatically states, “In a field collecting situation, you are not a conversational participant. Whatever your reasons for being there, whatever your reasons for getting that information, the simple experience of participating in a conversation is not [his emphasis] one of them” (1987: 81). While I understand and agree with the logic of the interviewer stepping back, I felt a bit constrained in asking my interview questions rather than conducting a conversation. I was also reluctant to directly address the question of authenticity, not only for the reason
stated earlier, but also because I did not want to so baldly impose my own belief systems onto the conversation and ask the anathema “leading question.” However, I wonder if it would have been better to address the question of authenticity directly. In some respects, I felt that it was the white elephant in the room whose presence I should openly acknowledge. By doing so, I could have a more direct conversation about the subject. On the other hand, I might have gained more information by indirectly approaching the issue. This issue might be finding a better balance of pursuing an even more conversational interview style than what I had utilized, allowing the interview subjects to speak freely, and to pursue a more directed style of questioning. Charles Briggs in Learning How to Ask (1986) addresses a similar question of learning which questions are appropriate and not appropriate to ask, of earning the right to ask certain questions. But as Jackson observed, “The best interviewers somehow make the difference between conversation and interview unobtrusive as possible.” (Jackson 80) and I may just not be at that point yet.

Narrowing the Scope

Though I have collected a lot of information about Chinese restaurants from my fieldwork and from my personal insider knowledge of having grown up and worked at a Chinese take-out, I am only utilizing a fraction of it for this dissertation. I could have used my data to construct a broad general study on Chinese restaurants. However, in order to really do a more in-depth examination of authenticity, I felt that it was best to
focus on one restaurant. In this spirit, I chose to focus on Ding Ho for several reasons.

When I first entered Ding Ho, I was immediately struck by its several anomalous features
and that it was still a distinctly Chinese restaurant. The coexistence of seemingly
contradictory elements seemed to be a rich site in which to explore ideas about Chinese
identity and ethnicity as expressed by this on particular restaurant. I felt that I could
more thoroughly address the issues of authenticity by examining this one restaurant in
depth rather than doing a broad sweep of several restaurants where I may fall into a trap
of superficial analysis. In addition, Ding Ho had been in operation for several decades
since the 1950s and maintained several features from those early days. The anachronistic
elements would provide a better understanding of the expectations and expression of a
Chinese restaurant sixty years ago and how it developed into the current incarnations of
Chinese restaurants today. The restaurant was also in its 3rd generation ownership by the
Yee family which meant that I would be able to talk to the owners about their decisions
in creating, maintaining, or changing aspects of the restaurant. One of the most important
aspects that drew me to focus on the restaurant was also how accessible and open the Yee
family was to me. They were incredibly generous with their time, extremely helpful, and
friendly which made my research with them easy and enjoyable.

It is often the dishes offered at Chinese restaurants that are the subjects of debates
about its authenticity. Consumers want to know if a particular dish is authentically
Chinese, if it was prepared with a Chinese clientele in mind or if it was somehow
adulterated and degraded for a seemingly less discriminating American palate. There are
several popular dishes such as Kung Pao Chicken, General Tso’s chicken, chow mein,
chop suey, or egg rolls that can fall into this category. It is tempting to conduct a case by case examination of each of these foods to determine its origins as some scholars or writers have already done. Renqiu Yu has already written an excellent article “Chop Suey: From Chinese Food to Chinese American Food” (1987) that details the origins of chop suey and Jennifer Lee devoted an entire chapter to her investigation about General Tso’s chicken in her book *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* (2008). But rather than conduct a survey of Chinese dishes, I chose to focus on one localized Chinese dish as an example of how authenticity may function in Chinese cuisine in the American context. I chose to devote one chapter to Wor Sue Gai, a boneless chicken dish that is offered in several Chinese restaurants in the Columbus, Ohio area but is not generally known outside the area. Wor Sue Gai presents an interesting case where the claims of Chinese authenticity have multiple levels of identity. In examining Wor Sue, I was able to address the broader claims of authenticity that affect other Chinese dishes whose authenticity is disputed or in question.

Part of my research also involved collecting vintage Chinese restaurant menus. Early in my graduate student career, I wrote a paper about vintage Chinese restaurant menus. At that time, I believed that older Chinese restaurants were more limited in menu offerings and that it was only recently that Chinese restaurants offered a more expanded menu. I thought that finding older Chinese restaurant menus would provide evidence of this hypothesis and I set about finding older Chinese restaurant menus. I discovered that many people were selling old Chinese restaurant menus on Ebay and I began purchasing them for my research. People had often kept menus from Chinese restaurants as
mementos of their dining experiences and some menus had even been kept in scrapbooks that were later dismantled and sold individually. Around the time I began to purchase Chinese restaurant menus on Ebay (around 2004), Chinese menus were selling for approximately five dollars per menu. I chose to purchase menus based primarily on visual interest (many of them were stunning work of art) and on the age that the seller stated the menu originated from (I preferred older menus and generally accepted whatever the date of the menu the seller stated although I did not verify the age myself).

Over the years, Chinese restaurant menus have become increasingly expensive as people have realized its artistic and cultural value. Currently, Chinese menus on Ebay at its lowest end are approximately $25 while many other menus are offered at $30 to $40 with some menus being offered as high as $125 for one menu which indicates the increasing interest that people have in such cultural artifacts and their value as collectibles. Several institutions also maintain collections of Chinese restaurant menus. Small non-profits such as the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle, Washington and the Chinese Historical Society in San Francisco, California have small collections of Chinese restaurant menus. The San Francisco Public Library, the New York Metropolitan Library, and the Los Angeles City library have extensive collections of Chinese restaurant menus in their holdings. Harley Spiller of New York City is a private collector of Chinese restaurant menus and has amassed a large collection over the past 30 years. I viewed Chinese restaurant menus from collections at the San Francisco Public Library, the New York Public Library, the Wing Luke Museum, and Harley Spiller’s private collection but I have focused on working with menus in my personal collection for this dissertation.
The sellers were often not sure of the age or provided what they thought was the age of the menu. Knowing the exact dates of the menus would have been useful, but they were unfortunately unavailable. However, it is still useful to conduct a close analysis of the menus themselves as cultural artifacts as they yield a wealth of information about how Chinese restaurants have expressed themselves to an American public. Analyzing the vintage menus provides a broader context for my examination of Ding Ho as a single restaurant. The menus offer examples of how any single Chinese restaurant approaches the idea of a Chinese restaurant in contrast to Ding Ho. I look at the types of dishes offered, how they are described or not described, the transliterations of the names of the dishes, and how the artwork may depict Chinese-ness. This information can tell us how Chinese restaurants made their own appeals for acceptance and how they negotiated Chinese-ness for their audience. Many (if not all) of the menus contain a section of dishes that is labeled as “Chinese” and another section that is labeled as “American.” This differentiation is rich with clues on how Chinese restaurants understood Chinese-ness versus American-ness. Such close readings of the menu yield clues about the social context in which Chinese restaurants operated and how they negotiated ideas about Chinese.

Internet Restaurant Reviews and Food Discussion Forums

My research methods also involved reviewing online restaurant reviews and analyzing relevant internet food discussion threads. In this internet age, much
information about any restaurant is available online. Restaurants have their own websites where menus and background stories are posted for the public. Diners can share publicly their experiences and opinions of restaurants for other prospective patrons, akin to the work that was once only reserved for food critics who published their reviews in the newspapers. The internet allows the average restaurant go-er to bypass the more institutional and perhaps “elite” views of food critics who may or may not represent the tastes of the broader community. Food discussion forums offer an avenue of conversation and critique among disparate people geographically distant from each other which may not have been possible otherwise. Although such internet reviews and discussion boards are may not be accurate sources of concrete information about restaurants or food, they do document perspectives and lore that exist about a particular subject. They reveal what people think about food.

I utilized restaurant reviews post on yahoo.com for Ding Ho for my analysis. The reviews provided insight on how Ding Ho was perceived in the community. I had considered conducting interviews with Ding Ho restaurant patrons. However, it would be difficult to get a good cross section of Ding Ho diners to represent general perceptions of the restaurant. I could have asked the owners of Ding Ho to suggest some patrons for me to interview, but I felt that this would be an imposition on their time. In addition, if they were to suggest some names, the patrons would likely be loyal customers who could provide only a positive view of the restaurant. Such interviews would be useful in their own right, but they may not yield the richness and diversity of opinion that a series of internet restaurant reviews could provide.
Food discussion forums such as Chowhound.com provided such a wonderful source of conversation about Chinese food. There are many more discussion threads on Chinese food and restaurant on Chowhound.com, but I focused on the threads that mentioned Wor Sue Gai or the separate Chinese language menu. Wor Sue Gai was especially difficult to find information on, but Chowhound.com was one of the few places that even mentioned this dish. Although the information in the discussion threads may not be accurate, they do highlight the elements that are important to people and provide clues, if incomplete ones, on how the dish came to be. The discussion on the separate Chinese language menu offers a window to what might otherwise be a private conversation about the indignation some diners feel about a perceived lack of access to the authentic Chinese dishes. Overall, such internet resources have been invaluable in analyzing general opinions on aspects of Chinese cuisine.

Conclusion

Through these combined methods of interviews, observations, collection, close readings of the text, my goal is to get a greater sense of the dimensions of the Chinese-ness of a Chinese restaurant and as a performance rather than as a static identity. This is a folkloristic approach that is important for challenging a more static idea of authenticity. This argument that authenticity is not static but multiple and dynamic will be central to the whole dissertation.
Ding Ho Far West Restaurant on Broad Street is unmistakably Chinese. The chop suey script\(^8\) of the restaurant name, the red lanterns hanging from various corners, the fat Buddha porcelain statues situated throughout the room, the smells of hot oil in a wok, and the carved sculpted dragons curling along the frame of the bar. All these elements signal “Chinese restaurant.”

However, standing behind the register is an elderly white haired Caucasian lady who rings up the take-out orders. One of the servers is also a Caucasian woman and a mixed heritage gentleman behind the bar chats amiably to a customer. After I am seated, a Chinese waitress looks at me with a bit of curiosity while the Caucasian server unexpectedly sets a basket of sliced Italian bread in front of me. I am quite surprised to be served bread as I have never before heard of or encountered such a practice in a Chinese restaurant. I wondered if the owners were perhaps not Chinese, which might account for the unusual characteristics. At the same time, I also thought that perhaps the owners might very well be Chinese, but that this restaurant probably had some very good reasons for how they chose to run their business.

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\(^8\) I use the rather non-academic term of “chop suey script” to describe the type of font often used for English writing that is meant to mimic the visual look of Chinese characters. It is no longer as common to see this type of script in association with Chinese culture as it can be perceived as racist or stereotypical.
While Ding Ho maintains obviously Chinese elements, its other unexpected aspects challenge monolithic/singular expectations of what a Chinese restaurant is and present a more complex and nuanced picture of what can constitute a Chinese restaurant. The bread and the non-Chinese staff are aspects that are not necessarily what one might expect from a Chinese restaurant, yet the restaurant still has many of the trappings generally associated with one. The seemingly out-of-place elements might raise the question of whether Ding Ho is a “real” Chinese restaurant. For some people, the presence of these clashing parts cancel out the “authenticity” of the Chinese-ness of the restaurant. But what makes a restaurant “Chinese” does not rely just on one factor alone. It is a series of criteria that must come together to build an identity of cultural authenticity. However, the criteria are not static, nor are they stable. There may be a criterion whose inclusion might be questioned, or even be contradictory, but as Ding Ho shows us, cultural authenticity is as multifaceted and contradictory as culture itself – slippery and difficult to define. Yet, although some parts may seem contradictory, Ding Ho still maintains a distinct identity as a Chinese restaurant. In this chapter, I show how Ding Ho defines itself as Chinese in ways that are multiple and contradictory, and in some ways, unexpected, but is still “Chinese.” This chapter will focus on how the third generation owner-operator of Ding Ho conceptualizes his restaurant as Chinese in self-evident and self-conscious ways.

The Story of Ding Ho
Ding Ho is a family-owned Chinese restaurant with a long history in Columbus. It first opened up in 1956 when Clifford Yee took over a converted gas station with his friend Frank Yee (no relation) and made it into a Chinese restaurant – Ding Ho Far West Restaurant. This was not Clifford’s first foray into the Chinese restaurant business. Like many others who opened up a Chinese restaurant, he and Frank first got their feet wet by working at the Far East Restaurant on the East Side in Columbus. There, Clifford worked as a server and a cook for almost fourteen years, learning the ins and outs of the Chinese restaurant business before opening his own. In 1964, he re-located the business to a developing property on 3471 Broad Street in a working class neighborhood of Columbus. It was the 40 Motel which was built with specifically Ding Ho in mind as a leasee. But his business partner Frank passed away soon after in 1967 and Frank’s son Peter took over his place. Clifford began to think about the future, his retirement and who might run the restaurant in his stead. He asked his only son, Bill, who was living in Montreal, Canada at that time, to come to Columbus to start thinking about taking over the business. So in 1969, at his grandfather’s behest, Bill brought his three young children with him to Columbus and began working at Ding Ho. Nine years later, in 1978, Clifford passed away as well, and Bill took his place. Bill and Peter ran Ding Ho together until Bill bought out Peter’s shares of the business in 1996 and gained full ownership. Unfortunately, Bill suffered a stroke, and like his father before him, requested his eldest son to return to Columbus to take over the business. In 2003, his son Steve returned from Texas where he was living at the time to take over the full operation of the business. In 2008, Ding Ho once again moved from its location of over forty years
to a free-standing and larger building on 120 Phillipi Road where it continues many
aspects of the Chinese restaurant business set by Clifford Yee and Frank Yee in 1956.

It is not clear why Clifford Yee ended up in Columbus, Ohio as the people who
might know his reasons have already passed. Columbus is a seemingly unusual
destination for a Chinese person to establish him or herself as it did not have an
established Chinese network or community upon which to draw support and resources in
the same way San Francisco might offer. Chinese communities have been much more
established in US coastal cities, especially on the West Coast. San Francisco was a major
entry point for scores of Chinese immigrants who arrived to mine for gold and to build
railroads during the mid nineteenth century. San Francisco was also home to the
immigration port of Angell Island while New York was home to Ellis Island. Vibrant
Chinatowns existed in both cities and the Chinese communities flourished there and
especially throughout the West Coast. As a result, due to their visible presence and
relative large numbers, it may seem as if Chinese communities existed only in these
areas. Meanwhile, Chinese communities could also be found in Chicago and in the
South. Pockets of Chinese people also existed in seemingly unlikely areas in the smaller
cities of the Midwest like Columbus, Ohio.

In fact, Columbus had been home to Chinese people since the 1880s at the very
least. The 1880 US Census was the first census in which people of Chinese descent in
Columbus were listed.9 According to the 1880 Census, there were eighteen people listed

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9 I used the Ancestry.com database to look at US Census records for people of Chinese descent in
Columbus, Ohio. I did a search for people who listed China as their birthplace or identified their race as
Chinese. The 1880 Census was the first decade in which Chinese were listed as living in Columbus, Ohio.
as being Chinese. Interestingly enough, however, not all eighteen people listed China as their birthplace. Of the eighteen people, only eight listed China as their place of birth while the rest were born in Ohio with one born in Georgia. Was it possible that as early as 1880 there were Chinese born in Ohio? In the space for listing race (or color as the category was identified in the census), the letter “C” indicated “Chinese,” and three families had a “C” marked for their race. Also, their names were also not Chinese. I had thought that perhaps these were people of Chinese descent who might have been taken in by white families in some fashion and taken on Western names. However, additional information indicated that these families were not Chinese as they did not seem to follow the typical profile of Chinese during that time. For instance, their parents’ birthplaces were Ohio, Georgia, and Virginia, which would indicate a more rooted history in places not known for having a Chinese population; Chinese immigrants were often transnational and any roots would be likely in the Chinese enclaves in major cities rather than areas with few other Chinese people. Occupations include laborer and huckster (traveling salesman) of which laborer might have been a logical job for a Chinese male at the time, but laundry work was a line work for many Chinese at the time. Combined with the Western names and family history in the United States, I suspect that the “C” might have actually meant “colored” although the term on the Census used to indicate African Americans was “black.” The eight other Chinese people listed in the 1880 Census were primarily single men who were in the laundry business. Five listed laundry as their profession while one was a servant and two were in the tea business: one as a merchant and the other as a tea store owner. Three of the men were in fact married – one
laundryman and the tea store merchant and owner – but it is unclear if their wives lived with them. Their names were listed as spouses but they did not receive a separate entry in the census although other women of the time were.

It was not until the early 20th century that stable Chinese communities began to form in Columbus, as evidenced by city directories and population numbers. However, the Columbus census indicates that most of its Chinese were born in China, but it is not clear if they had spent considerable time in one of the major Chinese enclaves en route to Columbus or if Columbus was a direct destination. Early Chinese communities tended to be bachelors, thus the term “bachelor society” as these men lived their entire lives in the US without the opportunity to marry or have families. Columbus was no different. The early Chinese in Columbus were single men who operated laundries or small shops. However, in Columbus, the city directories show that families began to grow as evidenced by Chan Hay, purportedly the first Chinese child to be born in Columbus as announced by a brief blurb in the *The Columbus Citizen* on September 18, 1909.

Laundry work seemed to be the primary occupation for many of the Chinese in Columbus but the first Chinese restaurant in Columbus was opened by laundryman Jan Kee in 1901, only to be gone a year later. Why did it last for such a short time? Jan Kee was already in his sixties when he opened up his chop suey business and he may have passed away since he was not listed in the city directory the following year. Sun Joiy opened the next Chinese restaurant the following year in 1902 and from then on, the

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80 I looked at the Columbus city directories dated 1870 to about 1950 in increments of approximately ten years although there were occasions in which I looked at years in between the decades. The first listing of a Chinese restaurant business was listed in the 1901 directory. This led me to the conclusion that Jan Kee opened the first one.
number of Chinese restaurants doubled in number every year. Meanwhile, with each passing year, the Chinese slowly began to dominate the laundry business as white-owned laundries began to dwindle until there none. By the 1940s/1950s, however, even Chinese-owned laundries began to fade out as the primary Chinese occupation became the restaurant business.

It is likely that the Chinese restaurant business was becoming established enough in Columbus that it could draw more Chinese from other parts of the country as a viable place to live with a growing numbers of Chinese. Ding Ho was likely part of this growth of Chinese restaurants. However, Ding Ho is rather unique in the sense that it has been in business continuously for over 50 years with the same family who started it. In fact, it is in its third generation of ownership – a noteworthy fact since most Chinese restaurants usually do not last beyond one family generation. It is not unusual for the children of Chinese restaurants owners to work in the parents’ business in terms of “helping out.” Miri Song in her study on Chinese families running take-out businesses in Britain writes that “The availability of family labor has tended to be treated as an unquestioned given” (Song 1999: 2). In this sense, Ding Ho is very much like many family-owned Chinese restaurant businesses where the children are often required to work at the restaurant in one form or another and in varying degrees of commitment. Steve Yee, the third generation owner, states of his own experience, “You’re the oldest son, you’re expected to work when you’re young.”

He recalls his youth spent working at Ding Ho:

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11 The children referenced in Song’s study are generally young adults aged 17 and older who are the offspring of parents who own Chinese take-aways rather than literal children in terms of age.  
12 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
Oh, it was not fun. You want to go out and play with your friends and everything else but whereas your parents say hey, you go to work. You’re nine, ten years old, you wanna go play kickball, baseball outside, but you had to work. So I was more or less used to it. That was expected of me. So I, you know, would learn how to drive at sixteen. I had to pick up a lot of stuff for the restaurant. You know, I had to work a lot.\textsuperscript{13}

His sisters, however, were not required to contribute the same hours and effort to the restaurant as he was. “Whereas my sisters, you know, my father didn’t expect them to work here. They expected daughters to eventually marry and move away, you know. It’s up to them if they want to work here,”\textsuperscript{14} Yee explains. Song’s study revealed that “Although many daughters did work considerably in their families’ take-aways, they were not usually encouraged to take over the business, unless there were no sons willing to do so.” (Song 1999: 175) Perhaps it was for this reason that Steve rather than his other siblings was exposed to the restaurant operations at an early age. Since Bill took over from his father, Clifford, he most likely expected his own son to do the same. Steve describes his early beginnings at Ding Ho:

Well, I was running around here when I was like eight, nine years old. Before my grandfather actually passed away, I had to come down almost every weekend and help out. Started off in the basement, filling up sweet and sour mustard sauce in the to-go containers, for carry-out. Did that and went from making wontons, dishwasher, worked at every single position in the restaurant. You know, coming out in the dining room when I was fourteen as busboy and work my way up. So I learned every aspect of the business.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13] Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
\item[14] Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
\item[15] Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
\end{footnotes}
But in Ding Ho’s case, the expectation of Steve to work at the restaurant seemed to extend beyond the type of “family work contract” (Song 1999: 73) that Song describes in her study. In that study, the children worked at the restaurant out of economic necessity as a valuable family resource. But Ding Ho was not a small take-away, but a full dine-in restaurant with the financial ability and the business needs to require more employees beyond what a single family could usually supply. In fact, Bill preferred that Steve continue working at the restaurant, in contrast to the families in Song’s study. In her study, Song writes that “According to the young people in two-thirds of the twenty five families, their parents did not want their children staying in the catering industry and wanted them (both sons and daughters) to obtain higher education and professional qualifications instead” (Song 1999: 174).16 But in Steve’s case, his father encouraged him to stay in the business. “He’s like, don’t go to college. Why not work here? You’ve got a great business. Noooo, I’m going to college, getting an education, not even a choice to me.”17 Steve attended the Ohio State University, majoring in marketing and business, but continued to run Ding Ho even after he graduated. He was offered several jobs, but his father told him that he would double the best salary he was offered if he would stay and continue to run Ding Ho. It might be logical to assume that because the Chinese restaurant has long been an ethnic immigrant niche occupation that subsequent generations would be encouraged to expand their choices for livelihood. Song’s study showed that the children of the Chinese take-away owners viewed the business as what

16 While Song’s study focuses on take-away businesses as opposed to the more involved full-scale Chinese restaurant, I think the sentiment still applies. Restaurant business is not as reputable? Praiseworthy as a more professional occupation. However, it may only apply to take-out businesses considering that it is seen as a less prestigious type of business than perhaps a more profitable full scale Chinese restaurant.
17 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
Song describes as “racially stigmatizing” (1999: 178). But Bill obviously viewed Ding Ho as a viable enterprise exactly as it was. Steve recalls, “I managed this place after college. Came back here, ran it about four years. I had different aspirations. I wanted to expand, have to maybe the chance to open four or five more units. And my father said no. You keep it the same. It provides enough of everything for everybody to live well.” Steve followed his father’s advice and maintained many of the elements of the restaurant from when it first began. Keeping it the same has indeed been a successful formula as the restaurant continues to be in business.

The story of Ding Ho expands our understanding of the Chinese restaurant and challenges the assumption that Chinese restaurants are only a temporary occupation for new immigrants. It also challenges Song’s findings that owners prefer that their children not continue in the business. Importantly, Steve did go to college before taking over the business; he did not sacrifice education for taking over a restaurant, a choice that would be viewed as a sacrifice by many Chinese families. In Steve’s case, his father actually discouraged him from pursuing higher education. But these distinctions, the elements of Ding Ho that stray from the expected trajectory of Chinese restaurant stories, do not make Ding Ho any less Chinese. In many ways, the background story of Ding Ho is typical of many other Chinese restaurants – the start of working in a pre-existing Chinese restaurant before starting your own, the family labor. The differences in Ding Ho’s story simply show us that there are variations in Chinese restaurant backgrounds and that the stories of Chinese restaurants are multiple. In the same vein, there are elements in the

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18 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
Ding Ho restaurant that are unexpected and may not follow the “typical” Chinese restaurant. For some restaurant patrons, these aspects signal Chinese inauthenticity. However, like the differences in Ding Ho’s background story, these elements may also simply be variations. It is only one version out the many versions that Chinese restaurants can express.

*The Threat of Categories*

The Ding Ho restaurant on Broad Street seemed old-fashioned with its large sign that displayed its full name, “Ding Ho Far West Restaurant” and a menu that had strayed little from the one that was created in the 1950s. Indeed, little has changed since the restaurant’s heyday during the 1960s – from the small green cocktail lounge and waitresses who have worked there continuously for thirty years to the basket of sliced Italian bread and butter brought to you as soon as you sit down. It’s a bit of a surprise to be served bread in a Chinese restaurant as it is not a customary part of Chinese cuisine. “Yeah, it used to be that’s only for American food,” Steve explains. “You order fried chicken. You order a spaghetti meatball. We have bread and butter come with it. And it started…you know, I don’t know when it started, maybe in the sixties, a customer said, hey, can I have some bread and butter with my Wor Sue Gai. It kind of transitioned to now where you get bread and butter with your meal. We get it from an Italian bread
place every morning. Fresh bread. Yeah, we’re one of the only people,” chuckles Steve.19

Even though Ding Ho is categorized as a Chinese restaurant, like many of the earlier Chinese restaurants in the United States, it has a dual menu of “Chinese Food” and “American Food.” Thus, while it offers chop suey and chow mein, steaks and hamburgers are also available for its diners. While the bread is one of the characteristics that distinguish Ding Ho from other Chinese restaurants, it is not an unusual element in most mainstream American restaurants. In most mainstream American restaurants, some type of bread is generally brought to the table or even expected. However, the type of bread familiar to many European food heritages is not part of Chinese cuisine. Thus, the bread and butter, much less Italian bread, is seen as an odd feature to see at a Chinese restaurant, even if it is meant to be part of the “American” portion of the dual menu. In fact, for some people, it raises the question of Ding Ho’s Chinese credentials, whether it indeed offers authentic Chinese cuisine because it also offers this anomalous sliced bread.

Assessments of the restaurant are mixed as some diners dismiss Ding Ho while others embrace it, as evidenced by online reviews. One Internet review of the restaurant exclaims, “Ding Ho is the gold standard by which all other Chinese cuisine is based.”20 While it is unclear if the reviewer genuinely believes that all of Chinese cuisine has modeled their food after Ding Ho or if the reviewer uses Ding Ho as the standard to compare other Chinese restaurants, the high regard for Ding Ho’s food and belief in its

19 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
Chinese-ness are clear. Another reviewer raves “We’ve traveled the world but by far this is the best Chinese food anywhere!”\(^{21}\) Implied in this reviewer’s claim is that Ding Ho’s Chinese-ness is not compromised since the reviewer has presumably traveled even to China and Ding Ho’s Chinese food remains the best. However, one patron sniffs, “Do you want rolls with that, sug? [sic]: Never trust an Asian restaurant that serves rolls with our entre [sic]. It can’t be authentic.”\(^{22}\) This reviewer is suspicious of Ding Ho’s purported Chinese-ness because it offers an item not usually offered at Chinese restaurants. The last internet reviewer raises an issue that often accompanies the assessments of Chinese restaurants: Is this restaurant authentically Chinese? On the surface, it seems to be a simple enough and clear question, but in fact, it is a very vague question that offers no definition or description of Chinese authenticity yet assumes that there is a common understanding of what it is. To answer this question, we must already have a notion of what constitutes authentic Chinese cuisine or what marks it as such. There are multiple ways in which authenticity can be addressed. Is authenticity assessed by flavor as suggested by Elizabeth Rozin’s (1973) ideas on flavor principles? Or is authenticity measured by whether ethnic staff has prepared the meal as Gustavo Arellano believes in his book on Mexican cuisine (2012)? Often, the presence of Chinese diners is enough for some people to assert a restaurant’s authenticity. Appearances matter and there is an assumption that the Chinese diners have a similar palate. These internet

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comments also all point to the idea that the Chineseness, authentic or not, is what makes the restaurant desirable or not.

The doubting diner is suspicious because implied in his declaration is that any authenticity is marred by the presence of the rolls because the rolls do not belong in the category of Chinese food. Here it is useful to consider the work of Mary Douglas on pollution and taboo. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas reflects on the idea of dirt as less an inherent danger than a means to create social order. She writes:

> As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behavior in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. (1966: 2)

Similarly, we might view authenticity as operating in a similar fashion in the sense that it is also about boundaries and categorization. Bread mars the category of Chinese cuisine in the same way that dirt mars the category of cleanliness. Both are about belonging and non-belonging. Douglas explains that “Dirt does not look nice, but it is not necessarily dangerous” (1966: xi). In a comparable fashion, bread may seem out of place in a Chinese restaurant, but it does not necessarily affect the Chinese dishes served there. After all, there was no claim at Ding Ho that the bread was part of Chinese cuisine. Whether it is there or not should have little bearing on the Chinese cuisine served to the diners as the Chinese dishes themselves will be wholly separate and discrete from the
bread. Despite this, bread still pollutes the perceived authenticity of the entire Chinese restaurant.

Admittedly, bread does have an anomalous presence in a Chinese restaurant. “An anomaly,” Douglas writes, “is an element which does not fit a given set or series” (1966: 47). In the context of Ding Ho restaurant, bread signals “American” rather than “Chinese.” This one detail taints or pollutes the entirety of the Chinese restaurant enterprise and calls into question the cultural flavor of the food the restaurant purportedly labels as Chinese, regardless of the actual food it serves. It creates ambiguity in the category of Chinese restaurant and as Douglas notes, “Ambiguous things can seem very threatening” (1966: xi). The bread muddles the idea of a singularity in the Chinese restaurant; it mixes two seemingly opposing cultures – East and West – when they “should” be separate. It is understandable that there is discomfort with anomaly since it makes our social categories less finite. “Most of us indeed would feel safer if our experiences [or in this case, our understanding of the surrounding world] could be hard-set and fixed in form,” Douglas writes (1966: 200). Experiences that are fixed in form avoid the problems and messiness of ambiguity. Douglas continues, “It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts. When we have them, we have to either face the fact that some realities elude them, or else blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts” (1966: 200). Anomalies indicate that the knowledge that we’ve held before may in face be incorrect.

To return to the reviewer’s declaration, if bread can be served at a Chinese restaurant, can the restaurant still be authentic? It depends on the perception of what an
authentic Chinese restaurant ought to be. While the concept of an authentic Chinese restaurant is ill-defined, it appears as though we should all have a common understanding of what constitutes one. The writer of that particular review seems to assume that there is a universal or common-sense understanding of Chinese authenticity. At the very least, an authentic Chinese restaurant won’t serve bread to its diners.

But the presence of bread, in actuality, is less a mark of “inauthentic” Chinese cuisine than an early strategy for the acceptance of Chinese cuisine – the acceptance of cuisine that may have been too “authentic” for the surrounding clientele. Yee describes the area as “We’re on the west side of town, big manufacturing area and lot of people are, college degree-wise, not as many people who are have advanced degrees, people with college degrees. Whereas you go to Upper Arlington or even around Sawmill, you got more people who are per capita incomes higher, more educated. They know how to eat, let’s say healthier, eat more authentic foods. They don’t just crave hamburger, hot dog, and greasy fried foods.”23 The client base in the surrounding area is not an adventurous one, he seems to say. The palate is not as varied, wide, or “educated.” The serving of bread is a nod to the familiar American meal and is a friendly introduction to what might be very unfamiliar dishes.

Likewise, the non-Chinese waitresses are also anomalies that may signal inauthenticity in the same way the presence of bread might. However, like bread, they are also early strategies to make the non-Chinese diners more comfortable in a Chinese restaurant setting. Since the very beginning of the restaurant, Ding Ho has always

23 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, August 3, 2012.
employed a number of Caucasian women as waitresses. For some people, the presence of
non-Chinese staff may indicate “inauthenticity” but like the bread, the staff are not part of
the cuisine and should not affect the food; they simply present the food. But as Yee
notes, “It’s always been customers feel more comfortable, those…especially back in the
fifties and sixties.” Language was an issue in the sense that “You want somebody who
could speak the English, speak a little bit English fluently so you can order your food and
not get a mixed up order. Same thing here. Most people work here very well…speaks
English pretty well, can take orders and customers feel comfortable with them.” They
hired white American waitresses as a business decision. A white American waitress is
“proof” that Ding Ho was acceptable. She could make the diners feel more comfortable,
serve as a cultural translator, explain the dishes in English that would be familiar to the
non-Chinese diners. She was one of them. The fact that the owners were Chinese and at
least had some visible presence was enough of a marker of Chinese-ness. The
“anomalies” that serve as representations of inauthenticity are disruptions of a
preconceived notion of a Chinese restaurant (which may include expectations of an all-
Asian staff, all-Asian diners, and an unfamiliar exotic menu). They indicate a
“pandering” to American tastes. The “anomalies” raise questions of where the burden of
cultural authenticity is located in a Chinese restaurant. Does it reside in the food or
perhaps the amount of Asian presence (diners and staff)? Or must there a combination?
For the one diner, the presence of one seemingly out of place element dismantles the
entire authenticity of a Chinese restaurant. But there does seem to be one aspect that at

24 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
25 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
least definitively testifies for many diners the authenticity of a Chinese restaurant, whether it is openly accessible or not: the secret Chinese menu.

The Secret Chinese Menu

On Chowhound.com, there is a long discussion thread entitled “Why do chinese [sic] restaurants insist on having "secret" Chinese menus their English-Speaking customers can't decipher?” The poster “mwk” who began the thread complained:

I went to try a new Chinese restaurant here in Boston Chinatown last week. I had heard that the best dishes were on the "secret" Chinese [sic] only menus on the walls of the restaurant.

I tried my best to get any of the waiters to help me order from those menus. But, they kept insisting that I wouldn't like any of the food. They just did not want to tell me what was being offered off the English menu. I argued the point for a while, and I finally was able to have them suggest one dish which I ordered and it was wonderful (it was a stir fried eel dish with pea tendrils and garlic). But, the fight to get it was off-putting.

One time a few years ago, I went with a group of people to a Chinese restaurant, and one of the people spoke Chinese, so he ordered. The food was wonderful and I've wanted to try doing that again, but I don't have any Chinese friends locally.

Why do these restaurants insist on "hiding" these dishes from the general public? I understand that many or most of their customers are Chinese and it isn't an issue for them. But, what do you do if you are a poor American soul with a love of good Chinese food and a basic lack of Mandarin language competency? Is it really that hard to have another menu with English translations for these? If 5%
of their English customers order those dishes, isn't that more business for them anyway?\textsuperscript{26}

The poster's complaint is likely not an unfamiliar one. A would-be diner (presumably a non-Chinese diner) enters a Chinese restaurant for Chinese cuisine. He or she orders from the menu handed to him or her, but realizes that there are many other dishes that the restaurant offers that are \textit{not} on the menu that he or she was handed. Why are these other dishes withheld from him or her? Why can't he or she have them? Are these authentic Chinese dishes that only Chinese people are privy to while he or she is served fake Americanized dishes? Does the restaurant think that he or she is not sophisticated or worldly enough to appreciate real Chinese cuisine? It is only with great effort that the non-Chinese diner gains access to the "secret" Chinese menu, whether through dining with Chinese-speaking companions or with ferocious tenacity in convincing the wait-staff that he or she will like the dishes not offered on the main menu. As one responder in the thread noted of the situation, "This is a recurring complaint."\textsuperscript{27}

It was often the case that Chinese restaurants offered dual yet distinct menus for their diners – one that was distinctly labeled "American" which listed dishes such as sandwiches or steaks and another menu that was labeled "Chinese" which listed items such as chop suey, fried rice, or whatever was labeled as Chinese cuisine and so on.

\textsuperscript{26} \texttt{mwk}, Jul 6, 2012 09:47 AM, "Why do chinese [sic] restaurants insist on having "secret" Chinese menus their English-Speaking customers can't decipher?" accessed Friday, December 28, 2012, \url{http://chowhound.chow.com/topics/857367}

\textsuperscript{27} \texttt{DeppityDawg}, Jul 6, 2012 10:43 AM, reply comment to thread entitled "Why do chinese [sic] restaurants insist on having "secret" Chinese menus their English-Speaking customers can't decipher?" accessed Friday, December 28, 2012, \url{http://chowhound.chow.com/topics/857367}
However, these dual menus were generally offered on the same physical menu, both available to all diners. For those patrons not intimately familiar with Chinese cuisine, one could choose familiar American fare or explore the culinary territory of Chinese food. While the Chinese-and-American-food style menu is considerably less common today, a similar duality seems to persist albeit in a different form: the general menu versus the secret Chinese menu.28

It is true that some Chinese restaurants may have a general menu for their diners and another menu for its Chinese diners that is written in Chinese.29 But it is not necessarily to “prevent” non-Chinese speakers from ordering the best dishes, as mwk seems to imply. Rather, it may simply be an issue of business practicality. One poster explains, “I don't think they're ‘hiding’ anything it's just that there are going to be a number of off-putting options there that detract from what they believe their customer base prefers.”30 Another poster comments, “I do, however, think that the restaurant owners genuinely believe that non-Chinese diners will be frightened off if they are able to peruse those menus.”31 As these posters note, there are certain dishes that may not appeal

28 It should be noted that other ethnic restaurants also have “secret” menus. Undergraduate folklore student Rachel Baransi’s father’s Middle Eastern restaurant carries “American” food and he explains it’s so people will feel comfortable bringing their grandparents to the restaurant—they’ll have something familiar to eat. Another undergraduate student Rida Khan discovered that Café Istanbul, a local Turkish restaurant, serves halal meat although this is not mentioned on the menu. In a way, this is also a “secret” menu of sorts.
29 There are also cases where there the “Chinese” menu is written in both Chinese and English or only one main menu that written in both Chinese and English. In other cases, the “Chinese” menu is simply handwritten on paper and taped to the walls of the restaurant.
to mainstream American tastes and are thus reserved for the Chinese diners who are familiar with them and enjoy eating them. For these diners, the secret menu seems to be code for “things Americans won’t like” or “delicacies saved for Chinese patrons.” In either case, the secret menu is not readily available to just anyone and its unavailability to the general public adds to its aura of authenticity.

In one sense, it is a protective measure for the business in terms of reputation and waste. “I think the fundamental problem leading to this issue is that so many Chinese restauranteurs have had Americans order these dishes and not like them, and send them back so the owner loses his revenue, or they've heard about the problem from others -- it's probably a common assumption among these owners that that is what will happen if they offer these dishes to Americans, so they don't,” states johnb in the discussion thread.32 But it is also protective in the sense (thought perhaps not deliberately so) that cultural cuisine is reserved for the insiders, the culturally intimate, for those who do not make assumptions and moral judgments on the cuisine linked to subtle forms of oppression/racism. On poster hypothesized that “The reason why Chinese restaurants will have "secret" menus is because historically they were segregated, ostracized and maybe even ridiculed because of the foods that they ate in their homeland. I still remember a story that was told to me about a group of college age kids who were trying to decide what to eat, and when someone suggested Korean, one member of the group

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said, ‘Yuck, don't they eat dog?!?’

While this poster’s anecdote speaks to another element of Chinese cuisine perceived as so “uncivilized” as to eat dog meat or disturbingly exotic, it may not be main impetus for offering dishes only in Chinese.

Several explanations offered by the posters agreed that that restaurant owners are quite cognizant of the limitations of the mainstream palate: “I've bumped into quite a few cases where the general opinion of a few (and I am by no means trying to denigrate all, or even most of Chinese resturanteurs) [sic] resturuant [sic] owners seemed to be that not only would non Chinese patrons not like the more "exotic" ingredianted [sic] items of the menu, but that they would balk at ANY item ouside [sic] of the "American Classic" menu.”

Another poster bluntly states, “Let's face it -- folks like us are in the vast minority among Chinese restaurant customers, who mostly just want to shovel it in from the buffet.”

Implied in his statement are several beliefs that mark a particular set of people who are interested in Chinese cuisine and how they view food tastes of the general public. First, he identifies himself as a type of gourmand (“folks like us”) since he is a participant on a discussion board devoted to seeking out good food; he is someone who knows “good” Chinese food. Second, he labels the majority of Chinese restaurant customers as essentially the unrefined mass who value quantity and would not know

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34  The poster’s anecdote references Korean rather than Chinese cuisine in the consumption of dog but it is understood that Chinese and Korean cuisine may be conflated as the same and are often associated with the same stereotypes.


quality (although he does not account for the Chinese clientele who may actually be the bulk of a Chinese restaurant’s customer base). Third, he makes a distinction between kinds of Chinese restaurants—the ones he values and “buffets.” His statement speaks to the many issues that intersect in the secret menu - business, Chineseness, the status of the insider versus the outsider. Another poster succinctly sums up the point:

Let's understand something.

Restaurant owners, including Chinese ones, are in business to make money, not to scratch your Chowhound itch.

Most folks outside of our little Chowhound community, do not want and do not care for whatever you believe is on those "secret" (or non-English translated) menus.

The risk-reward of letting someone sample a "secret" menu item just doesn't justify the long-term risks or costs.

The risk of letting a customer try one of those "secret" items is that you risk offending that customer, and losing that person forever to Panda Express down the street.

And, believe it or not, most of the world are not Chowhounds. I dare say that Chowhounds probably make up 1% of 1% of the total diners out there in the wild.37

The “secret” Chinese menu, therefore, is not an issue of deliberate withholding but a reading of the tastes of the restaurant clientele and what would be most profitable or successful.

The complaint in the discussion thread is not so much about the “secrecy” as it is about access to the “best” Chinese dishes. As one poster points out, these menus aren’t exactly “secret”: “Why are we referring to these dishes/menus as "secret" when the OP [Original Poster] clearly says they are posted on the wall? S/he just can't read Chinese.”

The menus are not so much secret as it is not readily and easily available to the non-Chinese speakers. But it is this inaccessibility that marks the Chinese dishes on the “secret” menu as the most desirable dishes. It is understood that the dishes on the Chinese menu are the “authentic” ones, the ones that are not served to the non-Chinese or mainstream public, despite the absence of the actual word “authentic.” Much of the language in the discussion thread refer to the Chinese menu as the “good” stuff, which the majority of diners supposedly cannot appreciate because they have limited “American” tastes or simply like to “shovel it in from the buffet.” Thus, quality is often seen as closely connected to or operates as a marker of authenticity.

Internet posts in an online forum afford a discussion about Chinese restaurants beyond what was previously publically available. Before this, the only public discourse about Chinese food was in cookbooks and in restaurant reviews. Online discussions open up new discourse possibilities. They reveal assumptions and stereotypes that might not otherwise be voiced (or at least not voiced as publically) that recall Orientalist discourses that have always been part of Chinese restaurants. This is what is so intriguing about this discussion thread: the language in these online conversations maintains echoes of

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Orientalist narratives about the imagined East that mark the authenticity of Chinese restaurants with ideas of an imagined “other.” In a study of online ethnic restaurant reviews, Akihiko Hirose and Kay Kei-Ho Pih note that authenticity of ethnic restaurants was based on the use of an Orientalist narrative. They state that “the cultural definition of authentic ethnic cuisine is discursively constructed through the identification of the racialized other” (2011: 1483). Indeed, in the chowhound.com discussion thread, authenticity is often signaled with subtle designations of “them” and “us” that are couched in racialized terms – the Chinese versus the non-Chinese. In Orientalist discourse, the Orient helps define “Europe as its contrasting image, idea, and personality, experience” (Said 1978: 1-2). Therefore, the Orient (or in this case, Chinese food or by proxy, Chinese culture) is unknowable and closed which defines the West as knowable and open. But Chinese food’s unknowability becomes marked as ethnic food or the racialized other while Western food remains unmarked. In this discussion thread, there are no questions or references to Western food being inaccessible or unknowable because it is a local category whose presence and knowledge is always presumed and thus unmarked. But, as Amy Shuman notes, “The problem with unmarked categories is that they conceal the interests served by maintaining them (1993: 345). In the framework of the secret Chinese menu, it’s the Chinese who are problematic, not the non-Chinese diners, and who must justify their practices to those who are not privy to the untranslated Chinese menu. Meanwhile, the left-out diners do not question their own desire to access the Chinese menu but see it as a right. Thus, Chinese food becomes the Orientalist object
that needs to be demystified and de-problematic while the West maintains its uninterrogated and neutral status.

What is inaccessible is viewed as exotic, essentially Chinese, although it is not exactly clear what the “secret” Chinese menu contains since the knowledge is inaccessible. In this discussion thread, we also see that that authenticity is equated with “good” or “quality.” He or she has heard that the best dishes are the ones written on the Chinese-only menu on the walls. The real Chinese food can be had if you go with a Chinese speaker who can order for you. Why else is the secret Chinese menu so desirable unless it is “good”? Arjun Appadurai acknowledges that “We often admit that there is food that, though inauthentic, is good. But can we as easily speak of food that is authentic but bad?” (1986: 25). In the chowhound discussion thread, there is not much talk about the inauthentic as being good; it is mostly about the desirability of the authentic Chinese menu items. But Appadurai still makes a good point. – what do we do with the food that is considered authentic but is poorly made or is not appealing to our tastes? Mario Montano suggests that yes, there can be authentic food that is bad but it gets converted into something that is neutralized into being acceptable to dominant culture. In his study on offal in Mexican folk foodways, he states that the “dominant culture can succeed in neutralizing, reinterpreting, and setting boundaries that separate ‘acceptable’ foods from those perceived as disreputable or threatening” (1997: 62). Mexicans were regarded as inferior by Anglo Texans and by proxy, their food was also regarded as such – unhealthy and unappetizing. As Mexican cuisine became more mainstream, its once lowly status becomes transformed into high status food through
pricing, reinterpretation, and commercialization. In fact, it becomes transformed into something “alien and adulterated” (Montano 1997: 62). Chinese cuisine faced or faces a similar issue. The Chinese community in America was once regarded as unsanitary and disease ridden or as sites of ill-repute (Shah 2001). Chinese cuisine was likewise considered askance. The secret Chinese menu may be a strategy to separate and neutralize what might be seen as less inviting (for the non-Chinese diner) aspects of Chinese cuisine. If the dominant culture does neutralize and reinterprets ethnic food to make it more palatable, then the secret menu is that which keeps the “bad” authentic food separate.

It is interesting to note that the perceived authenticity of the dishes is not marked by the presence of Chinese diners or Chinese staff or décor. These elements are already a given since they do not even arise in the discussion thread. Authenticity is not even marked by flavors or ingredients or cooking methods or anything to do with the dish itself. The authenticity of the dishes is marked by its very inaccessibility to the non-Chinese diner. Hirose and Pih state that “the production and reproduction of the exoticized signification of the ‘Oriental other’ in the East Asian gastronomical scene are intimately linked to the authenticity of a racialized cultural otherness which, in turn, is connected to the authenticity of the culturally competent consumer experience” (2011: 1499) In other words, authenticity is situated in the racialized other by its conflation with the production of exoticized elements (exotic because the hidden menu is foreign and unknowable but most likely off-putting to most American tastes) of Chinese cuisine. The “secret” Chinese menu becomes an Orientalist object.
Orientalism, in Edward Said’s definition, is a “Western style [of thought] for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1978: 3). In the discussion thread, posters (presumably non-Chinese) are indignant at being restricted from the Chinese menu. Indeed, Chinese restaurants servers who did not offer the Chinese menu were criticized as making broad assumptions about the diner: “I'm reminded of one basic point: people who are (or appear to be) Chinese will never understand the frustration of having the food they want routinely hidden from them or denied to them. They just don't……It's simply about the restaurant making assumptions about its customers. I don't think it's unreasonable to be miffed about being stereotyped!” complained one poster. There is a discomfort with the lack of access which challenges a perceived entitlement to all that a Chinese restaurant has to offer – an Orientalist notion. Not only is the secret Chinese menu about desirability, it also subverts the power base of Orientalist thought so that the West does not have authority over the Orient. The West is put in a position of the outsider, the one who does not know.

The discussion thread complaints uncannily echo food writer Calvin Trillin’s pursuit of authentic Chinese food which Lisa Heldke describes in *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (2003) as problematic and colonialist. Though she admits that she has long enjoyed his food writing, she is critical of his quest as “yet one more in a long line of Westerners who have attempted to pry their way into Chinese culture- sometimes, as in Trillin’s case, innocently and amusingly, but sometimes also

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savagely” (86). According to Heldke, Trillin believes that Chinese patrons do not order off the English language menu but order off Chinese language signs posted on the walls. Moreover, it is these dishes that look so delicious and represent true Chinese cuisine which the Chinese customers eat and seem to be “enjoying themselves more, he’s convinced, than he ever can by ordering off the English language menu alone” (84). She notes that unlike his pursuit for other non-Chinese local specialties, Trillin does not ask the server for what is good but instead insists on accessing the out-of-reach authentic items on the walls that the Chinese diners are eating (85). Like Trillin, the posters in the discussion thread believe that the secret Chinese menu is the most desirable. Heldke, using Trinh Minha’s *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcolonialism and Feminism* (1983), explains that the Western pursuit of authenticity has often focused on the “remote and hard to attain” as the embodiment of the authentic (87). This what strikes me in Trillin’s pursuit and the theme in the discussion thread - the focus on the perceived *inaccessibility* of the dishes rather than the dishes themselves. The diners are not quite sure what is being hidden or kept away from them, yet they still want it and they are irked if they cannot get it. Such an intense pursuit of the secret Chinese menu then raises the question of whether the diners’ interest lies in the food itself or if it is more like what Heldke calls “Trillin’s zeal for the food on the walls that also contributes to its colonizing character – namely, his tendency to act as if he is entitled to whatever information he desires”(86). The secret Chinese menu is in part a desire for a perceived authenticity, but

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40 Heldke draws from Trillin’s *Tummy Trilogy* (1974, 1978, 1983) which chronicles his explorations of local foods and restaurants throughout America. The third book in the trilogy was published in 1983, approximately thirty years ago. One might argue that his thinking is outdated, yet the same complaints made by Trillin back then are still being made today.
it also a subtle move to gain authority (or at least lessen the feelings of powerlessness) over the Orient.

At Ding Ho, yes, there are indeed two kinds of menus. There is the general main menu which is handed to diners as they are seated. This menu includes the Chinese and American favorites since 1956 – chop suey and chow mein (but also Lobster Cantonese), steaks and hamburgers. Then there is what Yee calls the Chinese menu: “We actually have a menu that’s written in Chinese for people who come and want more authentic items. Then we show them the menu, they can order off the authentic menu. Like your ginger shrimp, your different fishes and everything else.”41 This menu has the regular restaurant menu cover on the front but with twenty numbered dishes handwritten in Chinese and in English on the back. The items do not seem particularly exotic with its plain simple ingredients of ordinary meats (chicken, beef, pork), green vegetables, or seafood. Dishes such as Pepper and Salt Shrimp, Fresh Pork and Bamboo, and Chicken and Chinese Broccoli are listed on the Chinese menu. The English names of the dishes are descriptive, and for the most part, do not have the transliterated Chinese that identify so many of the Chinese dishes on the main menu.

This system has been in place since the late 1980s.42 He claims, “We do have Asian people come in, they ask for it. I, myself, or somebody who somebody who speaks Cantonese, we’ll walk up to them and ask them what they would like.”43 While there is a

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41 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, August 3, 2012.
42 According to a personal conversation on May 21, 2013 with Lucy Yee, Steve Yee’s twin sister who also helps run Ding Ho, beginning in the late 1980s, a group of Chinese businessmen associated with a local jewelry show came into town approximately every three months and dined at Ding Ho. This menu was created with these businessmen in mind.
43 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, August 3, 2012.
certain amount of assessment that comes with deciding when to offer the Chinese menu, it is not necessarily hidden or restricted from the general clientele as some diners might fear. He states, “We do have a Chinese menu that when customers come in who’s Chinese who want authentic Chinese food, even American people, we show them the menu.” He explains that the regular main menu was “geared toward American culture, American taste.” His reasoning for having a separate menu is similar to many of the explanations in the chowhound discussion thread, that most of his customers would find the Chinese menu to be distasteful: “We tried that before when people were asking more authentic, we show them that menu, they’re like ahhh, no, we’ll just stick with, you know, our chicken chow mein, wor sue gai.” His explanation echo what some of the posters in the discussion thread already noted, that the separate Chinese menu is not about necessarily restricting non-Chinese customer access, but about a savviness in figuring out what customers want. As Yee has mentioned, much of his clientele come from working class backgrounds and may not have had as much exposure to Chinese cuisine. The separate Chinese menu at Ding Ho is about appealing to a variety of clientele without alienating any particular group but still maintaining its identity as a Chinese restaurant.

*Family Is Key*

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44 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
45 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, August 3, 2012.
46 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, August 3, 2012.
Ding Ho has since moved out of the charming old-fashioned location on Broad Street. It relocated to a new space less than a mile away in order to remain close to its longtime local customer base. Formerly a steakhouse, the new location is larger and roomier. Yet it seems somewhat less distinct even though Steve Yee brought almost everything from the original booths to the lighting fixtures, in keeping with his father’s advice long ago to keep things the same. The staff also relocated with the restaurant as have most of their customers, as loyal as ever. Although Steve has begun to consider reducing the number of dishes offered, the menu continues to be essentially the same as it had been the past fifty years. “As long as we continue the same tradition with the menu and everything,” Steve states.47

It might seem as if maintaining tradition and preserving Ding Ho as closely as possible to what it has always been is the most important thing about the restaurant. During one of our interviews, I asked Steve Yee what was, to him, the most important thing about the restaurant. I was not exactly sure what his answer would be, but I expected his answer might go along the lines of “We want to serve the best Chinese food” or its history or its longevity. I suppose I expected an answer that would be related to Chineseness. But without hesitation, Steve replied “family” as the most important thing about Ding Ho. Many members of his extended family continue to work at the restaurant. “I have a sister, nieces, nephew, aunts, uncle. And it’s all about working together," he says.48 The importance of family is an issue that Steve repeatedly brings up in our conversations. It is possible that his emphasis on family might be part of what he

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47 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, August 3, 2012.
48 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, August 3, 2012.
considers to be Chineseness.\textsuperscript{49} However, he extends this idea of family to include staff and the loyal customers who continue to frequent Ding Ho, a move which seems to embrace a type of homespun country-goodness persona that is reminiscent of local Ohio country-style restaurants.\textsuperscript{50} While family is indeed important to Steve and the Ding Ho restaurant, his efforts to create the public face of the restaurant seem to combine the idea of family with an awareness of his clientele. On Ding Ho’s restaurant website, Steve Yee and his sister Lucy Yee provide an introduction to the restaurant in a video:

Welcome, to Ding Ho Restaurant. Our grandfather opened Ding Ho in 1956 in a converted gas station with a premise of providing fresh homemade Chinese food made to order. His philosophy was, “Treat your customers like family, provide big portions at a reasonable price, and they will keep coming back.” Fifty-four years later, in third generation, and of course operating in a larger building, we still have the same philosophy. The key to our success and longevity is not only great food, but great employees. Each employee is like family. Their experience and years of service is a major key to our success. Our grandfather picked the name Ding Ho, which translates as “the best.” Fifty four years in business, serving great food, not buffet. Give us a try, maybe you’ll say “This is Ding Ho.” [Customer speaking] “I’ve been coming to Ding Ho for over forty years. The eggrolls are great. I like the wonton soup. And normally it’s the pork fried rice.”

The idea of family is quite central in this video. The business began with the grandfather and has stayed in the family for the third generation; this is a family-owned business that has been around for over fifty years. This longevity not only indicates

\textsuperscript{49} Steve Yee has mentioned family responsibilities as the oldest son and the need to respect elders which are characteristic of values associated with Chinenessness (although not exclusively so). These beliefs indicate to me that the family as being important and key to the restaurant might also be part of his understanding of what constitutes Chineseness.
\textsuperscript{50} For example, Bob Evans is a local restaurant chain that characterizes itself as “farm-fresh” with entrees that evoke American comfort food.
\textsuperscript{51} www.dingho.net
tradition, but also trustworthiness. A business would not survive without some element that its diners can rely on and trust. The theme of family is also linked with home – the claim that their food is homemade and fresh conjures up visions of comfort food, albeit Chinese. Homemade signals familiarity and non-threatening reassurance – right down to the friendly neighborhood cop who states that he’s been a customer for over forty years and thinks the eggrolls are great. The family concept is extended to include even employees and customers, an acknowledgement of their long time loyalty to the restaurant. Like family, the employees and customers have stuck around for a long time.

The video demonstrates quite clearly that Ding Ho knows who their customers are. This concept of family is likely very appealing its client base – a working class Midwestern audience who are cost-conscious big eaters. His statement that Ding Ho provides large portions at a reasonable price is also a nod to what their customers value. But it is not just quantity, it’s also quality. Steve makes the distinction that they serve great food, not buffet, which we can infer is not great food. Like the posters on the internet discussion forum about the secret Chinese menu, buffet seems to be the low quality version of Chinese cuisine cooked for the masses who do not care to know any better. It is interesting to note that Chineseness is not overtly stated yet it is a strong subtext. In a sense, the Chinese-ness is assumed because it does not have to explicitly state “We are Chinese.” There is no need to prove Chineseness; the origins of the restaurant maintained as tradition speaks to the Chineseness of the restaurant. If Chinese authenticity was an issue, they might have decided to go with an Asian face as the customer who praises the quality of Ding Ho’s cuisine. Instead, they went with an older
Caucasian man wearing what looks like a police uniform to extol the virtues of Ding Ho. It’s a real person rather than some actor, and he doesn’t give a canned answer. The fact that it is an average down-home down guy hints that this is a place that is friendly and accessible. All these elements show us that is the idea of family that is important to Ding Ho and that Chineseness is something that is self-evident rather than something that must be proclaimed.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I make the argument that Ding Ho’s Chineseness is multiple and seemingly contradictory and unexpected, but ultimately, it is still Chinese. What makes Ding Ho Chinese does not rely any one simple factor. Ding Ho challenges the idea that Chinese authenticity should depend on a set of static criteria. The restaurant’s origins are similar to many other Chinese restaurants in terms of its connections to pre-existing Chinese restaurants and family labor. But there are several other elements of Ding Ho that defy conventional notions about Chinese restaurants such the presence of Caucasian servers and the offering of bread at the start of the meal. For some diners, these elements signal inauthenticity because it threatens the categories that have defined authenticity in Chinese restaurants for them. Rather than viewing these elements as different expressions of Chinese restaurants, they are perceived as anomalies that pollute the pristine quality of authenticity. But what does signal authenticity is the inaccessible that is ill-defined and unknowable as shown in the internet discussions about the separate
Chinese menu. Ideas about authenticity are couched in terms of inaccessibility and remoteness. It raises the question of whether the desire for authenticity in Chinese restaurants is about domination in the Orientalist tradition that Edward Said describes rather than a pursuit of good food. For these diners who have posted their thoughts online, it is not exactly clear what makes a Chinese restaurant authentic, but they know what can pollute the pristine category to make it inauthentic. But Ding Ho shows us that its separate menu is not about restricting access to the secret delights of Chinese cuisine or necessarily about authenticity, but an awareness of appealing to different kinds of customers. In fact, Ding Ho’s primary concern is not Chineseness as this seems self-evident to them. What is important in their restaurant is the idea of family that appeals to both its sense of duty to the biological family but which also extends to its employees and customers in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of a working class Midwestern clientele. What Ding Ho ultimately demonstrates is that it is Chinese but its identity as Chinese can include elements that might seem to be at odds with the very idea of being Chinese because Chinese restaurants are multiple and express themselves with variations as do all cultural expressions.
Chapter 5: Wor Sue Gai, Chop Suey, and Claiming Local Identity and Authenticity

In this chapter I focus on one regional Chinese restaurant dish acknowledged to have been created in the United States to explore discourses of local identity. I use several forms of data, including interviews with restaurant owners, patrons and my family, online discussion forum conversations, and internet-based documentation as related to Wor Sue Gai. This chapter will not define characteristics of Chinese cuisine and then attempt to determine whether Wor Sue Gai is “authentic” enough to enter those ranks. Instead, I explore the multi-layered and somewhat muddy background of a Chinese restaurant dish and examine its implications for claims of authenticity in cuisine. I make the argument that authenticity can be about claiming this quality rather than being situated in concepts of origins.

The Story of Wor Sue Gai

Wor Sue Gai is a local favorite that can be found on the menu in almost every Chinese restaurant in Columbus, Ohio. Literally translated, Wor Sue Gai means “Wok Seared Chicken.” While different restaurants may have slightly varying versions, Wor Sue Gai generally seems to be a portion of de-boned chicken (breast or thigh) that is
breaded or battered, deep fried, and then sliced. This sliced chicken is then served atop a bed of lettuce (generally shredded iceberg lettuce) with a gravy ranging in color from orange to brown that is drizzled over everything. According to Steve Yee, preparing Wor Sue Gai requires several steps. He states:

To make the Wor Sue Gai is a very long process. You gotta take a whole chicken and simmer it in the broth for about forty-five minutes. You gotta let it cool down, the chicken, then you gotta debone the chicken. Then you gotta bread the chicken, fry the chicken, and that’s a lot of work. 52

However, according to my internet searches for the recipe, chopped or slivered almonds sprinkled over everything also seem to be an essential part of the dish, giving rise to its alternate name: Almond Chicken or Almond Boneless Chicken.

What is particularly intriguing about this dish is the claim that it is a local creation although the exact origin story is a bit murky. “We’re [Ding Ho and Wing’s] one of the original inventors of the Wor Sue Gai, with Wing’s on East Main. We’re trying to figure out who did or [if] both came up with the original concept of it,” claims Yee. 53 In continuous operation since 1955, Ding Ho is a rich repository of memories and information about Chinese restaurants in Columbus. Wing’s is another long-standing Chinese restaurant in Columbus, located in the East Side of the city in an area called Bexley. Kenny Yee (no relation), the owner and operator of Wing’s Restaurant, agrees

52 Steve Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
53 Stephen Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
that Wor Sue Gai is a dish that “basically you can only get in the state of Ohio. It originated in Columbus.”

Unlike many other dishes offered in Chinese restaurants, Wor Sue Gai has not been the subject of debate about authenticity. Neither restaurant critics nor patrons have questioned whether or not it is truly a "Chinese" dish that has traveled from China or whether it was a bastardized creation for the American palate. Its purported origin story already places it in America, not China, although its association with things Chinese remains. Thus, Wor Sue Gai raises some intriguing questions about its identity. In terms of Chinese food, most people would likely agree that if a dish was made in America, then it is not really “Chinese.” Yet Wor Sue Gai is not really subject to those types of questions. While it is understood to have originated on American soil, it retains its association with Chinese restaurants, especially since it is generally not found in non-Chinese restaurants in Columbus. People do not seem to have issues with its level of Chinese authenticity or inauthenticity but simply accept that it is found in Chinese restaurants.

That Wor Sue Gai was created in Columbus is a widely held belief in the city. Anecdotal stories and conversations with other restauranteurs and acquaintances reinforced the strength of this idea. Yet it seems curious that this seemingly common dish would have originated and spread from a city that was not known for having a large Chinese population. I am familiar with the names of many Cantonese dishes through my research on vintage Chinese restaurant menus and my own Cantonese background.

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54 Kenny Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 25, 2007.
While I was not specifically aware of this dish, it seemed familiar enough – the “wor sue” transliteration indicated Cantonese or the Toisan dialect – the languages of most of the Chinese population in the United States up to 1965. The “gravy” that usually is ladled onto the dish conjured up the vague orange/brown-color of the sauce often poured onto Egg Foo Young and other Chinese dishes frequently found on vintage Chinese restaurant menus. Other similar-sounding dishes include Wor Sue Ap/Opp or Wor Siu Ap/Opp, both presumably the Toisan pronunciation of “wok roasted duck” The name “Wor Sue Gai” did not seem to indicate any particularly outstanding characteristic or hint at any locality. In fact, it seemed to be just another standard dish, similar to chow mein in ordinariness though perhaps not quite as commonplace. However, after reviewing several Chinese restaurant vintage menus from cities across the United States, I discovered that while some restaurants offered Wor Sue Ap/Opp, none of them listed Wor Sue Gai as a dish, indicating that it was perhaps indeed a more obscure dish than I had previously assumed. It seemed strange that if there was Wor Sue duck, cooks would not think of making Wor Sue chicken.

Documentation of the dish itself is difficult to track. Spelling is an issue when conducting research on Wor Sue Gai as there were no standardized transliterations of Cantonese used in print. The dish has been spelled variably as “Warr Shu Gai” or “War

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55 Egg Foo Young is an essentially a fried egg patty. Two or three raw eggs are mixed with chopped onions and bits of meat such as pork, chicken, beef, or shrimp. Sometimes spring onions and/or bean sprouts are added. The mixture is then deep fried and served over rice with gravy ladled on top of everything. The dish also has variations in spelling and may also be spelled as Egg Fu Yung.

56 I own a small collection of vintage Chinese restaurant menus which I purchased individually on Ebay. The menus were generally dated as being from the 1940s to the 1960s. Although the actual date of any given menu can be difficult to verify, the pricing and the types of dishes offered indicate a time period prior to the 1970s.
Su Gai.” In addition, it may have been listed under other names such as Almond Boneless Chicken. But even under the same name (especially with a more broad name as Almond Boneless Chicken), the recipe itself might be different from what is generally understood to be Wor Sue Gai in Columbus.\(^57\) A search on the dish (using the various spellings) in academic databases such as Academic Search Complete and Lexis Nexis yielded zero results. I also looked through several Chinese cookbooks with publication dates ranging from 1911 to 2005 for recipes that might be similar to Wor Sue Gai but with little success as well. The search technique that yielded the most information about Wor Sue Gai was a simple Google search. Simply Googling a topic is not always the most reliable means to uncover information as there is no built-in system of verifying the information before it is put up on the internet. However, googling Wor Sue Gai was the only search method that yielded any information or dialogue about it.

Where Wor Sue Gai does appear is on internet food discussion boards such as Chowhound.\(^58\) There are several threads where posters seek or reminisce about this dish. For example, one poster states, “I'm a transplant from SE Michigan. Most Chinese restaurants in that area serve a dish called ‘Almond Boneless Chicken’ or ‘Warr-Shu-Gai’……. Have any of you spotted this dish anywhere in the DC area?”\(^59\) Another poster laments, “I have heard this is a Detroit dish - we certainly ate it in every Cantonese restaurant there - it does not seem to exist in Chicago….. The man needs his War Siu Gai

\(^{57}\) Although there may be variations on the spelling, I use “Wor Sue Gai” to reference the dish.

\(^{58}\) Chowhound is the discussion board of www.chow.com and describes itself as “community of discerning eaters share information and opinions about cooking and restaurants.” Please see http://chowhound.chow.com/boards.

and he needs it now! Can anyone help?“60  Despite the numerous Chinese restaurants located in these cities, Wor Sue Gai is not to be found in the cities to which these Michigan transplants have moved. The fact that it cannot be found in the Chinese restaurants of Chicago or DC indicates that, unlike chow mein or fried rice, Wor Sue Gai may not be part of standard Chinese restaurant fare as I had originally assumed. The fact that posts about Wor Sue Gai generally involved asking others where they might find it, also indicates the dish has a type of uniqueness, in this case, a regional uniqueness. Indeed, all this lends validity to the idea that it might very well be a localized regional dish.

It is also interesting to note that several of the posters mention Detroit, or more frequently Michigan, in relation to Wor Sue Gai, either noting that they (the posters) were originally from Detroit or other areas of Michigan where Chinese restaurants always offered it or speak of the dish as having originated from Detroit. Other online searches also indicate a Detroit connection. One food blogger writes, “Tonight I had the guts to try and replicate a chicken dish that is popular in Chinese restaurants around Detroit, MI. It's [sic] proper name is Wor Su Gai, but my family calls it ABC, short for almond boneless chicken.”61  Like the posters from Chowhound.com, the blogger indicates that the dish in the version that she is accustomed to (in Detroit) cannot be found in her current locale: “I can only get this when I visit my family up north. I have been to many


a Chinese [sic] restaurant around here in Atlanta and not one has come close. So when I browsed the web for a recipe I was jumping for joy when I actually found one.”62 Her recipe is taken from About.com63 and on the site, there is an introduction to the recipe:

“War Su Gai is a Chinese-American dish consisting of deep-fried chicken that is coated with a flavorful gravy and garnished with almonds. Although not widely available, it's a specialty in Detroit, Michigan, Columbus, Ohio, and no doubt a few other areas.”64 Here we see another claim for its Detroit connection as well as a Columbus connection. And in a 1991 email, Leah Smith claims:

Warr Shu Gai or Almond Boneless Chicken, like chop suey, is a Chinese-inspired American dish. So far as I have been able to determine, it originated in Detroit. It was a favorite dish of my childhood there. Every Cantonese restaurant in the area serves it, but I've never been able to find it outside of Michigan. Descriptions of it to Chinese restaurant personnel elsewhere have been met with blank stares.65

Based on these internet discussions, it would appear that Wor Sue Gai has a stronger association with Detroit than Columbus.

This raises the question of whether Steve Yee, the owner of Ding Ho, may be incorrect in his claim that Ding Ho or Wing’s invented the dish. One poster on

62 Ibid.
63 About.com provides content on a variety of topics and is owned by the New York Times Company. More about the company can be found at http://www.advertiseonabout.com/about-us/.
65 Leah Smith’s email about Wor Sue Gai appears on several different sites. I found and used her email from the following link: http://kabish.com/recipes/recipes.php?id=147, accessed Friday, July 20, 2012. In addition, portions of her email that identify the origins of Wor Sue Gai have been reproduced in varying forms to accompany reproductions of her recipe which she claims to have obtained from the Detroit Free Press. However, a search of the Detroit Free Press’s website yielded no information on Wor Sue Gai in any of the spelling variations.
Chowhound.com explains Wor Sue Gai’s beginnings in a way that seems to definitively place Detroit as its birthplace:

The reason that it developed in Detroit is because it was easy to make cafeteria [sic] style and many of the cooks at the automotive plants were Chinese immigrants, so like most Chinese American dishes it was adapted to cooking early in the morning and being ready to compile about 4 hours later. Most true Chinese dishes are stir fried and served immediately. Not conducive to serving cafeteria style. Local restaurants [sic] adapted to customer demands and started making this adaptation. So there is the connection: Detroit=automotive plants Cafeteria= Chinese immigrant cooks=Wor Su Gai. That’s [sic] my theory and if Pearls [sic] in Birmingham Michigan is still around Pearl could cooperate [sic] that theory (she was the Head Cook at General Motors). Lets [sic] hope the recipe doesn't die with the auto industry.66

There are several fascinating elements to this story. First, the poster links Wor Sue Gai with the Detroit auto industry and by doing so, reinforces the dish as American-made – much like the Detroit auto industry. Another point of interest is the conception of cafeteria food versus Chinese cuisine. Chinese dishes are stir-fried and served immediately while cafeteria food (read: low quality food) requires advance preparation to be put together hours later. In fact, Wor Sue Gai is a labor intensive dish that involves several steps. It seems an unlikely candidate for cafeteria style food.

What is remarkable about this story is not that it provides any definitive or true origin of Wor Sue Gai. In fact, it not a definitive explanation, nor do we know if it is true. What is revealing about this story is that this popular dish, found in several Chinese restaurants, is presumed to originate in America. The actual origins of the dish are

unknown or not clear, which allows for a creation story that is located in an American context. It is worth noting that in this story, Wor Sue Gai is not presumed to be just a Chinese dish; instead, it is a dish created in America by a Chinese cook for American tastes and is thus an American Chinese dish. Much like the ruminations that often accompany chop suey (Coe 2009, Calvin Lee 1958, Jennifer Lee 2008, Liu 2009, Yu 1987), information about Wor Sue Gai follows a trope about Chinese food in the United States: the belief that much, if not all, Chinese food in America is somehow fake, made-up, or bastardized for American tastes. Like chop suey, Wor Sue Gai is a popular dish on Chinese restaurant menus (at least in Columbus and apparently Detroit), but it is also seen as having been invented in the United States.

Much of this analysis in this section has relied on Chowhound.com discussions on Wor Sue Gai. While I understand that an internet forum discussion may not be the most reliable source of information about the dish, it still provides an invaluable perspective. We don’t know if the story of Wor Sue Gai as having Detroit origins are true, but what can be gained from reading these forum postings is that some people believe that Wor Sue Gai was invented in the United States, that it might be a regional dish that is not widely known, yet some people are quite invested in finding the dish in whatever locale they reside in. What these internet discussions tell us that is that these beliefs and ideas about Wor Sue Gai exist. What it also tells us is that authenticity in a Chinese dish is not just about origins. Unlike chop suey, another dish purportedly invented in the United States, Wor Sue Gai does not have the same level of discussion and/or documentation.
surrounding it which means that we must rely on more unconventional means such as internet discussion forums to access general perceptions of the dish.

_Chop Suey and Chinese Cuisine_

Until relatively recently, chop suey was found on the menu of almost every Chinese restaurant. For the better part of a century, it was touted as the quintessential Chinese dish – a mixture of small bits of meats and vegetables in an indeterminate sauce. Today, however, chop suey is one of those dishes that many people consider to be an inauthentic representation of Chinese cuisine, a dish created by Chinese cooks in America for the unsuspecting white American palate, and its presence can mark a Chinese restaurant as inauthentic or old fashioned.

There are two main stories about the origin of chop suey. One is that hungry miners wandered into a Chinese restaurant and the chef had nothing but leftover pieces which he cooked into a hash called “chop suey” (Lee 1958: 27). Another is that Li Hongzhang, a high-ranking diplomat from China, visited the US in 1896 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 they cook American meats and vegetables in a Chinese style and named it “chop suey” (Lee 1958: 28). Alternate versions of the diplomat’s visit claim that he was not accustomed or fond of Western so food and so he either went to a Chinese restaurant and ate chop suey or had his chefs prepared chop suey for him (Yu 1987). But in fact, journalist Andrew Coe,
author of *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States*, maintains that Li never did eat chop suey during his visit to the United States. He writes that newspapers, unsure of what Li was really eating, widely reported him as doing so, most likely, as he explains it, “because chop suey, the only Chinese dish most white Americans had tasted, had become emblematic of Chinese food as a whole” (Coe 2009: 163).67 A third, lesser known version involves Lem Sen, a San Francisco cook, who insisted that right before Li visited the United States, Lem invented chop suey at the behest of the owner of a bohemian San Francisco restaurant who wanted a dish that would pass as Chinese and satisfy the current interest in China due to the diplomat’s impending visit” (Coe 2009: 176; Lee 2008: 61).68 All these origin stories place chop suey in the context of America as an invented dish created by Chinese cooks for the American palate. To lend even more credence to the idea that chop suey was an American creation, one often hears stories of Chinese from or in China who do not recognize the dish or who have never heard of it. Coe tells us that a 1904 *Boston Globe* article profiled six Chinese students who claimed that they had never heard of chop suey until they arrived in the US (177). After all, it only seemed logical that someone from China would be in the best position to know about Chinese cuisine and whether chop suey was Chinese or not.

However, Coe seems to imply that chop suey was in fact a dish that was already being eaten by the Chinese as a *Chinese* dish. He cites the journalist Allan Forman who wrote of an 1886 dinner at Mong Sing Wah’s in New York city in which a lawyer friend

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67 Coe also states that the New York Journal painstakingly recorded every bite the diplomat ate in public and every move of his four chefs and according to the records, chop suey was not one of the things he ate (2009: 163).

68 Both Coe and Lee reference the original story which was reported in the New York Times in 1904.
ordered in Chinese, “chow chop-suey, chop-seow, lanonraan, san-sui-goy, no-ma-das” (158). Coe describes the meal as “not a banquet of rare ingredients imported from China but a meal off the menu – the everyday restaurant food eaten by New York’s Chinese” (158). And the six students from China who had never heard of chop suey until they came to the United States? Two of them hailed from areas close to the Yangzi River and the rest from Guangzhou. In other words, they were not familiar with chop suey because they were not from the Pearl River Delta area of China which Coe states, “would have an outsized influence on the American perception of Chinese food” (100). What Coe is referring to is the Toishan area/county by the Pearl River Delta in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong from which most of America’s Chinese population hailed from prior to 1965 due to America’s restrictive immigration laws. Thus, Chinese cuisine in the United States was essentially the regional cuisine of the Pearl River Delta. As further proof, Coe cites Hong Kong surgeon Li Shu-Fan’s memoir:

I first tasted chop suey in a restaurant in Toishan in 1894, but the preparation had been familiar in that city long before my time. The recipe was probably taken to America by Toishan people, who, as I have said, are great travelers. Chinese from places as near to Toishan as Canton and Hong Kong are unaware that chop suey is truly a Chinese dish, and not an American adaptation. (161)

Chop suey is indeed a familiar dish from the Pearl Delta county of Toisan. My own family hails from that region and I recall my mother, born in the 1930s, who never cooked anything that resembled an American meal, often prepared what she identified as “chop suey” as one of the dishes for the family meal and it was never considered “American.” In her version of chop suey, celery, onions, daikon, mushrooms, and either
pork or chicken were stir fried together with oyster sauce. According to my father,\footnote{Heung Ming Yan, telephone conversation with the author, Friday, July 27, 2012.} chop suey was eaten in China, but there it referred to a technique that became popular during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century before it became known in America as the name of a specific dish.\footnote{My father was also trained as a chef in Hong Kong in the 1950s and opened a Chinese take-out in Baltimore for over thirty years.}

Chop-suey itself it is not a particularly unique or imaginative use of ingredients. It is not like putting bacon and chocolate together where you have savory and sweet combined or the blurring of meat and dessert foods in combinations that are not usually put together. In a culinary tradition that includes the technique of stir-frying chopped meats and vegetables together, it is not inconceivable that a dish such as chop suey could have come from China. Chop suey is a very practical type of dish. In fact, as the conversation with my father suggests, chop suey is not even the name of a dish; it is more like a \textit{type} of dish. The translation of “chop-suey” means “bits and pieces” and the “chow chop-suey” that Allan Forman and his friend dined on in 1896 means “stir-fried bits and pieces.” Essentially, chop suey or chow chop suey is taking whatever you have in the kitchen (perhaps leftovers), cutting it up into small pieces, and stir-frying them together. So if perhaps you are in a Chinese (home) kitchen and you dine on a dish of stir-fried sliced pork or chicken or any other meat with chopped vegetables and you ask your host, “What is the name of this delicious dish?” If your host replies, “Oh, it’s just chop suey,” what he or she is essentially saying is, “Oh, it’s just leftovers” or “Oh, it’s just a hash I threw together” or “Oh, it’s Mystery Surprise.” It’s not the \textit{name} of a dish; it
is meant as a general catch-all description of smaller bits of food put together and stir fried. It is a humble food: plain, simple, and economical. It is homestyle Chinese food of the Toisan Chinese; essentially it is peasant food.

When Americans first began to take notice of chop suey, it was a little unclear what it consisted of. The bits and pieces that make chop suey could be anything, such as gizzards, sprouts, or fish, for as Coe writes that “in nineteenth century New York, the definition of chop suey was anything but fixed” (160). Because Chinese chop suey meant that anything could be thrown together and stir-fried, it could be leftovers or it could be whatever the cook felt like putting together that day. The theory often bandied about Chinese foods becoming Americanized because of substitution or adaptation because of the unavailability of specific ingredients does not really apply here because of the chop suey principle of various bits and pieces thrown together. There is no must-have ingredient to substitute. This flexibility is perhaps what allowed chop suey to become known as “Americanized.” For example, Shiu Wong Chan’s *The Chinese Cookbook* has this to say about a chicken chop suey recipe: “This dish is not known in China. From its name it means simply a variety of small pieces. However, the principles of Chinese cooking are the same” (Chan 1917: 37). Chan identifies chop suey as a Chinese cooking method and this echoes my own feeling that chop suey as a method, or a cooking principle, is rooted in Chinese cuisine.

However, for many people, what makes a dish Chinese is not the principle but the ingredients. In the case of chop suey in the United States, the burden of authenticity

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71 Actually, the Chinese characters printed before the recipe is “Stir Fried Chicken Slices” but in English, it was printed as Chicken Chop Suey.
seemed to whether you had the proper ingredients, whatever they may be (and indeed, as Coe noted, it was not so clear cut). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, yes, Chinese ingredients and vegetables were not as widely available as they are today and substitutions most likely did occur. But chop suey did not necessarily require substitutions as it was already a flexible dish. It may have, apparently, been presumed to contain a set list of ingredient substitutions (which it did not), and any change or “substitution” would thus be described as “Americanized.” Chop suey in one form could conceivably be “Americanized” if the ingredients are say, chopped potatoes, ham, and cheese cubes stirred fried in wok because they are ingredients that are not usually utilized in Chinese cuisine. But if such a dish did exist, it would be less “substitution” than perhaps a deliberate creative endeavor. But if the principles are still the same – chopped bits and pieces stir fried together – it could still be chop suey.

Coe writes that the idea that chop suey is not Chinese had “staying power” (Coe 2009, 177) despite the lack of documentary evidence for stories of the miners or of Li Hongzhang’s chop suey adventures during his American visit. He points out that the idea of chop suey as a big hoax continues in popular culture from the headlines of a 1918 Philadelphia Inquirer article that announced “The Origin of Chop Suey Is An Enormous Chinese Joke” to Jennifer Lee’s proclamation that it was the “biggest culinary joke played by one culture on another” (Lee 2008, 49). He observantly notices that in all these cases of chop-suey-as-fake-Chinese-food, it is the American who is the butt of the joke, “too ignorant to recognize real Chinese food” (Coe 2009: 177) and “too stupid to know that they were essentially eating garbage” (Ibid.: 178). He writes that “the punch line
about eating garbage suggests a veiled revenge (analogous to the chef spitting in the soup) for decades of mistreatment. Call it a myth that conveys a larger historical ‘truth’” (Coe 2009: 178). Coe is onto something in that statement. The persistent labeling of chop suey as fake Chinese food for stupid Americans may very well indeed suggest an anxiety about the Chinese and their mysterious cuisine. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese culture was still something that was unknown and to be feared; it represented a site of fascination and exoticism. But what could be known was chop suey, the somewhat “addictive” dish that the Chinese made in their restaurants. One part of the search for authentic Chinese food (depending on who you were – a non Chinese versus a Chinese person) may have been the desire not to be the butt of the joke, to not be the “ignorant” American. Despite the “addictive qualities” that made one go to a Chinese restaurant again and again for chop suey, you were not taken in by that incredible “hoax.”

But the larger historical truth may not be the revenge fantasy that Coe seems to think. Chop suey is a food of the “contact zone” which Mary Louise Pratt describes as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt 1992: 6). Chop suey as a contact zone food does not mean that it is a hybrid, like the creolization of languages. It is a contact zone food because it raises questions about identity and power relations. The larger historical truth that Chinese food in America reveals is perhaps that Chinese food often represents this search for the authentic, a direct and verifiable connection to the Chinese motherland.
Returning to Wor Sue Gai, the frequent mentions of the Detroit connection may indicate to some that it did originate in Detroit rather than Columbus but most definitely not to China. However, it does not necessarily mean that Steve Yee or Kenny Yee are incorrect in their origin stories. It possible that Ding Ho or Wing’s created the dish and the recipe made its way north to Detroit via a restaurant patron who enjoyed the dish or perhaps an associate of the restaurant who later moved to Detroit and that Detroit embraced it even more than Columbus did. While both Steve Yee and Kenny Yee are unclear as to who created the dish, Ding Ho or Wing’s, they do believe that it originated in Columbus. After all, it does not appear to be part of the Chinese restaurant menu lexicon in other cities. In addition, Ding Ho and Wing’s have always offered Wor Sue Gai on their menus, and both are among the oldest Chinese restaurants in Columbus. Thus, the idea that Wor Sue is a Columbus invention is not an unreasonable conclusion to make.

Efforts to track the origins of Wor Sue Gai are as much about satisfying a simple curiosity about how this popular dish came to be as a desire to understand its connection to China. Origin stories are comforting; they can tell us exactly how, where and how something started without the ungraspable nebulosity of the unknown. As Jennifer Lee wrote about her wish that the story of Lem Sen inventing chop suey was actually true, “These symbolic characters make the mess of history more streamlined, palatable, and digestible – not unlike Americanized Chinese food. Against a backdrop of chaos, there is a single pleasant narrative” (64). More importantly, in the case of foodways, it tells us how we should treat/view a dish by situating it in the realm of the inauthentic or
authentic. Origins of food seem to be important, especially for food that doesn’t seem
“American” in the context of the United States. Knowing the origins of Wor Sue Gai will
decide whether it is Chinese or “Americanized.” If we know that Wor Sue Gai was
invented in Columbus (or Detroit), then we can say that it is not really Chinese because it
was invented in the United States. Then we are not the butt of any joke, armed with the
sure-fire knowledge that puts us in on the “know.”

Conclusion

For any cultural expression, it is important to make the distinction about the type
of authenticity that is in question. In the case of Wor Sue Gai, authenticity is not about
whether this dish is truly part of the cuisine of China. It seems accepted that it is a
product of America though an “exact” origin story could confirm the suspicion. When
people talk about the authenticity of Wor Sue Gai, however, they are usually not talking
about whether it is Chinese or not. Rather, they are talking about how it is made and
whether it is good or not. Some people in Columbus are passionate about their Wor Sue
Gai. One regular diner at Ding Ho states:

What I like about the Wor Sue Gai the best is the chicken – the way it’s cooked
and breaded on the inside and they have a sauce. The sauce was over it. And the
diced onions. And I like the almonds that they crunch up on them. The almonds
are sort of my favorite on it and I always like extra almonds. You know it makes
it taste better. I love chicken so well . . . When they make it so moist and it’s just
got a different taste. It’s something about the sauce mixed in with the chicken and
the onion, with chopped up onions, green onion. It’s something about just the
taste that’s just. . .It’s like eating a potato chip. You can’t eat one and I’m saying
you sort of get hooked on it, you know. Like my son said, last week we come over to here to eat, he said, hey dad, I could eat it every day of the week and I sort of chuckle to myself. It’s the same way I feel from all those years I’ve been eating since the late sixties and seventies. I’ve ate Wor Sue Gai at other places and it’s just really not even close to being the taste…..I just love the taste of Wor Sue Gai.72

The process and labor involved in making Wor Sue Gai seems to require several steps that are not as quick and easy as chop suey. Steve Yee does not use the actual word “authenticity” when he described the process of making Wor Sue Gai, but he has an idea of what “real” or “authentic” Wor Sue Gai is. He observes, “There’s a lot of imitations….Whereas a lot restaurants call that Wor Sue Gai and you buy chicken breasts and batter it and deep fry it and call that Wor Sue Gai.”73 His meaning is clear: there is a real Wor Sue Gai and a Wor Sue Gai that is not so real. Here, authenticity seems to be conflated/equated with quality or effort. The use of just chicken breasts rather than simmering the entire chicken is a fast food short cut that is obviously not as good as the process he believes is required for Wor Sue Gai. For the short-cutters, Wor Sue Gai is not about process but simply about deep frying battered chicken breasts. And that is the issue Yee seems to have with this type of Wor Sue Gai – that the cooks did not really understand what constitutes the dish. For Yee, the burden of authenticity lies within the entire process of simmering, deboning, breading, etc in making Wor Sue Gai. For the short-cutters, the element necessary to make the Wor Sue Gai is the battered deep fried chicken breast. What we see here is a differentiation of what people mean by authentic in the very same dish. Authentic Wor Sue Gai is about process.

72 Ron Follrod, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, April 14, 2013.
73 Stephen Yee, interview by Nancy Yan, Columbus, Ohio, September 10, 2007.
In the cases of chop suey and Wor Sue Gai, it is important to note that the flavor of the dish is not contested in terms of its Chinese-ness. For the diners who are not intimately familiar with Chinese cuisine, an origin story that links it directly to China might be enough proof that it is Chinese. The fact that it is served by Asian people might also be enough verification. Or that the other diners in the restaurant are Asian. Perhaps it is because diners who are not intimately familiar with Chinese cuisine may not know enough to make assessments of authenticity based on flavor and must rely on other cues to validate a restaurant’s authenticity or inauthenticity. In such cases, how can one know what is authentic Chinese food? Elizabeth Rozin states that it is possible to re-create the flavors of any cultural cuisine by identifying and isolating the different flavors (or spices) that are used in combination in any particular culture. She writes, “A flavor principle, then, is the taste that results from a mixture of several flavoring ingredients that are used together frequently and consistently within a cuisine, a taste that can be abstracted and described apart from the basic foodstuffs the ingredients interact with (Rozin 1973: 3). In order to approximate or at least come close to recreating authentic cuisine from a specific culture, one must understand the flavoring principles behind their dishes. So for instance, if one wanted to prepare a dish that tasted West African, one would use tomato, peanuts, and chili as the primary ingredients. While Rozin admits that a dish outside its home origin may not be reproduced with absolute authenticity since ingredients may be slight different or cooking techniques may vary, “with time and effort, authenticity can be achieved” (4). The achievable authenticity is in the flavor even in approximation. Rozin comments, “The flavor principle idea proposes that seeming or theoretical authenticity
may be a more valid goal and in fact permits mastery of a foreign cuisine without the necessity of conforming absolutely to the limits of that cuisine – in short, liberation from the non-essential and freedom to improvise” (4). Thus, authenticity or mastery of a foreign cuisine is not so much an exact reproduction as it is an understanding of the underlying flavor principles that make up a culture’s cuisine.

What is important is not so much how Wor Sue Gai came about, who invented it, and where it was invented. It may or may not have originated in Columbus. It might even be found in other cities besides Columbus or Detroit. What is important to note is that it is a Columbus dish. At the same time, it is also a Detroit dish. It is also a Chinese dish. It is also an American dish. What Wor Sue Gai tells us is that like any cultural expression, it has multiple layers in its identity and multiple co-existing identities that are not contradictory. What makes it all of these things is not a linear origin story that neatly lays out the birth of an immutable dish. Unlike discussions about chop suey, Wor Sue Gai isn’t about whether or not it is from China. What is important to note is that Wor Sue Gai is all of these things because they all claim Wor Sue Gai. It is a local dish because it is embraced by the people of Columbus and Detroit. Authenticity is not about origins so much as it is about claiming and who claims the cultural expression as rightfully their own.
A part of understanding Chinese restaurants is the examination of the menus they present to their diners. Liora Gvion and Naomi Trostler describe restaurant menus as the “identity card” of any individual restaurant (2008: 953). It is a public presentation of the restaurant’s distinctive character. Gvion and Trostler also claim that restaurant menus are “a written record of the evolving culinary changes” (2008: 952). While Chinese restaurant menus do operate as written records of culinary changes, they also indicate the restaurant owners’ awareness of the social context in which the restaurant operates and a negotiated presentation of Chinese ethnic identity. Chinese restaurant menus must present signs of being Chinese but must also accommodate external perceptions of Chinese cuisine.

While the menus cannot provide us the actual dining experience, they provide hints and clues about the restaurant’s perception of self, its relationship to the immediate community, and its standing in the broader context of America. They are exoteric presentations of culture in a way that the food alone and décor cannot. Eating at a restaurant is a complete sensory experience, touristic or otherwise, and menus are simply one aspect of it. Food engages different sensory experiences – primarily of taste and smell but also of touch and vision. Prior to consumption, food maintains its mystery for
those who are not familiar with the cuisine. Upon consumption, the food provides the intimate details of ingredients and flavor. Meanwhile, décor informs the physical context of the experience – elaborate red-colored lanterns or dragon artwork that may or may not have been meant to evoke an experience of “China,” a plainer décor that may indicate inauthenticity or more authenticity, depending upon intent or perception. Décor has visual signifiers but does not contain the linguistic elements that menus do. Menus are the form in which various concepts about Chinese food and culture are addressed. They provide concrete signs in which to decode cultural nuances and information for the public. They combine visual imagery and language to convey a direct message that is less covert and interpretative than cuisine or décor. What can the diner expect? What types of tastes is it geared towards? What is Chinese food? Would the menu mark the restaurant as a place for people who are afraid of Chinese cuisine and need familiar American dishes or does it cater to a clientele familiar with Chinese culture and cuisine? Menus direct the diners and guide them through the experience the restaurant wants to convey for its diners. In this chapter, I consider how Chinese restaurant menus as cultural texts – how they operate as “identity cards” and how they provide can information on such ephemeral establishments such as a Chinese restaurant. I examine seven vintage Chinese restaurant menus for what they can tell about the individual business and characteristic traits of earlier Chinese restaurants.
Collecting the Menus

I began collecting vintage Chinese restaurant menus during 2002. I initially believed that early Chinese restaurants offered a limited repertoire of dishes and that it was only recently that Chinese restaurants began to offer such a large selection of dishes. I assumed that egg foo young, chop suey, and chow mein were the mainstays of these earlier restaurants. This idea was based on my family’s Chinese take-out business, even though my childhood forays to large Chinese restaurants in Washington, DC’s Chinatown during the 1970s should have informed me otherwise. I thought that finding vintage Chinese restaurant menus would confirm my theory (in fact, they contradicted my initial narrow perceptions).

I didn’t know where to find vintage Chinese restaurant menus but I started by checking Ebay which turned up a few listings. At the time, they generally sold for approximately five dollars each, sometimes even less. There were not that many buyers so I usually won the bid. Currently, I have about thirty menus, mostly from Ebay but a few from ephemera fairs.

In addition to Ebay, I was able to review vintage Chinese restaurant menus archived at various institutions. I reviewed menus located at the San Francisco Public Library, the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle, the Chinese Historical Society in Boston, the New York Public Library, and the private collection of Harley Spiller. Overall, I reviewed approximately one hundred Chinese vintage restaurant menus. The menus I examine in this chapter are from my personal collection. While some menus were dated in the Ebay listing, others were not. I chose these particular seven menus because they
contained a representative characteristic of Chinese restaurant menus or depicted an unusual characteristic. I define vintage as pre-1970s. I use the 1970s decade as a general time cut-off for two reasons. First, it is a few years after the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act which increased the number of immigrants from all regions in China. Previously, most of the Chinese in America hailed from the Guangdong region in China which meant that most of the Chinese restaurants were Cantonese. The changes in the Chinese population in the United States also influence changes in the Chinese restaurant. Second, most of the menus that were available were generally not dated beyond the period of the 1970s. While the dates of the menus may be ambiguous, the pricing of the dishes indicate that they are at least forty years old. However, I am focusing on the menu as material culture that is iconic (in semiotic terms) of Chinese restaurants.

*Chinese Restaurant Menus*

I stuck my hand in a pile of Chinese take-out menus from Columbus, Ohio and randomly retrieved a menu from “Bamboo Hut” located on East. Broad Street. It looked like any other Chinese take-out menu. It offered egg drop soup, wonton soup, egg rolls, crab rangoon, and chicken wings. The main dishes were organized in categories of poultry, pork, beef, seafood, vegetable, lo mein, fried rice, and other relatively unsurprising groupings. And of course, what Chinese restaurant wouldn’t have General Tso’s Chicken or something Kung Pao, as this restaurant did? It was very much a typical

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74 Bamboo Hut menu was collected in 2007. The restaurant has since closed.
Chinese restaurant menu with all the dishes that one would expect in a Chinese restaurant.

However, upon closer examination, I see items that strike me as rather interesting. This restaurant also offers a variety of cuisines from countries other than China. There is Singapore Rice noodles, presumably representing Singapore. Basil Shrimp seems more likely to hail from Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries than from China. Mongolia also makes an appearance in the form of Mongolian Chicken. And specific Chinese regions such as Sichuan and Hunan are given a nod. There is one dish, Yi Shiang Pork/Chicken, that remains unfamiliar because none of the dishes have explanations or descriptions and its Chinese transliterated name does not offer a hint of what differentiates it from others. One might ask, since when these distinct Asian countries become “Chinese” so as to be part of the Chinese restaurant repertoire? And since when did Chinese food become so individualized that it had regional identities rather than one single national identity?

The questions that this menu has raised are more telling than the answers themselves. That several Asian countries are somehow included under the rubric of Chinese speaks volumes of how distinct Asian ethnicities are often lumped together (in this case, lumped under Chinese) in the United States. On the other hand, there is also an increased distinction of Chinese regional identity in the restaurants. Even if words such as Sichuan or Hunan indicate no more than another Chinese-ified name of a dish for the public mainstream, they are still the names of distinct provinces in China which have had their cuisines become part of the language of Chinese restaurants in the United States.
What is even more telling in this Chinese restaurant menu is its very ordinariness. The fact that the menu is written entirely in English and that none of the dishes include any descriptions at all indicate that they are so familiar and so much a part of the American social fabric that what was once considered so foreign and exotic has now become mundane. The Chinese restaurant in many ways has become such a blasé entity that it longer requires as much explanation.

The Bamboo Hut menu, collected in 2007, tells a very different story from older Chinese restaurant menus. In those menus, there were none of the regional specialties (save Cantonese) nor the inclusion of other Asian cuisines, for example. Prior to 1964, most of the Chinese in America did immigrate from the Canton province and many menus provided more explanation of culture and cuisine than the one from Bamboo Hut (for example, Ding Ho and Paris Inn). Thus, while much of Chinese restaurant menus may be assumed today, Chinese restaurant menus as a material object provide information about how Chinese restaurants were perceived in the immediate community.

Despite its common presence on the American landscape, the Chinese restaurant seems to have escaped the attention of in-depth examination and cultural analysis. More often than not, if the Chinese restaurant is discussed, it is considered through the lens of its food and possible dubious cultural authenticity.75 Perhaps it is because of its very common-ness that the Chinese restaurant has become an assumed yet unassuming presence. It is no longer quite the same surprise to see a Chinese restaurant in small isolated towns nor is dining at one a unique experience previously limited to the Chinese

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75 For instance, J.A.G Robert’s China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West (2002).
or the adventurous. Unlike the Chinese laundries which has essentially disappeared, the Chinese restaurant has continued to be an occupational niche for many Chinese and other Asian newcomers to the United States. The Chinese restaurant is in no danger of becoming extinct; rather, it is flourishing and becoming even more plentiful than McDonalds’ – an American icon (Jennifer Lee 2008). This abundance of the Chinese restaurant allows it to blend into the landscape as a fixture that seemingly will always be around, not requiring the preservation or investigation.

But to understand the Chinese restaurant requires more than a simplistic judgment on its culinary authenticity. The Chinese restaurant contains a complex intersection of cultural expression, expectation, and economic viability that goes far beyond debates of its cultural authenticity. How do we recover a sense of context and place of Chinese restaurants? Further, how did Chinese restaurants escape historical attention? Did the fact that they seemed to stay the same make it escape historical attention. Why are they not part of economic history if they have been such a ubiquitous presence? Interest in the Chinese restaurant is often tied to authenticity rather than to history. But in order to understand authenticity, one must also understand the context in which ideas about authenticity have developed.

Unfortunately, the story of Chinese restaurants is quite incomplete. Chinese culture as expressed in the United States was not generally seen as something important to collect. The prevailing pressure was to throw off reminders of cultural heritage and assimilate into the mainstream American society (Chan 1991). In addition, this, in part, may have helped give rise to the idea of the “model minority” where Asian Americans
were portrayed as upstanding American citizens as a means to control African Americans during the nascent stages of the civil rights movement (Matsuda 1996). Thus, there was little documentation of Chinese American folklore or history in the United States. If anything, Chinese cultural heritage was seen in terms of the motherland rather than through the lens of Mary Pratt’s contact zone (Pratt 1992) – how Chinese culture merged and conflicted with the culture it encountered in the United States. Instead, information on Chinese Americans is generally associated with railroad workers or possibly laundries, often as a footnote, through their labor rather than cultural expressions. The idea that Chinese American culture even existed was yet to be acknowledged; cultural traditions within the Chinese community were often in reference to China rather than as adaptations in a new national context.

In this current state, how do we recover and trace the development of something like the Chinese restaurant? In one sense, the Chinese restaurant as a concept or entity is quite persistent and enduring. However, in another sense, the Chinese restaurant as a concrete object is also quite transitory. New restaurants open up while others close; the building is remodeled or torn down or relocated; new dishes are introduced, others taken off the menu. Owners also come and go as do wait staff and chefs. While there have been efforts to document and preserve materials related to Chinese Americans, up until very recently, there have been little concrete and organized efforts to reconstruct and analyze the Chinese restaurant. Given this situation, it is useful to turn to the concrete remnants of restaurants that have already disappeared: the vintage Chinese restaurant menu. Many of the early entrepreneurs in the 19th and 20th centuries may have passed on
without telling their stories and their restaurants demolished to make way for modern urbanization, but some of their menus have survived to give us glimpse of their existence.

Once one arrives at a Chinese restaurant and is seated, the menu serves as the defacto tour guide for the dining experience to come. It helps us to assess the food, to let us know whether it is an “authentic” Chinese restaurant or an “American-ized” Chinese restaurant before we take the big step of actually ingesting the culture presented before us. It can either reassure us that this restaurant is indeed approachable or if it is too foreign for us. Does it offer General Tso’s chicken? Or chop suey? Or Peking Duck? Or perhaps even a hamburger with fries! Whether it is written only in English, bi-lingual in Chinese and English, or perhaps only Chinese characters, the type of linguistic presence will carry codes of signification for the diners. Presumably, the diner is familiar with the idea of selecting from more than one category of food and the menu presents categories from which to select rather than possibly duplicating items that are, from the cultural point of view, too similar. The menus of Chinese restaurants encompass a diachronic system of signs that connote the relationships of the Chinese community to the broader social environment/context. It is a guide that explains to the diner what he or she should expect, provide cultural information, how to put together a meal, and serves as a cultural mediator.

If we look at the Chinese restaurant menu as the form in which ideas are presented, then the concept it presents may be the level of “Americanization” or degree of “authenticity.” But the concept can also be several things – it can also present ideas about class, identity, or assimilation. The menu may signal that Chinese food is an elite
cuisine worthy of partaking or it may be less self-conscious about whether or not it still
smacks of taboo and mysterious ingredients. It may highlight or foreground unfamiliar
dishes with tempting descriptions or they may be shunted to a less prominent place in the
menu. These nuggets of information may tell us how narrow or broad an audience the
restaurant caters to. Overall, the menu encompasses ideas about the relationship between
Chinese Americans and mainstream America. The menu is a tangible messenger of the
image restaurant owners want to present - often whatever will be the most profitable,
based on their understanding of what the immediate clientele wants and the restaurant
owners’ cultural standing in America. While certain images or signs (such as specific
dishes) may remain consistent, it is also important to note that the concepts they embody
may change over time as the perception of Chinese restaurants and culture change.

But the Chinese restaurant in the US is more complicated than a simple clear
divide between authentic and inauthentic establishments as people may be inclined to
assume. Authenticity is a combination of expectations, conventions, and heritage, and all
of these change, in part as a response to and interaction with the larger contexts of
Chinese American interactions and restaurants in general. For some people, authentic
restaurants may be those that offer unfamiliar dishes and for others, the presence of chop
suey is enough to denote authenticity. What is seen as authentic may also be what people
have come to associate with a Chinese restaurant. The inauthentic is a modification of
that expectation, marked by unexpected combinations or the presence of seemingly
unrelated foods. The changes in the perceptions of authenticity and menu offerings
reflect larger social changes in terms of acceptability of food and culture. Many of the
older restaurants do not exist anymore (as Chinese restaurants often come and go) and we are not able to visit the establishments to determine for ourselves whether it would meet our standards or perceptions of authenticity. But if we look at the menus of Chinese restaurants from various time periods and regions in the United States, we can find information about what was considered popular, what was familiar or unfamiliar, and what was expected of a Chinese restaurant.

From vintage menus, we can also see shifts in attitudes towards Chinese restaurants and dishes that have gone in and out of style. Early Chinese American history tells us that the Chinese community was often met with suspicion and trepidation. During the 19th century, the Chinese community in San Francisco (and by extension, all Chinese in general) was perceived as a bastion of disease and general ill-repute that was to be shunned despite examples to the contrary. For the Chinese, Nayan Shah writes, admission to cultural belonging and citizenship in the United States hedged on being able to perform normative hygiene and heterosexual family (Shah 2001: 15). The Chinese, of course, were not unaware of the stereotypes and the need for a certain amount of cultural recognizability in order to be accepted. One type of response was to make a point on their menus of assuring the patrons that the establishment at which they were dining was clean and “American” in hygiene despite being Chinese. Several menus stated that the kitchens were available for inspection (for example, Paris Inn) while beautiful artwork often incorporated images of sophisticated Westerners (rather than Chinese) diners and couples against an oriental backdrop (Golden Pagoda). It promoted a pampered dining experience that reflected a more positive albeit orientalist perception of Chinese culture.
Many restaurants also presented not only Chinese food but also “American” fare as well, signaling the need for some sort of gentle introduction to Chinese culture by offering familiarity in addition to the exoticness of Chinese cuisine. Thus, patrons would have the opportunity to opt out of the intimacy of eating unfamiliar foods in the safety of the constructed exoticism of a restaurant environment. As the restaurants and the menus become more contemporary, the issue of kitchen cleanliness becomes less pronounced while cultural authenticity seems to become more central.

Chop suey was the undoubtedly the representative dish of Chinese cuisine for decades. During the 19th century, any mention from that time period of Chinese food by non-Chinese generally (and perhaps only) included chop suey and perhaps chow mein. Reactions to this dish of mixed chopped vegetables and meat ranged from fascination to apprehensive disgust to its “addictive” qualities. While it signified the exotic to unfamiliar patrons, it was in fact a rather lowly Cantonese dish created more or less from “leftovers.” Up to the 1970s, there was hardly a Chinese restaurant that did not offer chop suey - the quintessential “Chinese” dish. However, the 1965 Immigration Reform Act opened up opportunities for Chinese from other regions of China to immigrate to the US and bring with them their own regional style of Chinese cuisine. As a result, we see a shift in the types of Chinese restaurants that were opening up from the standard Cantonese to more regionalized cuisines – Hunan, Szechuan – which generally used spicier ingredients. No longer was Cantonese the dominant Chinese immigrant nor was it the only type of Chinese cuisine available. While the newer Chinese restaurants built on the success of Cantonese Chinese restaurant by offering much of the same type of fare,
they also introduced newer dishes such as Hunan Beef or Szechuan Chicken. Chop suey was no longer in vogue as but what replaced it as the newer face of Chinese cuisine was General Tso’s chicken – bits of chicken dipped in batter, deep fried, and then drenched in a sweet and sour sauce. However, like chop suey, its origins are murky and disputable as “authentic” Chinese cuisine, as Jennifer Lee writes in her book *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* (2008). In Lee’s book, she also spends a chapter pursuing the origins of General Tso’s chicken, only to find that no such general really existed and by that definition, is not really a Chinese dish. What is interesting here is that that the form of chop suey may remain the same, but its concept (authenticity) changes in a different context (contemporary times) to one of inauthenticity. We can also see the concept as remaining stable (inauthenticity) while the form changes from chop suey to General Tso’s chicken.

The need to gently introduce the non-Chinese public to Chinese cuisine (and indeed, provide an introduction to Chinese culture) inevitably influenced the design and information on the menu. It may seem odd to think that a restaurant may have goals other than to make a profit, but like other ethnic restaurants, more was at stake because Chinese restaurants had to negotiate a cultural element simply by being an ethnic restaurant. What would satisfy their Chinese and non-Chinese customers’ expectations of a Chinese restaurant? A delicate balance would have to be struck between what would appeal to the tastes of their Chinese customers and what would not frighten off their non-Chinese customers who were not acquainted with Chinese cuisine while remaining recognizably Chinese to both Chinese and non-Chinese. How could they appear friendly,
inviting, and perhaps even familiar while maintaining a sense of “Chinese-ness”? How do they negotiate a balance between the appeal of the exotic and the appeal of the familiar? Restaurants were put in the position of negotiating the needs and desires of multiple types of patrons. Thus, the Chinese “authenticity” in restaurants is never something that is singular or unchanging. The Chinese restaurant must always address the varied tastes of customers and adapt to the cultural and culinary climates as they change. These multiple expectations and demands do not easily lend itself simple categorizations of authenticity as tastes and expectations change. Menus are not indications of stagnant cultural authenticity.

It may be tempting to look back at older menus and deem restaurants that offered both Chinese chop suey and American steaks to be inauthentic. However, ideas about authenticity are very much connected to the era in which it is expressed. Menus tell us that there were multiple ideas about authenticity and that authenticity was embodied in multiple ways. A collection can show us which dishes were popular, what were regional, and which dishes fell out of favor only to be replaced by different ones. The presence of hamburgers or a category of American foods may not necessarily mean that the dirigibles in the Chinese section were not “authentic.” Different categorizations of food tell us what the owners believed to be cultural distinctions of food and how foods should be grouped. The salad or sandwich would not be found in the Chinese section of the menu. These restaurants may still remain “authentic” and some of them may even explicitly inform their diners of their “authenticity.” Visually, some menus incorporated the writing style that was meant to mirror Chinese writing in English. Other illustrations
could be minimal with little to indicate cultural affiliations or ranged to ornate representations of Buddhas, lanterns, dragons, and other images often associated with China. For some diners, such illustrations contributed to the overall experience of authenticity if the experience of authenticity meant that one could practically imagine being “transported” to China. But the restaurants do not necessarily prepare food in terms of authentic or inauthentic; the dishes offered are whatever will sell and sell best. Thus, what sells well may become the expected authentic and eventually represent authenticity in the larger social consciousness.

These vintage menus can tell us how that story has changed through the decades. At the same time, vintage menus that are available to be examined are limited in what they can tell us about Chinese restaurants. These menus are often gorgeous with beautiful artwork. They may be from expensive restaurants that can afford to produce fancy menus or in fact, they may be smaller, more unassuming restaurants that present aspirations of high class or sophistication. Menus that are saved serve as a memento of a memorable experience, a touristic souvenir, or perhaps simply an aesthetic item. But what of the restaurants or eateries that have simple or plain listings of the available comestibles? Or of the restaurants that do not even have individual menus for their patrons but list their dishes on the wall or are rattled off by the waiter? These types of restaurants that do not have individual menus to be handed to the customer may serve a different type of food or serve a different type of patron. In fact, they may present a wholly different image of Chinese culture. These are the restaurants that do not have tangible remnants of their existence and become lost in memory. The restaurants with
the ornately designed peacock and shimmering gold lettering on the front covers that are saved as mementos are the ones that get to tell the story. As a result, the negotiated authenticity they present becomes the story writ large. We do not get the whole story from examining menus; we only get the story of a certain kind of restaurant, most likely the fancy establishments with attractive menus, rather than the smaller, more modest or unassuming eateries. What we can get from concrete material of Chinese restaurants is only a part of the story, a glimpse of the past.

*Paris Inn*

Paris Inn is an interesting combination of European stylings and Chinese signals. The cover art seems to hint at a more European establishment with the depiction of a building (presumably the restaurant) with Roman columns and arches on the second floor. The vertical sign for the restaurant displays lion heads and swans which seem more European in design rather than Chinese. There are a few subtle nods to Chinese culture such as the font of the restaurant name and address, both of which seem to be in the stereotypical oriental font, and the first floor of the building which appear to be more Chinese-style columns with red door frames and ceiling décor. This menu does not depict other stereotypical symbols of Chinese-ness that might identify the establishment as being Chinese such as the restaurant name, Chinese characters, dragons, etc. Despite the text on the sign indicating “Chinese and American Dishes,” the name “Paris Inn” would seem to indicate a more European establishment than a Chinese restaurant. However,
that the sign indicates “Chinese and American Dishes” seem to indicate a Chinese restaurant since such a side by side pairing is often found in other Chinese restaurants.

It is interesting that the name of this particular restaurant is simply “Paris Inn,” absent of information that would explain the connection that a Chinese restaurant might have with the city of Paris. Paris conjures up images of sophistication and worldliness and seemingly has little to do with Chinese restaurants. Naming the restaurant “Paris Inn” might convey the same sort of sophistication to their particular establishment or to Chinese food in general, raising it to the same reputation level as French cuisine. In addition, it may have been a distancing move from the idea of simple chop suey joint by situating it in the context and connotation of international flavor.

That the restaurant aspires or perceives itself to be elite is quite obvious. We are informed on the first page inside the menu that Paris Inn has been “Catering to a Discriminating Public.” On the top of almost every subsequent page this phrase is repeated underneath the name of the restaurant, constantly reminding its guests of the type of establishment they are patronizing. The introductory blurb on the second page explains the type of restaurant Paris Inn is, focusing on the idea of discriminating taste among its patrons. The discriminating public chooses to dine at Paris Inn for this is a restaurant that operates on the “fine ‘old school” methods of service. This introduction simultaneously posits the restaurant as a high-class one while situating its patrons as equally high class for having discriminating enough tastes to know, understand, and patronize Paris Inn. Its quality is such that there is nothing to hide and guests can see for themselves what goes on behind the kitchen doors, as hinted by the open invitation to
guests to inspect the kitchen at the bottom of the third page. This, of course, may also be an acknowledgement of the trepidation or preconception of Chinese food as being dirty and unsanitary that diners may have had. Opening the kitchen for inspection by guests could provide peace of mind that the food was clean and harmless.

Like most early Chinese restaurant menus, Paris Inn also offers a Chinese menu and an American menu (both in English) for its customers. The Chinese menu does not really offer too many surprises for the patrons and very little that might be unfamiliar. Though certain dishes are transliterated Chinese (such as chow mein, chop suey, or subgum), most dishes are written primarily in English. The selections may seem extensive, but they are essentially numerous variations of a few dishes, most of familiar standards: chop suey, chow main, egg foyoung, fried rice, noodles. While most Chinese restaurants might offer the beef-chicken-pork-or-shrimp variations of one particular dish, Paris Inn concocts a multitude. There is not only one type of Chicken Chop Suey but over ten variations of it, including Turkey Chop Suey (but it is not clear why Turkey Chop Suey warranted its very own section). Interestingly enough, there is a Spanish Chop Suey and a Spanish Beef Chop Suey, but it is listed under the heading of “Plain Chop Suey. Some of the desserts may be a bit more unusual (the imported Chinese preserved fruit, gamgot, most likely kumquats), but in general, Paris Inn does not offer anything too ‘exotic.’

Whereas the Chinese menu only constitutes four pages, the American menu takes up five. Again, there is an extensive listing of dishes and a wide variety of Western styles. It is interesting to note that while the restaurant is named Paris Inn, it does not
offer French cuisine as one might expect. It offers Chinese and American fare, yet the American menu presents a mish-mash of European dishes. One can find German Schnitzels, Russian caviar, a Spring Chicken Spanish Stew in addition to dishes with pretensions of being French such as the Milk-fed Chicken a la Parisienne or Tenderloin Stead a la Jardiniere. There is a lumping of non-Chinese foods under the broad category of “American” much in the same way that regional Chinese dishes (Beijing, Cantonese, Hunan, Shanghai, etc) food have been made monolithic under the category of Chinese.

The Golden Pagoda

The Golden Pagoda is not your average hole-in-the-wall Chinese restaurant. The illustrations on the menu cover tell us that this is a fine-dining establishment. Most notably, there is a man pulling a rickshaw carrying a Chinese woman in what appears to be fine Chinese clothing. Rickshaws are a sharp reminder of class – the actual physical labor of one person used to provide comfort for an upper class client. The presence of the rickshaw, while most likely not an actual available service for the patrons, conjure up an image of a stereotypical and familiar association with Chinese culture and of fine service that caters to the needs of its customers, to be treated like well-heeled patrons. In the background are an elegant five-story pagoda (another marker of Chinese-ness) and silhouettes of men in top hats and ladies in long evening dresses. The restaurant advertises “Chinese Food and Cocktails,” connecting Chinese culture with the sophistication of cocktails. Chinese culture at the time was still viewed with a mixture of contradictory perceptions of exoticism to suspicion to “other.” The juxtaposition of
“Chinese Foods” and “Cocktails” serves to subtly raise the perception of Chinese culture to a more sophisticated class.

The menu is dated circa 1950s. However, the restaurant itself opened in 1941. Located in “New Chinatown” in Los Angeles, California, it is a focal point in the central plaza of New Chinatown. New Chinatown was so named, after a premature demolition of the older Chinatown. It was a planned community for Chinese residents and businesses to relocate to. As a planned community, it was intended to integrate Chinese and American elements in a harmonious coexistence, an articulation of an ideal mingling of two cultures. The Golden Pagoda restaurant therefore represented this goal of challenging old stereotypes of dingy Chinatown eateries with a clean, upper-crust façade. The food as well would be a mix of Cantonese favorites with familiar chop suey and chow mein. Is this authentic Chinese cuisine then? As the result of historical events that propelled Chinese to plan a new community for themselves, the menu offerings can be seen as an authentic expression of the changes that the Los Angeles Chinese community confronted.

*Shangri-La Chinese American Restaurant*

Like many early Chinese restaurants, The Shangri-La billed itself as a “Chinese-American” Restaurant. One might ask, why not simply be a “Chinese” restaurant and compromise its “authenticity” with the taint of the “American” juxtaposition? Prior to the 1970s, Chinese restaurants did not have the same ubiquity that it does today. Chinese

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76 Historical information about The Golden Pagoda Restaurant was taken from http://oldchinatownla.com/history.html
restaurants (and culture) were still largely foreign and exotic to most Americans, with perhaps the exception in some areas with large, more established Chinese populations such as New York City or California. The “American” part was not meant to detract from any sort of perception of authenticity. Indeed, authenticity was likely not even an issue. Rather, the intent was to make it more familiar and inviting to the public at large. Early 19th century accounts of Chinese food often posited it as strange, perhaps distasteful. In the late 19th century, Louis J. Beck claimed that a menu that included black dog grease and black cat eyes was displayed on a restaurant door in Canton, China (1898). In addition, Chinatowns (and Chinese culture by association) were seen as havens of dirt, disease, opium, and other unsavory social ills. With such prevalent stereotypes present in mainstream culture, it is not surprising that many Chinese restaurants would attempt to resist these images by associating itself with some element of “American-ness.” Offering Chinese and American cuisine could invite customers to have the option of eating something familiar and the opportunity to try Chinese food and understand that it may not be as alien and intimidating as previously thought. It was a business move as well: one must make the unfamiliar more familiar in order to gain customers

At Shangri-La, the Chinese menu offers chow main, fried rice, chop suey, egg foo young, and noodles – typical fare found in most Chinese restaurants for many decades. In comparison to other vintage Chinese menus, it does not veer too much from what was typically offered in older Chinese American restaurant menus. What this tells us that such dishes were the expressions of Chinese food for most people for many years.
People come to expect these dishes to be present at a restaurant that was Chinese. If a present day Chinese restaurant were to offer the same menu, however, it might indicate to some patrons that the restaurant is “inauthentic” or “Americanized.” Chop suey and chow mein are now perceived to be bastardized Chinese cuisine made for American tastes, not Chinese tastes (despite its Chinese origins and associations). Today, one might expect General Tso’s Chicken or Orange Chicken to mean authentic Chinese food. In fact, General Tso’s Chicken also has a similar murky and convoluted origin as chop suey. Thus, what is considered to be “authentic” or popular Chinese food evolves and changes as fashion also evolves and changes.

The American menu of Shangri-La offers items such as steak and chops, sandwiches, eggs and omelettes, potatoes nine different ways, cold meats, and rarebits and cheese. It is interesting to note what is considered typical “American” food during the same time period. Today, if Shangri-La still existed and offered a Chinese and an American menu, would we find the same dishes? As the Chinese menu might replace chop suey with General Tso’s chicken, the American menu might have hamburger and fries, pizza, chicken nuggets for kids, perhaps fish and chips, instead of cold meats or rarebits and cheese. Thus, as certain Chinese foods fall out of vogue, what is considered to be American food also evolves with the times. Authenticity in food must be considered in a chronological context.

Nanking Café & Hoe Sai Gai Chinese American Restaurant
Nanking Café in Oakland, California covers many bases by advertising Chinese, American, and seafood (as if seafood demanded its own cultural category), chop suey, and noodles. These are all the markers of a Chinese restaurant that wants to appeal to a broad audience, making sure that it has all the Chinese restaurant favorites in addition offering American cuisine. Until recently, most Chinese restaurants were run by Cantonese people (from the Southern region of China – Hong Kong, Guangdong). Nanking Café is interesting because its menu indicates that the operators (or the originators) may not have been Cantonese. First, the city of Nanking (currently Nanjing) is not located in a Cantonese region (it is located in the Jiangsu Province) and the owner might have wanted to give a nod to his/her hometown. Secondly, the transliteration of Chinese dishes seem to be slightly different from other Chinese menu transliterations, indicating that the transliterations are from another dialect rather than from Cantonese.

“Chop suey” and “chow mein” is spelled the same way as it has been in other menus. However, what seems different is the “chow yuke” which is a stir fried meat dish. In Cantonese, it might be “chow yuk” or “yoke” but the “yuke” indicates a slightly different pronunciation, which may be Fujianese.

If we compare the transliterations of the Chinese dishes from Hoe Sai Gai, located in Dearborn, Michigan, we find that the extensive list may seem considerably more unfamiliar. The reason is that many of the dishes are transliterated (as the standard Pinyin romanization system was not yet in effect). Looking at the transliterations can also give us clues about the origins of the owners. As Nanking Café might be from another region besides Guandong, Hoe Sai Gai is obviously Cantonese (especially if one
is familiar with sounds of the Cantonese language). But not only do the phonetics sound Cantonese, they might seem to closer to the dialect of Toisan, a closely related dialect of Cantonese that is spoken in the county of Toisan in the Guangdong province. For instance, the dessert for the Tai Sa Hay dinner is “houn guan” which is a sugared ginger. In Cantonese, the phonetics might be “tong geung” but in Toisanese, the “tong” (sugar) has an “h” sound and the “geung” has the more open mouth sound of “guan.” The switching of the “t” consonant for the “h” sound recurs throughout the menu for several dishes. “Himm Soon Opp Pinn” is very close to the Toisan pronunciation of sweet and sour duck with pineapple (which they explain as pickled duck with pineapple) which replaces the “t” sound with “h” of “himm.” The phonetics of duck is also a giveaway of the Toisan dialect which pronounces it as “opp” but a Cantonese pronunciation would pronounce it as “gnopp.” Thus, Chinese menus can also tell us the regional origins of the owners, a factor that may also influence the “authenticity” of its menu.

**Ding Ho**

Ding Ho is a local Chinese restaurant in Columbus, OH, family owned and in operation continuously since 1955. There are not many restaurants like it in the area anymore as they have kept its menu mostly intact from the ‘50s. Originally located on Broad St, it has recently moved to a newer location but has maintained its old style of serving rolls with every meal served. They still offer a Chinese and an American menu for its patrons. One of their specialties is Wor Sue Gai, crispy chicken over lettuce with gravy, a dish that is said to be invented in Columbus.
Though it has no graphic illustrations on its cover, the menu boldly announces itself with its name “Ding Ho” in large black lettering against a red background. The Chinese characters are printed first, above the English lettering which has the words below: “Translated ‘The Best.’” Already, the menu puts itself forth as a friendly place that demystifies the “Orient” for the diners.

This restaurant is clearly geared towards being accessible to a non-Chinese audience. As is the case with many older Chinese restaurants, they offer a Chinese menu as well as a section of “American Dishes.” The Chinese menu consists of chow mein, chop suey, egg fooyoung, fried rice, yat ca mein and war mein (noodle dishes) – dishes that are popularly understood to be Chinese though by today’s standards are often considered to be “inauthentic.” Though offered as Chinese, these dishes also include variations that may not seem very “Chinese”: veal chop suey, tomato chow mein or barbequed pork chop suey. Such dishes indicate a mixing of cultural ingredients or adaptations that incorporate the local context. Interestingly enough, the category of sandwiches – generally thought of as American- are also listed under the Chinese menu. One obvious reason may be of space – there was no room anywhere else on the menu to list the all-important American sandwich. There are hamburgers and club sandwiches but interestingly enough, there is also a “Chinese Roast Pork” sandwich and egg fooyoung sandwiches – a nod to the Chinese twist on American foods. Even though the section is Chinese, it has glimmers of cultural mixing.

The American menu consists of appetizers, soups, steaks-chops-poultry, eggs, sea foods, Italian spaghetti, salads, vegetables and potatoes (ostensibly sides), and dessert and
beverages. The categorization seems to be primarily in terms of courses rather than dish. Here, the menu indicates that the owners had a good understanding of the American palate and indicates the restaurant’s familiarity with American foods. However, even the American menu seems to have a Chinese twist to it. American appetizers usually consist of more hearty fare but fruit juices are listed under appetizers as are olives, green onions, pickles, and hearts of celery. While Chinese meals do not normally offer appetizers, some restaurants may offer small plates of pickles to the diners before the main meal arrives. Thus the appetizers under the American menu have a Chinese interpretation. However, this cultural interpretation still allows them to be listed in the American section because they do not become unrecognizable; they are still American.

In addition the Chinese and American sections, the Ding Ho menu also presents a section consisting entirely of Cantonese dishes. “Try Our Special Cantonese Dishes,” it entreats the diner. It is a friendly invitation that highlights the more unfamiliar dishes but does not pressure or alarm the diner. Soup courses and appetizers are also listed in this section, but they are of the more hearty variety such as egg rolls, barbequed spareribs or shrimp. They seem to resemble the small bites of dim sum (small plates similar to the concept of Spanish tapas) rather than the peanuts or picked vegetables one might be served at other Chinese restaurants. The food in the combination platter is not stated, but it is most likely a combination of the other appetizers already listed. Under this Cantonese section, the dishes are listed by type of meat: poultry, beef, pork, seafood, and egg dishes. What is interesting is that a Cantonese chow mein is also listed under each type of meat, indicating that the chow mein under the regular Chinese heading is
somehow differentiated. Does this mean that the regular Chinese chow mein is not Cantonese or is somehow Americanized? The other Cantonese specialties are transliterated into English with seemingly exotic sounds….the Loong Har Ding (lobster) or the Hong Sue York (pork tenderloin). Like other Chinese menus, the transliterations indicate a Toisan background because of the phonetics spellings that seem closer to the dialect rather than Cantonese. Many of the other dishes are listed with explanatory titles such as Fresh Jumbo Shrimps with Lobster Sauce. Whether or not the dishes have unfamiliar or plain English names, they all have specific descriptions of what the ingredients are. In this way, the menu makes no mystery of what the ingredients are for the diners.

I was fortunate to be able to obtain two other more recent versions of Ding Ho’s menu from the owner. The oldest menu seemed to be from its early days in the 50s or 60s. The next menu seems to be from 90s, based on pricing that is not very different from the current menu. The cover remains bright red with most of the original wording. What is most different is that the corners have a decorative design most likely meant to indicate an oriental flair. Another addition is the claim “Serving Columbus Since 1956.” There seems to be an accentuation of the Chinese aspect of the restaurant and an emphasis on its longevity. Inside, the menu remains relatively unchanged – there is no longer a heading for Cantonese Specialties or Chinese cuisine. The American section is now renamed “American Favorites.” In a nod to modern changes to Chinese cuisine in the US, there is the addition of Szechwan dishes, reflecting changing American tastes and Chinese immigration to the US.
The current menu continues to maintain the bright red color and the origin date. However, a large fancy dragon is emblazoned on the front and the font of the inside is less of a neutral font. Instead, the headings are changed to a more “chopstick” style script. It seems as if the menu wants to emphasize and preserve the orientalist aspects of the restaurant. Additional changes are also made in terms of offerings. While some dishes are no longer available [say which ones], new ones are added such as Buddha’s Delight and Hunan Scallops. While the restaurant attempts to preserve its origin story, it does have to make additions so that it reflects the model of the current Chinese restaurant and not be stuck in time.

It is unusual to have menus from different time periods of the same restaurant. In Ding Ho, we can see how changes were made to reflect a more business oriented model that is profitable rather than maintaining a Chinese restaurant that is no longer relevant. While it maintains much of the original menu, the owner (3rd generation) knows its customers – some of them have been patrons for decades, bringing in new generations to the restaurant.

Erлинд’s Restaurant: Canadian and Chinese Cuisine

Erлинд’s Restaurant is located just over the US border on the Six Nations Reservation. It is a restaurant that serves Canadian and Chinese cuisine. It is not located in the United States but it provides an interesting example of cultural interaction between two cultures that are not part of the mainstream. The reservation is an unexpected location to find Chinese cuisine as outsiders might perceive North American indigenous
grounds as an insular site of closed native cultures rather than cultural mixing. However, as Erlind’s shows us, Chinese cuisine can be found in many places.

How did a restaurant on the reservation end up serving Chinese cuisine? On a reservation, a restaurant serving Chinese cuisine is obviously not meant to serve Chinese patrons as any resident Chinese population is likely small, if any. Was it meant for tourists?

The extensive menu hints at an intimate knowledge of Chinese cuisine, which suggests that at one time or another a Chinese person was working in the kitchen and helped to create the menu. It is an odd mixture of old fashioned and contemporary Chinese food items alongside what many might consider to be “American” food.

The Canadian cuisine consists of fare such as sandwiches, burgers, and salad with the exception of a children’s menu item of “sweet and sour chicken, egg roll, and chicken fried rice.” It is interesting to note that the “Canadian” cuisine is clearly labeled. The menu is tri-folded so that the Canadian cuisine is the visible back page.

Meanwhile, the rest of the dishes are familiar as Chinese cuisine, yet there is no heading labeling them as such. This is either indicative of the menu creator who may see Chinese cuisine as the natural standard and the Canadian cuisine as the group that needs identification or that Chinese cuisine is so familiar that it needs no identifying label. People will immediately understand it as Chinese cuisine.

Some of the menu items hark back to old Cantonese dishes with its Chinese dialect transliterations and vintage spellings. Bok choi is spelled “bok toy,” a clear indication of the Toisan roots. Bo-Lo Guy Pan is the Toisan transliteration of Pineapple
Duck. Erlind’s Best Shrimp is also known as Cantonese Butterfly Shrimp. The categories also diverge from typical Chinese menus. While they do have a “Chef’s Special Suggestions” section, other categories are not typical. There are appetizers, a whole section on chicken wings, soup, chop suey and chow mein together, egg foo young, lo mein. Vegetables and chicken get their own dishes while beef and pork are together in one section. Other categories are in terms of flavor: sweet and sour, curry, Szechuan (which is listed as hot and spicy, an apparent synonym), and a section just for garlic blackbean dishes. Fried rice is listed merely as rice dishes. Rice places are listed under “steamed rice dishes.” Are these categorizations a product of indigenous influence or an individual’s caprice?

While many Chinese menus seem to highlight its “Chinese-ness,” Erlind’s menu seems to want to display a strong Native identity. The border decorations are reminiscent of Native design and the only illustration on the menu is the medicine wheel on the front cover. The only Chinese words on the menu are hand-written; Six Nations. Two of the family dinners even reference native culture: Chief Family Dinner and Six Nations Dinner though these combination dinners give no hint of why their names should be so named while other combination dinners are simply named for the number of patrons it meant for. The Chief Family Dinner and the Six Nations dinner are the larger combination dinners which may be fitting for a “chief” or the name of the reservation itself.

*The “Chinese Menu” and the Invisible Menu*
So far I have focused on Chinese restaurant menus that are physical concrete objects. However, there are two types of menus that are even more ephemeral or may exist only in memory. The first one is the hidden or “secret” Chinese menu that I discussed in Chapter 4 and the other menu is what I am calling the “invisible” menu because it may not exist even in physical form.

The hidden menu is the one that may be offered to Chinese patrons and is written in Chinese. The menu might be a separate menu from one that is offered to non-Chinese patrons or is written on paper taped the walls or otherwise posted but with no English translations. Often, non-Chinese patrons believe that this menu is deliberately being withheld from them and that they are denied access to it. The type of restaurant that offers this sort of dual menu is one that may serve multiple types of customers. The non-Asian customer will, in most cases, receive an English language menu. However, someone who is perceived to be of Chinese descent may receive a menu written in Chinese. They are not necessarily the same menu, however. This is not necessarily preferential treatment or a deliberate intent to exclude, but more of a pragmatic move. Most likely by experience, the Chinese restaurant owners know that there are some dishes that may appeal to a Chinese customer but not to someone who is unfamiliar with certain Chinese dishes, hence, the dual menus. However, it is not to say that someone who is not intimately familiar with Chinese cuisine cannot also have access to the same dishes. Rather, it is a matter of familiarity and knowing what dishes may be available to order.

The invisible menu is the menu that has never been written down or was never saved. They might be from humble restaurants that had their offerings written on a piece
of piece that was easily disposed of or, like in my family’s case, on interchangeable letterboard. These establishments do not have the kind of evidence left behind as a restaurant whose physical menu was kept or collected. How do these Chinese restaurants configure themselves as Chinese? And how do they adapt to the local environment? My family’s carry-out served a primarily African American neighborhood in Baltimore city. It offered crab cakes and seafood, a nod to Maryland’s famous blue crabs. It also offered fried chicken, fried shrimp, fried fish, and French fries. There was no tea offered, only coke/pepsi, sprite, orange, and grape soda. For small establishments such as my family’s, there will be little record of their operations. Thus, we have very little information in which to understand the history of the smaller Chinese restaurants in small towns where they might have been a place to serve food rather than as a site of intentional cultural exchange or exploration.

**Conclusion**

As cultural artifacts, Chinese restaurants menus are incredibly useful in providing information not only about the restaurant itself, but about the standing of the Chinese community in the larger sphere of American culture. While the menus offer themselves as presentation of its identity, it also operates as a marker of social relationships. As noted before, earlier Chinese menus tended to have distinct separations of Chinese and American dishes with explanations of the Chinese dishes, indicating the need for introduction to Chinese culture and cuisine. Contemporary menus rarely have this type of divide or at least it is not as common. Most contemporary Chinese restaurants simply
offer Chinese cuisine without the addition of a section that offers the hamburgers and sandwiches often recognized as American cuisine. This may indicate that Chinese cuisine has become familiar enough and accepted enough that it does not need the gentle introduction that the presence of familiar items might provide. It may indicate that Chinese restaurants can stand on its own as an ethnic restaurant and contemporary palates do not see Chinese cuisine as quite so exotic and foreign. While the Chinese versus American distinctions are no longer as bald on the contemporary menus, they may still exist in a more subtle form. A very recent experience indicates that the divides may still exist but are not as easily visible. On a visit to Little Dragons, a Chinese restaurant on Morse Road, I wanted to order some food for take-out. There were two take-out menus on the counter. I was confused as to which one I should look at or what the difference was between them. The lady behind the counter tapped the menu on the right and said, “This one. This is for Chinese people.” The menu that was not indicated for me offered fried rice entrees and General Tso’s Chicken or what people might perceive as Americanized Chinese food – the “inauthentic” type. While the earlier separations of American and Chinese cuisine were separated on earlier menus, today, there seems to be a similar separation that is not always so distinctly stated on the itself but requires knowledge of how Chinese restaurant menus are coded.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I explore several ways in which authenticity is multiple and flexible instead of examining it from the perspective that authenticity is rooted in stability and static concreteness. First, while authenticity has generally been viewed in conjunction with continuity with the past, I argue that authenticity can be attributed on the basis of claiming and that invention is not necessarily in opposition to authenticity. Second, claiming authenticity can be empowering for disenfranchised groups and it can be a used as a strategic move to challenge oppression. Thus, it is especially important to insist on the claim as valid and as true, rather than as a construction. Third, claiming authenticity in each culturally specific situation produces different kinds of authenticity claims that are contextual and relational. Claiming authenticity in identity for disenfranchised groups may be a challenge to established norms while claiming authenticity in food may be about exoticism or familiarity. Fourth, anomalies disrupt authenticity claims, but they are variations of authenticity rather than pollutants. In Chinese restaurants, anomalies may act as familiarizing mechanisms for an unfamiliar audience. Fifth, perceptions of authenticity in Chinese restaurants can be tied to Orientalist discourses that situate authenticity as the exotic unknown. Sixth, authenticity can be about locality. Authenticity does not imply distance from the immediate context.
In fact, the opposite is true. It's always in relationship to the social environment. I have looked at the site of the Chinese restaurant to explore this multiplicity and flexibility by focusing on one restaurant, one dish, and a series of several vintage Chinese restaurant menus. In doing so, I look at how something as familiar and ubiquitous as the Chinese restaurant simultaneously embody complex markers of authenticity, the exotic, everyday, global, and local over time.

As my dissertation is rooted in the folklore discipline, I began by reviewing some of the literature that address how authenticity has informed and shaped the folklore field. Using the work of William Wilson, Roger Abrahams, and Regina Bendix, I outline the close connection between folklore studies and Europe’s Romantic Nationalism movement. Central to Romantic Nationalism was the idea of continuity from the past as integral to national identity. This concept of continuity to the past as essential to identity is similar to the ways in which tradition is also linked to the concept of continuity to the past. However, many perceived traditions were recent in origins or have been invented, according to Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, and in many cases, invented to maintain power. Richard Dorson coined the phrase “fakelore” to describe tales that were printed and published as American folklore in popular magazines of the day – fake because they were not passed down by word of mouth through the generations (1950). Authenticity, tradition, and fakelore are all intertwined with the idea of continuity with the past, often serving as the basis for the validity of so many cultural expressions or claims of cultural identity. But what constitutes the past can be troublesome and problematic as origins can be imprecise and murky. Thus, claims of authenticity can be
easily discredited if the basis for the claim is situated in some concrete or static past-ness. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin view tradition as an interpretative move that is conducted in the present rather than as an inherited body of customs and beliefs in a move to challenge immutable boundaries of tradition. In making their argument, however, they deconstruct traditions that Hawaiian sovereignists use to bolster their claims to sovereignty. This does a disservice to disenfranchised groups such as the native Hawaiian sovereignists for it diminishes their claim to legitimacy on the basis of the very notion of tradition that Handler and Linnekin attempt to challenge. With such complications and potential pitfalls of the claims to authenticity, Regina Bendix believes authenticity should be dismissed from use in cultural scholarship in order to undermine its detrimental association that have so often marked political movements. However, such discourses understand authenticity in terms of stable origins. What is missing from the discussions are the empowering possibilities of claims of authenticity in cultural identity, especially for groups seeking to challenge oppression, and that authenticity may be multiple rather than singular. For disenfranchised groups, claiming authenticity may be culturally and strategically important. Therefore, it is important to accept different situations may produce different kinds of authenticity claims that do not adhere to the stability model of authenticity.

The literature seems to suggest that authenticity is merely a construct and as such, should be deconstructed and dismissed to diminish its power for the pursuit of authenticity can be fraught with danger as in the cases of nationalist movements. But despite what scholarship might tell us about the murky and imprecise boundaries of
authenticity as reasons for its dismantlement and dismissal, it cannot be denied that claims to authenticity remain very real and important to people. It is not adequate to simply demonstrate that the authenticity of a cultural expression is invalid because it was “invented” or that it has had multiple influences because there is an investment in authenticity. Should scholars tell people not to be so invested in authenticity because it has been found that their claims to authenticity do not hold up to historical or bounded examination? Such a move would be akin to saying “What is important to you is not really important” which would be an oppositional move for folklorists and other scholars conducting ethnographic work. Construction is an etic concept that to a non-academic would imply “made-up.” If authenticity is a construct, it is no more constructed than other concepts such as gender or race which still exists as very real to people and treated as such. Thus, authenticity should be treated as real and valid if it is claimed as such.

There are scores of examples, despite what scholarship might suggest or deconstruct, where authenticity is important and where it matters. As Sunaina Marr Maira and Andrea Louie have shown in their respective studies of Indian American and Chinese American youth, authenticity is important in constructing their cultural identity in the diasporic context. However ambiguous, ambivalent, dynamic, or contradictory their conceptions of ethnic identity are, these youths are invested in the idea of an authentic Indian-ness or Chinese-ness in a context that challenges their sense of self. In their studies, both Maira and Louie recognize the conceptions of authenticity are multiple and should be accepted as such. In the situations of identity issues, authenticity claims can become crucial. In such cases, claims to authenticity can be tools of empowerment
which can be used strategically to help legitimize their own standing in the broader social context.

Food, especially ethnic food, is one area in which claims of authenticity are intertwined with legitimacy and identity. The Korean women in Ji-Yeon Suh’s study long for authenticity in Korean foods. Isolated and without easy access to the foods of they were familiar with, they attempt to replicate the dishes of home as best as they could, but even so, it often did not match up to their idea of authentic Korean food. It is likely that one could argue that their conception of authentic Korean food might well be inauthentic, if one conducted a study on Korean foodways and deconstructed it, basing authenticity on an unchanging singular tradition. But for these Korean women, authentic Korean food was a source of comfort and succor. Rather than being unfamiliar, authenticity in these cases was about finding the elements of familiarity from their remembrances of home. It is in cases like these that authenticity is useful and empowering rather than destructive.

I chose the site of the Chinese restaurant to further explore the ways in which authenticity might be less rife with the connotations of dangerous nationalism that so often is bonded with ideas of authenticity. I was interested in looking at how authenticity might be useful and important and how authenticity might operate differently in that context. The Chinese restaurant is a rich site for studying authenticity not only because it has been vastly overlooked as a scholarly subject in past years and is need of more study, but also because Chinese restaurants are so frequently subject to scrutiny for its authenticity or inauthenticity. While the authenticity of Chinese restaurants is generally
not high stakes since it is not commonly used as power to oppress in this context (although its perception may contribute to the economic success of the restaurant), examining the question of authenticity in this type of cultural expression can provide valuable insight on how authenticity operates in different contexts. In Chinese restaurants, authenticity is both about familiarity and exoticism, about the everyday and about distance.

Initially, I intended to conduct a broad survey of Chinese restaurants in Columbus, Ohio. While I did interview several Chinese restaurant owners and visited many more, focusing on one restaurant proved to be a much richer experience as I was able to really get to know the restaurant and staff in depth and develop closer relationships. I found Ding Ho to be particularly intriguing from the very first time I visited the establishment. I came across Ding Ho as I was driving across Broadway Street, simply on the lookout for Chinese restaurants for my research. It was obviously a Chinese restaurant because of its name, and it caught my attention because of the vintage stylings of its sign and its location adjacent to the old fashioned Motel 40. When I entered the restaurant, I was not quite sure what to make of it. There were so many aspects that did not fit my usual expectations of a Chinese restaurant, for example, the elderly Caucasian waitress, the sliced white bread and butter served to me once I was seated, and the scant presence of Chinese staff. Like some of the online reviewers of Ding Ho, my initial inclination was to judge this restaurant as inauthentically Chinese, meant to serve the tastes of a non-Chinese clientele. The bread and Caucasian waitresses were anomalies that disrupted preconceived notions of what constituted the category of
Chinese restaurant. To use Mary Douglas’ ideas about pollution, the bread served as a pollutant to the entire category simply because it was one element out of place; likewise, the elderly Caucasian server also seemed anomalous in the setting of the Chinese restaurant and thus called into question the restaurant’s authenticity. Like the online reviewers, I viewed Ding Ho as not a “real” Chinese restaurant, but I had based my perceptions on my own preconceived notions of what an authentic Chinese restaurant ought to be like (which certainly did not include bread and butter). But what I realized that as contradictory as the markers might seem in Ding Ho, they were only variants in the diversity of Chinese restaurants and were strategies to make its clientele comfortable in what might be intimidating cuisine. As unusual the bread and Caucasian staff might be in a Chinese restaurant, there were many other markers in Ding Ho that might reinforce the perception of Chinese-ness – its origin stories, the Chinese owners, and the use of strategies to encourage interest in Chinese cuisine like so many other Chinese restaurants have done. What might seem to be pollutants are strategies that familiarize the category for those who are not familiar with it, but in doing so, it may also decrease the perception of authenticity for others. This suggests that in Chinese restaurants, there are two elements at work in tension with each other or at odds – authenticity and the strategies for familiarity (or pollutants) for the unfamiliarized. For the unfamiliarized, authenticity is located in unfamiliarity, as implied by online conversations about the separate Chinese language restaurant menus. The pollutants negotiate authenticity by neutralizing some of the unfamiliarity or at least decrease its distance.
The “secret Chinese menu,” the separate Chinese language menu offered in some Chinese restaurants, is another area in which the authenticity of a Chinese restaurant might located. Using a discussion thread on the food website Chowhound.com that discussed the irritation in which some diners had with being denied access to the Chinese menu, I explore the orientalist discourses that are associated with the perceived authenticity of the Chinese menu. It is interesting to note that the diners desire whatever is on the Chinese menu without really knowing what is on it. It raises the question of whether this desire for authenticity, which resides in the unknown and inaccessible, is more about establishing authority and access over the Chinese restaurant rather a desire for authenticity in Chinese cuisine. Ding Ho’s separate Chinese menu shows us that the separate Chinese menu is not about denying access, but another strategy to appeal to different types of customers.

I looked closely at one restaurant to better understand markers of authenticity; I then look closely at one dish to explore how conceptions of authenticity may simply be about claiming rather than having defined origins. Wor Sue Gai is a chicken dish purportedly created in Columbus, Ohio. I had seen this dish on menus and it did not stand out to me in any particular way. I had just assumed that it was one of the many Cantonese dishes transliterated into English. But I began hearing people say that it was a local dish, which I was not particularly inclined to believe as I thought I had seen the name in some of my vintage restaurant menus located in other cities. It turned out that Wor Sue Gai did not appear in any them. I set out to learn more about this dish, wondering if it would carry some of associations of inauthenticity that dishes like chop
suey or General Tso’s Chicken have had. Steve Yee, the owner of Ding Ho, claimed that it was created either at Ding Ho or Wing’s, another long standing Chinese restaurant in Columbus. There was little documentation that I could find, but based on what I could find about Wor Sue Gai online, the dish seemed to be regional to Ohio (Columbus, more specifically) and Detroit, Michigan. The Chowhound.com conversations about Wor Sue Gai made little mention of whether it was authentic or not, surprisingly enough. It was simply accepted as a Chinese dish and a local one at that. It may be that Wor Sue Gai is not as well known as General Tso’s Chicken or chop suey that it did not warrant the same amount of scrutiny. But no matter what its origins, whether it was invented in Columbus, Detroit, or elsewhere, Wor Sue Gai’s identity was still perceived as Chinese and as locally invented. Its claim to Chinese-ness is not so much about origins but about perception of authenticity and claiming its identity as Chinese, as its claim to be local, and as authentic.

Examining vintage Chinese menus is a useful way to understand how earlier Chinese restaurants operated and to see how they changed as a way to understand the multiple ways authenticity is negotiated. Although the focus of my dissertation is not about the evolution of Chinese restaurants, it is important to note that Chinese restaurants have changed and adapted to the times and their menus will reflect those changes. While chop suey and hamburgers on a Chinese restaurant menu today may signal inauthenticity, it was quite standard in older Chinese restaurants. In fact, most early Chinese restaurants offered a Chinese section and an American section on its menu. Concepts of an authentic Chinese restaurant are very much connected to the era in which it is expressed. The
Chinese restaurant menu demonstrates how restaurants negotiated that constantly changing position. I make note of the types of dishes offered, the transliterations that indicated the regional background of the restaurant owners, the visual illustrations that may demonstrate class and exoticism. The Chinese restaurant menus decoded are records of its relationship to its social environment. Authenticity does not necessarily imply distance from the immediate context as the menus show. In fact, the opposite is true. It's always in relationship to the social environment.

This dissertation is about the intermingling of authenticity and Chinese restaurants. Individually and together, the topics of authenticity and Chinese restaurants seem to be filled with minefields and convoluted turns with variations and multiple layers. This dissertation represents only part of what I hope to be a larger body of work in academia about Chinese restaurants and authenticity. I started off my research with a few preconceived ideas (as we all must in the beginning stages of our research), that authenticity was a valid term that carried weight and legitimacy for groups. I chafed at the scholarship which seemed to diminish claims of authenticity for it seemed to diminish the importance and meaning that claims of authenticity might hold for individuals or groups. I believed that there was such a thing as authenticity, however complicated, contradictory, or nebulous conceptions of authenticity may be, because people believed that it existed. I believed that there was also such a thing as an authentic Chinese restaurant and an inauthentic Chinese restaurant because I made distinctions between the two, enjoying what I considered to be authentic Chinese food and avoiding what I considered to be inauthentic Chinese food. However, in learning more about the one
restaurant Ding Ho and the one dish Wor Sue Gai, it is apparent that what constitutes Chinese authenticity is broader than my personal conceptions of it. Like the diners who were uncomfortable with sliced bread at a Chinese restaurant, I initially would have agreed that Ding Ho was not really a real Chinese restaurant that served authentic food because the bread indicated to me that the restaurant accommodated American tastes and customs. Likewise, Wor Sue Gai was not really an authentic Chinese dish for its similarities to fried chicken and gravy, dishes that I would not consider to be Chinese or related to Chinese cuisine. But authenticity is often about perspective and interpretation. The perception of authenticity is often what makes any cultural expression authentic and thus authenticity can come in a variety of forms. Ding Ho’s bread does not necessarily cancel out its Chinese background. Wor Sue Gai’s inception in the United States does not cancel out its status as a Chinese dish in a Chinese restaurant. The fact remains that Ding Ho is still a Chinese restaurant because it identifies as a Chinese restaurant and Wor Sue Gai is still a Chinese dish (albeit in a form that may challenged preconceived categories of Chinese-ness) because it is considered to be Chinese. While Ding Ho may not be Chinese to some people, it certainly is Chinese to others.

What constitutes authenticity in any cultural expression is subjective, interpretative, and personal. It is also relational because the investments and consequences of designating authenticity are different for each cultural expression. At a conference after I had presented about authenticity and Chinese restaurants, someone came up to me and said, “That’s fine, chop suey can be authentic Chinese. I have no problem with that,” with the blasé attitude of someone who is not particularly interested
in the topic. But authenticity in Chinese restaurants is not just about chop suey – it’s about how and why one ascribes authenticity to one form of a cultural expression and not another. Of course, the authenticity of Chinese food was low stakes for him, but perhaps in another area he was more invested in, thinking about the boundaries of authenticity would be much more troubling and passionate. I think of one friend, a lover of country music, who emphatically decried some country songs as most definitely not real country music. His explanation of what constituted real country music was rather vague, but since I am not particularly interested nor knowledgeable about country music, I could not agree or disagree with him. But what I did notice is that for him, he had strong ideas about what could count as country music, however undefined those ideas were. They were also interpretative, since someone obviously believed those inauthentic tunes to be country music, even if he did not, and it matters to him whether these songs could be considered country music because the subject held value and interest for him. Another example of the importance of authenticity for specific cultural expressions is kim chee, Korean pickled vegetables. A Korean friend of mine saw a cooking show that demonstrated how to make kim chee, but apparently incorrectly, in her eyes. She was so upset by what she felt was an inauthentic portrayal of kim chee that she wanted to write a letter to the producers of the show to tell them how to make real kim chee. Her opinion on the authenticity of that particular preparation of kim chee was most likely based on her experience as a Korean who regularly consumed kim chee and understood its place in Korean culture. It is the particular cultural expression that people are interested in or have a stake in that is when authenticity matters to them.
In my dissertation, I argue that there are multiple authenticities in any cultural expression, that claiming authenticity is a valid act, that its authenticity can be based on claiming, and that claims of authenticity are contextual and relational. One could apply this argument to country music and kim chee as there are multiple interpretations and versions and that each interpretation is subjective and interpretative. However, I also understand that the multiplicity exists on a macro level but on an individual level, we still maintain boundaries for our personal understanding of authenticity. While I understand that authenticity in Chinese restaurants comes in a variety of forms, a part of me still has an idea of what authentic Chinese food means for me on a personal level. I had asked Steve Yee, the owner of Ding Ho, if it mattered for his customers whether Ding Ho’s food was authentic Chinese cuisine or not. He seemed to bristle a bit at the question and said that it would be hard to argue with customers who have been all around the world (and presumably eaten at Chinese restaurants globally) only to return to Ding Ho and state that Ding Ho had the best Chinese food. My question was inartfully worded, but the implication that Ding Ho’s menu might not be authentically Chinese seemed to bother him. At the same time, we had amiably discussed authentic Chinese food as the separate Chinese menu, as what the kitchen staff prepared for themselves for the restaurant staff meal, as bitter melon and other ingredients. He even had the staff prepare special authentic Chinese dishes for me – items that were not specifically on the Chinese menu but ordered on the basis of what was available in the kitchen. The dishes the staff cooked for me – stir fried Chinese broccoli and slices of stir fried fish meat with ginger and garlic - did seem authentically Chinese to me, but I understand that my conception of
authenticity is born out my experiences with mom’s home cooking and the weekly
Sunday dinners my family had at Chinese restaurants in Washington, DC’s Chinatown
during the 1970s. My conception of authentic Chinese food is also influenced by my
Cantonese background. The tastes of the dishes were familiar to me and followed what I
knew to be Chinese food based on my experience and exposure. Another person whose
background hails from a different region of China or from a different country might have
a different perspective of what constitutes authentic Chinese food. It is how the Ding Ho
diners can sample the offerings from Chinese restaurants from different parts of the
United States and the world only to return to Ding Ho and claim that it has the best
Chinese food. Their conception of Chinese food was likely shaped by Ding Ho’s menu
and thus what stands for authentic Chinese food for them is what is offered by Ding Ho.
It is our individual experiences that shape our conceptions of authenticity and as our
experiences are varied and multiple, so are the various forms of authenticity in any
specific cultural expression. Authenticity may not be an issue for all cultural expressions
for everybody, but for subjects that are we are invested in and mean something to us,
authenticity is real and legitimate.
Bibliography


