

TO SERVE THE "OTHER": CHINESE-AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE RESTAURANT BUSINESS

Netta Davis Boston University

For the Chinese, perhaps more than for any other group, food is a central feature of ethnicity, a basic statement about what one is" (E.N. Anderson, *The Food of China*)

We don't serve chop suey. We don't serve egg foo yung, that sort of food, at all. To us, that's not very Chinese. These are foods for American people . . . And I think it's not fine food, it's not real gourmet. It's not food that you have a literature behind . . . It's just food made up because they like it . . . Some people still think they are Chinese food.¹

Most urban Americans older than thirty can recall the recent metamorphosis of the Chinese restaurant business in this country; the pseudo-Cantonese *chop sueys* of their youth gave way to Chinese food that was somehow more . . . foreign. Many of the new dishes were spicy, made with exotic ingredients and altogether unlike the bland bean sprout-and-*chow mein noodle* dishes to which they had become accustomed. Changes in ingredients, preparation, configuration and combination have material and metaphoric import as modified Mandarin and Szechuan fare has become the standard Chinese food for most urban Americans.²

This evolution represents more than a regional shift in Chinese emigration to the United States, although it clearly owes much to this demographic change. In fact, while these culinary styles differ considerably, they represent similarly altered foodways, a representation of Chinese and Chinese-American culture which is both "unauthentic" fabrication and the product of an "authentic" cultural adaptation. The accommodation of Chinese cuisine to the American market and palate are the result of a

Netta Davis, Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), Cambridge, MA 08138 USA (netta_davis@harvard.edu). She is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of American Studies at Boston University.

¹Interview with May.

²Chinese restaurants in small towns and rural areas are more likely to be of the homogenized, "Cantamerican" variety.

Journal for the Study of Food and Society, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 2002, Pp. 70-81

©2002 by the Journal for the Study of Food and Society

process of negotiation and transformation carried out by Chinese-American immigrant restaurateurs whose business entails offering a product acceptable to the primarily non-Chinese public. This product is a symbolically loaded one, carrying with it multifaceted connotations of ethnicity, “otherness”, authenticity, and self-representation or obfuscation.

This paper explores the experience of Chinese-American immigrants in the restaurant business, specifically their commercially and culturally refashioned foodways. The evolution of the Chinese restaurant industry in the United States has been shaped by the shifting expectations and requirements Americans have for Chinese food (and most ethnic cuisine) as much as by the evolving Chinese-American community itself. At issue here are certain central questions: What do these immigrants think of the alterations and accommodations of their foodways, and how do they accommodate the accommodation?

The primary image of American immigrant adaptation is a culinary one. The Melting Pot image is challenged and yet the alternative appellations (i.e. tossed salad or stew) are often food-related, too. What the “other” eats can be profoundly impressive and ethnic slurs have often evoked this; epithets such as Frog, Limey, Kraut, Pepper-gut and Bean-eater characterize this phenomenon.

Taunts at early Chinese immigrants often included the accusation that they ate rats.³ This myth was used to denigrate Chinese immigrants and was wielded (often by Chinese entrepreneurs) to entice tourists into what was characterized as the dangerous, impure world of Chinatown. Susan Kalcik identifies this as one of two processes involving food and groups. First, the anti-intruder formula of “strange people equals strange food” and a second process which involves offering the new group’s food in safe settings, such as restaurants, where the formula is “not-so-strange food equals not-so-strange people,” or perhaps, “strange people but they sure can cook.”⁴

In recent decades there has been a trend toward viewing ethnic cuisines as better than native foods, as healthier, more politically correct or somehow more authentic.⁵ Tofu, mung beans and seaweed are

common, ordinary fare in Asia. In the United States they are often invested with nutritional, ideological, ecological and spiritual characteristics which are sometimes in keeping with the dietary philosophy of their countries of origin but are often beyond anything conceived of by ethnic cooks. The interplay of vilification and deification resulting from these opposing images of impurity and sanctity informs much of the Chinese restaurateur’s experience in America.

“People make a joke of Chinese people . . . I hear [it] sometimes when I’m passing through . . . the dining room . . . It’s okay. We are a minority. We are living in America. You know, one of the best ways about Chinese people is they don’t mind to be [a] joke. Because they understand they [are] living in another people’s country.”⁶

The Chinese immigration experience is, in some ways, unique. The Exclusion Acts are indicative of attempts to restrict this specific community’s immigration. Nineteenth century Chinese immigration drew almost exclusively from a few Cantonese provinces.⁷ Early Chinese immigrants were employed primarily as manual laborers although, as communities grew, a strong representation in the services soon followed. In 1938, the Oriental Division of the U.S. Employment Service in San Francisco reported 90% of placements were in the services, chiefly in the culinary trades.⁸ This trend has continued to affect the employment pattern of a large portion of the Chinese immigrant population.

With the arrival of the San Yi Man, or new immigrants from China, a large Mandarin population was introduced into the Chinese-American community. San Yi Man were generally better educated and more urban. Many came in their second phase of immigration, having moved to Taiwan or Hong Kong following the establishment of the People’s Republic

³Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 241.

⁴Susan Kalcik, “Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity” in *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 37.

⁵Ethnic food is certainly more *prevalent* than it was. One favorite way to invoke American multi-culturalism is to catalogue the proliferation of diverse restaurants available on a formerly white-bread street. According to Time Magazine, (Special Issue on Immigration, Fall 1993,) 18% of the population eats Chinese food at least once a week, topped only by Italian (39%) and Mexican (21%).

⁶Interview with Philip.

⁷Roger Daniels, *Coming to America*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), p. 241.

⁸Takaki, p. 267.

of China.⁹ This is the case with all three respondents in this project.

The existence of separate neighborhoods is another factor that has set this community apart. Chinatowns are the most prevalent, durable examples of ethnic "ghettos" in American history, and Chinese food has played an important part in the development of these enclaves. Restaurants were a crucial tourist draw to Chinatown. Chinese food was seen as exotic, mysterious, perhaps dreadful, in short, a metaphor for Chinatown and Chinese people themselves. This image was utilized by some in the Chinese community as a deliberate performance aspect of China-ness.¹⁰ The original regional cooking style was Cantonese, reflecting the origins of the vast majority of the immigrants.

The purpose for most Chinese restaurants was to provide good, cheap meals for immigrant bachelors and occasionally lavish banquets for wealthy families.¹¹ As the touristic aspect of their clientele expanded, the Chinese restaurateur had to keep pace with the requirements of the non-Chinese customer. Many Chinese restaurants became what Imogene Lim has referred to as "cultural outposts"¹², providing a first, relatively safe exposure to Chinese culture through its (altered) cuisine and (stylized) material surroundings. As the Chinese community spread beyond the borders of Chinatowns, this became an even safer phenomenon. Suburban restaurants were located in the customers' own neighborhoods and focused more than ever on the non-Chinese diner.

By 1970, Craig Claiborne would note that Chinese restaurants had been "multiplying like loaves, fishes, and bean sprouts."¹³ The popularity of Chinese food did not exactly coincide with the waves of Chinese immigration. Harvey Levenstein speculates that "the adoption of new food tastes is probably facilitated by an absence of low-status people from whose homelands they originate . . . The fact that most Chinese were concentrated on the coasts likely helped,

rather than hindered, the steady march of chop suey and chow mein through Middle America."¹⁴

In 1990, it was estimated that the Chinese population in America was over 1.6 million.¹⁵ Particularly in the New Immigrant wave, many immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia are ethnic Chinese and identify themselves as Chinese upon arrival in the United States.¹⁶ Between 1965 and 1984, the American Chinese community underwent an extraordinary change, transforming from 61% American-born to 63% foreign-born.¹⁷ This population has bifurcated into a "downtown" community centered in Chinatowns and other urban areas and an "uptown" community of better-educated and better-employed immigrants¹⁸ more in keeping with the "model minority" picture painted of Asians in America.

" . . . he had heard so much about the U.S. Such opportunity. You know how a lot of immigrants, they came this way. My father . . . he followed like those people . . . He found a job very quickly. You know how those days if you are [an] illegal immigrant, illegal alien, I wouldn't say immigrant . . . you have to hide. You even have to work night shifts. It was such a pity that you don't even see daylight. He didn't have money. He told me a story about how he shared pants with three people."¹⁹

In preparing this study, interviews were conducted with three Chinese-American immigrants who work in the restaurant industry. May²⁰ is the daughter of a renowned Boston-area chef and restaurateur. Her father fit into the early pattern of Chinese husbands arriving without their wives and families. He also fit into the pattern of going to work in a restaurant as part of the "Chinese ethnic economy."²¹ May immigrated from Taiwan in 1970 at the age of twelve, with her mother and four sisters. (The family had originated in Shanghai but fled to Taiwan after the

⁹Ibid, p. 422.

¹⁰Ibid, p. 251.

¹¹Ibid, p. 253.

¹²Imogene Lim and John Eng-Wong, "Chow mein sandwiches: Chinese-American entrepreneurship in Rhode Island"; paper presented at the Conference on Chinese Americans: Origins and Destinations, Los Angeles, CA. 8/28-30/93.

¹³Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 215.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 216.

¹⁵U.S. 1990 Census.

¹⁶Daniels, p. 353.

¹⁷Takaki, pg. 421.

¹⁸Ibid, p. 425.

¹⁹Interview with May.

²⁰The names have been changed for reasons of privacy.

²¹Takaki, p. 240.

Chinese revolution.) After many years of separation, they joined her father in New York City, where he had worked his way up in the restaurant business from dishwasher to busboy, from cook to chef.

May's husband Robert immigrated from Hong Kong as part of the wave of students who arrived in the 1970's. His brother Philip, 34, arrived as a student in 1979. Robert and Philip's family originated in Nanking before emigrating to Hong Kong. May and Robert work primarily on the business end of the restaurant. Philip manages the front-of-house aspects of this busy urban restaurant, which serves 300 customers daily. All three occasionally cross over into other areas of responsibility, as is common in a family-owned business. May, Robert and Philip have much to say about how Americans eat Chinese food, although their reactions are often quite different. May attended a professional cooking school and has a broad knowledge of the specific culinary processes involved in the preparation of both Chinese and non-Chinese foods. Although she is knowledgeable and vocal about the cultural importance of Chinese foodways, her commentary on modifications tends to focus on the culinary suitability and the palatability of the alteration.

Philip, both in his professional contact with customers and as an avid, catholic consumer of various cuisines, has developed his own philosophy of culinary adaptation which reflects his desire for less accommodation in Chinese restaurant dishes.

Robert has pragmatic insight into the accommodation process from a business point of view. He rejects the notion that his more liberal outlook on the issue is because he is, primarily, a businessman, instead revealing a *laissez-faire* philosophy that colors his feelings about food in general:

"It's not a business [thing]. I say if you like the Kung Pao Chicken [with] no peanuts but with cashew nuts, fine. If that's the way you like it, I have no objection about it. I mean, who knows? Maybe *cashew nuts really taste better in Kung Pao Chicken*."²²

Their observations and analyses of the preferences and dining behaviors of their clientele are central to this study, as are their personal experiences in the transformation of their culture's cuisine for the American Chinese restaurant customer.

The act of ingestion is an important template to use in studying group identity, ethnicity and the immigrant experience. Immigrant foodways and ethnic

foodways are not always identical phenomena, particularly in the commercial food industry. Ethnic foodways are those originally brought by immigrants or those borrowed from the home culture without direct immigrant intermediaries. Ethnic foods and food behaviors, which differ from the prevailing American foodways to varying degrees, have always been a feature of the American culinary landscape. Initially, this was almost entirely a home-cooked phenomenon but with the advent of the restaurant industry in the 18th century it became a consumer choice as well.

Ethnic foods may be marketed by those removed from the immigrant experience by several generations (and in some cases by those outside of the particular ethnic group entirely). The vending of ethnic foods by immigrants, on the other hand, carries additional weight. Foodways comprise an important part of the emigration luggage, those cultural possessions remembered in the home country context and transplanted to America.

The performance of immigrant foodways can define a group's boundaries, encourage cultural cohesion and represent a "symbolic assertion of self" against the dominant culture.²³ Anthropologist Mary Douglas has written, "by endowing food choice, preparation, and eating with such a symbolic load, cultures invest heavily in themselves whenever they engage in eating."²⁴ Shared foodways can bridge the gap between groups or dramatize the size of the gap. Pierre van den Berghe has written that "food not only reinforces ethnic ties; it also is the most rewarding and easiest bridge *across* ethnic lines."²⁵ What does it mean to ingest the food of the "other"? A great deal depends upon the circumstances of the dining. The position of the diner and the "other" in the societal hierarchy is important to consider. So, too, is the type of cultural transaction, which structures the ingestion experience.

In this study, the diner represents the dominant culture and the minority "others" sell a representation of their "otherness." This representation is a syncretic result of immigrant foodways encountering diverse American foodways, created, transformed and marketed for the American audience. Van den Berghe

²³Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 6.

²⁴Ibid, p. 28 .

²⁵Pierre van den Berghe, "Ethnic cuisine: culture in nature", in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 7, #3, 7/3/84, p. 393.

²²Interview with Robert.

continues: "Ethnic cuisines flourish not only within the confines of the urban ethnic community; it [sic] jumps across ethnic boundaries and gets marketed as a form of internal tourism."²⁶

The commercial dimension and its use in the scholarly interpretation of ethnic foodways have been a subject of some debate. Linda Brown and Kay Mussell, in their book *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States*, refer to restaurants as "attenuated situations, tinged with commercialism" and so not ideal places to learn about ethnic foodways:

"... restaurants convey relatively static concepts of a subculture and reinforce stereotypical assumptions that are further diluted by the imperatives of the marketplace. As specialty restaurants proliferate in American communities, changes inevitably occur in the foods themselves and, more significantly, in the meanings of the foods and their surrounding rituals for the subcultural groups that produce and consume them."²⁷

But since most Americans eat another group's ethnic food in a restaurant setting, and since it is a site of voluntary, purposeful ingestion of the "others" foodways, it is valuable to explore this specific interaction site. In the restaurant model, the customers may bring with them a sense of adventure or, conversely, the expectation that as the immigrant must assimilate, so should there be a similar accommodation from the food they offer to the native diner. The hybridized result may be less "authentic," it may never be ingested by the immigrants themselves, but the ubiquitous fact of commercially altered foodways is too important to be ignored.

These alterations are an expression of ethnic identity to those in the host community and represent the marketing of ethnic material. Therefore the acts of dining and vending in an ethnic restaurant fill both native and immigrant needs. They can be, at once, economic acts and self-identifying, boundary-confirming acts. There are aspects of inclusion and exclusion built into the experience. The dominant culture shares the (modified) foodways for a time but the "other" need not eat the modified food with them nor share their "real" food. Some see this experience as an opportunity for a business transaction, others as a culinary decision, others as contested culture.

'Philip' always [has a] big fight [with] me . . . He likes to give out lectures to the customer . . . Like General Gau's Chicken. People ask us to use white meat instead of dark meat. I would say 'Okay, you want white meat, I give you white meat.' But Philip will later fight with me. 'You should tell them white meat for General Gau's Chicken won't come out as good as the dark meat.' Philip's philosophy is 'Why [do] you let people come here and change our recipe? "I want this, I want this, I want this."²⁸

"... this is a free country. You can do anything to your food . . . But I still think a perfectly fine fried rice, you don't want to spoil by putting duck sauce into it . . . It is delicious, but that's wrong . . ."²⁹

"I prefer [that] American people try to learn . . . There's so many things I'd like to . . . educate . . . I hate to use 'educate' but I use 'educate' . . . People don't like that word . . . Customers [don't] like you to tell them what to do. They like to tell you what to do. But they don't understand . . . It's not a retail store. It's a kind of cooking, you know. It's [a] kind of ethics . . . You come to eat Chinese food, then you should respect the cook."³⁰

Robert tends to see the menu as a mutable commodity. He does not express much concern that modifications challenge his Chinese cultural heritage or identity. May's first reaction is disbelief that people enjoy these modifications. She then acknowledges that, while it might taste good to them, it just is not correct. While Philip accepts significant modifications to Chinese dishes, he has a great deal of respect for the tradition of Chinese cuisine and wants the higher forms, the respected, authentic forms, to predominate.

"The main issue, I say, is if you want to go to eat, if you're interested in eating that country's food, culture, you know . . . then you should understand you have to [be] prepared it might . . . not fit to your culture. Of course [we're] not serving something that is weird . . . like

²⁶Ibid, p. 393

²⁷Brown and Mussell, p. 4.

²⁸Interview with Robert.

²⁹Interview with May.

³⁰Interview with Philip.

snake . . . ”³¹

The culinary changes in restaurant ethnic food which Brown and Mussell referred to are undeniable. Chinese food is spiced differently for an American audience and the structure, balance and ingredients are usually altered significantly. Harvey Levenstein has written about this alteration:

“While the people of the dominant culture may adopt some of the foods of the subordinate culture . . . they do so by divorcing them from those aspects of the culture they regard as inferior . . . To a certain degree, this is a natural human reaction. As omnivores, we are understandably cautious about the dangers of new foods and have learned to incorporate them into established cuisine by preparing them with familiar tastes . . . and methods.”³²

In restaurants where Chinese diners are expected, a separate Chinese-language menu is often a feature, so that unacceptable foods are not blatantly advertised to Americans.³³ Mary Douglas invokes the “purity rule” when describing this concept of unacceptable foods, foods which one culture would simply not define as food.³⁴ For most native Americans, snake or fish lips would come under this heading. For most Chinese immigrants, dairy products are anathema initially; a predisposition to lactose intolerance may be a cause or an effect of this proscription. Offering an item which the recipient does not regard as food is a risky business which Chinese restaurateurs must negotiate regularly. In the larger societal context, a culinary transaction which is unacceptable to the recipient can result in “. . . a renewed sense of cultural separateness on both sides.”³⁵ For a vendor, it can result in a loss of business.

“I believe American people would like to see the meat, not seeing the whole, visually, the whole animal . . . They want to see filets of fish, when it’s already done . . . But Chinese people want to see the whole fish. They want to visualize it . . . And everything’s there, they like to eat every part, especially the head.”³⁶

³¹Interview with Philip.

³²Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, p. 216.

³³Brown and Mussell, p. 4.

³⁴Ibid, p. 28.

³⁵Ibid, p. 7.

Some changes in ethnic and immigrant foodways have been affected by the broader transformation of the American diet as well as specific cultural accommodation. Foods that were once consumed seasonally or regionally are now ubiquitous. Douglas has written that researchers must look at the entire dietary system to discern ethnic foodways, otherwise immigrant foodways seen in the context of the new country’s resources look too similar.³⁷ Health issues have entered the American dietary consciousness which were not a feature several decades ago. Some of these nutritional concepts were actually adopted from ethnic cuisines such as Chinese.

The recognition that immigrant foodways might have something to teach the American consumer is a post-World War I phenomenon. At the turn of the century, the emphasis in the settlement houses was to try to make immigrants eat like Americans did.³⁸ Levenstein found that after the war concern with food conservation and health led the prescriptive literature to extol the very foodways it had condemned.³⁹ This trend changed gradually over the next five decades until, in the 1960’s, ethnic cuisine was being held up as a superior form.

Cultural historian Warren Belasco refers to this “neoethnic revival” as a part of the larger “countercuisine.”⁴⁰ Ethnic food was perceived as the inexpensive choice as well as the healthy and hip choice. Politically and spiritually hip ethnic foodways were the most often acquired and emulated. Indian food evoked Hinduism and Gandhi, Middle Eastern food at first evoked communal kibbutzim and later forms evoked Palestinian solidarity, Chinese and other Asian foods evoked Buddhism and Mao. Peasant foods were borrowed from most international culinary traditions. Competing images of light, holy pan-Asian dishes and hearty, filling, proletarian fare are still choices presented for American consumption, today in the guise of 90’s pan-ethnic cuisine.

The acquisition of the ethnic cuisine of other groups, in addition to the fact that many Americans

³⁶Interview with May.

³⁷Mary Douglas, ed., *Food in the Social Order*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), p. 28.

³⁸Brown and Mussell, p. 43.

³⁹Harvey Levenstein, “American Response to Italian Food” in *Food and Foodways*, Vol. 1, (Great Britain: Harwood Academic Publ., 1985), pp. 12 - 13.

⁴⁰Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), p. 62.

were also rediscovering and exploring their own ethnic food traditions, resulted in the firm presence of ethnic foods on restaurant menus and in the pursuit of the ingestion of authenticity.⁴¹ Belasco sees this gastronomic "paratourism" as a reaction against the modern, "more therapeutic than ethnographic: a rather indirect exercise in self-definition. As in most tourism, by seeking the Other, one found the Self."⁴²

Dining on ethnic food was also rather indirectly authentic. In the chain of authenticity from the highest degree in the ethnic cook's own country, to their own immigrant home, to the middle-range of accommodating restaurant fare, to the most variable sort in the non-ethnic cook's home kitchen and finally to the least authentic processed product, true ethnic dishes have often been elusive and hard to define. Van den Berghe, in addressing the particular predicament of the ethnic restaurant, has written that the transient tourist's search for exotic gratification in a commercial setting results in a kind of "staged authenticity" that adulterates that which the tourist seeks.⁴³

"... from a business viewpoint, we have to please the people here. If you want to be all Chinese, you're going to have only few customers. Some people who really have gone to China... know what Chinese culture is, to appreciate Chinese food. But if you want to please the crowd and have good business, you have to have Duck Sauce..."⁴⁴

"I have [a] special monthly menu. I put in what I call the Buddhist Delight. It's supposed to be all Chinese vegetables... like lotus seed and a couple of bean curd things... Actually, there's a couple more other ingredients I could put in but I didn't use them because I figure out that most American people wouldn't like it if I put [them] in there."⁴⁵

The adventurous spirit of the 60's and 70's, according to Belasco, did not go very deep in the

American diet. Mass-produced versions of ethnic dishes were more "comfortably familiar"⁴⁶ than strictly authentic. This left out raw flesh, extremely pungent or spicy flavors and odd-looking ingredients. Mass-market versions of ethnic foods reflected safe contents and "stereotyped flavoring"⁴⁷. Processed foods often acquired a Chinese flavor by the simple addition of soy sauce.

Levenstein agrees that most Americans during these decades dabbled in ethnic foods:

"They used them as 'sauces' for their still-familiar 'core' foods... or domesticated them with familiar markers such as ketchup or mustard. They toned down spicing that was too piquant for their tastes and served dishes in the American context and order, rather than in the foreign one."⁴⁸

This was by no means a new phenomenon. Margaret Mead's study of American foodways during World War II looked carefully at the fears people had towards strange foodways. Her concern was emergency feeding of the masses, but her prescription is depressingly familiar: "... the most practical way of avoiding giving offense to anyone in a mixed group is to cook single foods with a minimum of seasoning and serve all condiments separately."⁴⁹ This describes the creation of a cuisine with no flavor principles⁵⁰ or with removable or mutable flavor principles and captures the commercial result in today's processed-food market aptly.

Chinese culinary tradition may be a particularly useful choice in studying immigrant foodways. Professional Chinese chefs go through arduous training which can last decades. American cooking schools tend to teach classic Chinese cooking as an immutable set of dishes but the tradition of Chinese cuisine, as seen through folktales, would seem to be more dynamic, serendipitous or adaptable. Chinese culinary folktales include the story of the accidental or ingenious creation of shrimp boat dumplings, pot-

⁴¹I may well have coined this phrase myself, since I am unable to locate it in Belasco. However, I certainly derived it from his work and give him credit for its inspiration if not its actual construction.

⁴²Belasco, p. 229.

⁴³van den Berghe, p. 394

⁴⁴Interview with May.

⁴⁵Interview with Robert.

⁴⁶Belasco, p. 232.

⁴⁷Ibid, p. 234.

⁴⁸Levenstein, *The Paradox of Plenty*, p. 220.

⁴⁹Kalcik, in Brown and Mussell, p. 53.

⁵⁰"Flavor principle" is a phrase coined by Elizabeth Rozin in her book *Ethnic Cuisine*, (Lexington: The Stephen Greene Press, 1983) to describe the distinct and unique combinations of flavors which define an ethnic or regional cuisine.

stickers and steamed pork buns by inebriated or distracted chefs, who are then rewarded by their employers for their innovation.⁵¹ Food is inextricably entwined in almost every aspect of Chinese life: “Chinese use food to mark ethnicity, culture change, calendric and family events, and social transactions.”⁵² The argument can be made that most cuisines mark a myriad of phenomena and that Chinese food is not unique in its cultural weight. However, unlike in most Western cultures, the various cuisines of China have retained a strong emphasis on the non-material meanings of food as explicit, widely acknowledged and discussed. Food preparation and ingestion are central to most social, religious and medicinal activities. Chinese people do not eat simply for nourishment of the body or for enjoyment. They have an intricate network of meanings, prescriptions and proscriptions which are explicitly wielded in the daily construction of foodways.

“Food is a medicine for us. Certain food represent something . . . Spinach is for blood, carrot is for eyes, everyone knows that, even American people do.”

“. . . there’s a lot of food that’s related to your health, like food for medicine . . . You know persimmon? That . . . you cannot eat with crab . . . Crab is a very cold food . . . It’s a property, hot or cold. Chinese food is divided into two things; it’s cold or hot.”⁵³

The varied religious traditions of China can illuminate the Chinese extra-material investment in food. Whether Taoist, Buddhist or Confucianist, the human body is seen as a microcosm of the universe. The influence of Confucianism on Chinese food is especially clear in the adherence to values of simplicity, frugality, purity and artistic beauty. Sympathetic magic qualities are also invested in various foods. Wine is taken to build up the blood, walnuts represent the brain, eating an animal’s body part strengthens that corresponding part in the human diner, etc.

Balancing concepts of yin and yang are reflected in the compositions of most dishes and menus. If

one is inclined too far to the yin side, as women tend to be, it is suggested that one eat jeh, or hot, foods. If one is too yang, one eats liang, or cool, foods. The ways in which foods are prepared also carry these properties. Frying is a very hot technique, boiling is very cold. Another balancing concept is the fan/ts’ai proportion. Fan, which translates to mean “rice” or “food”, refers to the starch staple which forms the center of the Chinese meal. Ts’ai is defined as that which facilitates in the digestion of fan⁵⁴ and refers to the meat or vegetables with sauce which are an accompaniment. Chinese diners (and many Chinese-Americans) share one bowl of ts’ai and have individual bowls of fan unless they are at a banquet. Americans eat Chinese food in reverse; one shared bowl of fan and individual portions of ts’ai.

“. . . the portions [are] totally reversed. American people, they eat meat as the main course, and the side orders are potatoes or the rice . . . The rice is just [an] accompaniment . . . well, that was the reverse. Our ‘entree’ is so the rice can go down.”⁵⁵

Chinese cuisine is not monolithic. Regional variations evolved over the centuries and there is no single representative cuisine. There are regional shifts in the jeh/liang continuum and foods are classified differently by region, or even city. The modifications of Chinese dishes in American Chinese restaurants reflect, and sometimes confront, these regional distinctions.

“We don’t get used to Cantonese food. We think they’re too bland because they’re all white-looking. Shanghai people like to use a lot of brown sauce.”⁵⁶

“I came from Hong Kong. Most Hong Kong dishes, they [are] something very light . . . It’s not like Mandarin and Szechuan-style, like what we serve here . . . Cantonese cooking is very light . . .”⁵⁷

Dishes on the Chinese restaurant menu in America

⁵¹Rhoda Yee, *Dim Sum*, (San Francisco: Taylor and Ng, 1977), p. 14-36.

⁵²E.N. Anderson, *The Food of China*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 244.

⁵³Interview with May.

⁵⁴Anderson, p. 82.

⁵⁵Interview with May.

⁵⁶Interview with May.

⁵⁷Interview with Robert.

already represent numerous accommodations to the American palate. In addition, there have been inventions to appeal to the customer; duck sauce, spare ribs and fortune cookies are only a few. But beyond these provisions for the non-Chinese diner, the restaurateurs find themselves responding to an array of special requests, what this study's respondents call "modifications." When American customers request sauce or preparation modifications to their menu selection, it may well have a cultural meaning for the Chinese provider. The customer may be crossing a regional boundary or combining foods which the Chinese diner would characterize as unhealthy or unpalatable.

"Every dish can be modified. Like Chicken with Broccoli, it's a white sauce chicken. Some people prefer Garlic Sauce, but then some people even make it into the extreme, Black Bean Sauce, which I couldn't even think how . . . they invent things for us . . . How can you see the black bean cling to the broccoli?"⁵⁸

Menu flexibility itself is not just an accommodation for Americans. It is actually a common practice, in Canton at least, to list scores of dishes with the understanding that diners can ask for anything within reason.⁵⁹ Therefore, some aspects of modification can be seen as a Chinese business practice that is not entirely rooted in cross-ethnic accommodation.

These modifications are perceived somewhat differently by May, Robert and Philip. Although they exhibit varying degrees of tolerance for this practice, they all clearly have a limit.

"There are some customers, they know a little bit of Chinese food and they want to make a thing, but they don't want to make [it] in their kitchen, so they tell us what to make. Sometimes it just goes too far . . . In [the] computer, we have all the modifications already. You can have any sauce you want . . . But sometimes it just goes too far."⁶⁰

"I don't mind at all . . . Actually . . . I encourage

our waitperson to recommend [to] people . . . We say we can put anything . . . Chicken with Broccoli with Garlic Sauce? Fine. Hoisin Sauce? Fine. The only thing . . . driving me crazy is . . . for example, this lady called . . . She ordered Moo Shu and it takes about five minutes to understand the way she likes [it] . . . like you [want] to say 'Oh, come on, just come in and you go to kitchen and pick all the things you like and then teach my cook to cook.'"⁶¹

"I personally encourage people to try some other sauces. Chicken with Broccoli is a white sauce. Not everyone likes white sauce."⁶²

Alterations in the composition of the dishes and configuration of the meal are not the only areas of accommodation. The manner in which the meal is eaten by customers has also been transformed from Chinese to Chinese-esque/American.

"American food, you have to have a platter of your own. You're independent from the other people. With Chinese food, [we] share everything. At home, we don't even have a little dish just so you can get some to your dish so you have your own . . . we don't think 'This is yours, this is mine.' This is ours."⁶³

May might be correct when she expresses a concern that Americans think their communal eating unsanitary, but it might also be that the communal aspect of Chinese food is one reason why Americans seek it out. Americans tend to share dishes or eat off of a communal platter in Chinese restaurants more commonly than in other restaurants. This "family-style" is not only Chinese, it evokes the traditional American shared meal as well.

The most important event in the Chinese restaurant industry in America lately has been the release of a report by the Center for Science in the Public Interest that revealed the putative dangers of eating Chinese food.⁶⁴ The report, which was widely publicized in the media, caused a great stir in the Chinese restaurant community. The authors quote a

⁶¹Interview with Philip.

⁶²Interview with Robert.

⁶³Interview with May.

⁶⁴Jayne Hurley and Stephen Schmidt, "Chinese Food: A Wok on the Wild Side", in *Nutrition Action Newsletter*, (Washington D.C.: CSPI, Sept. 1993), pp. 10 - 13.

⁵⁸Interview with May.

⁵⁹Anderson, p. 210.

⁶⁰Interview with May.

study which found that “52% of all Americans say that Chinese food is ‘more healthful’ than their usual diet.”⁶⁵ It recommended that diners eat more rice and share entrees, (essentially counseling Americans to eat exactly the way traditional Chinese diners would.) It also suggested that diners stay away from certain dishes entirely, particularly sweet-and-sour and batter-dipped dishes.

The immediate result was a marked increase in the number of diners expressing health concerns and making special requests of the staff.

“Like the famous experience we had. A lady walk in . . . she said “No oil, no soy sauce, no sugar, no MSG. Nothing. But I also want it to be tasty.”⁶⁶

“. . . people starting to give us messages like ‘Please low salt, less salt.’ . . . Of course, it won’t come out exactly like before. I have . . . very difficult customers, they want it steamed, they want the sauce on the side and they don’t want the [salt] but they still expect [it] to be exactly what they have used to taste. Very difficult, you know?”⁶⁷

The report identifies certain dishes as being particularly unhealthy. It is clear from May’s distinctions that Chinese restaurant fare exists in an authenticity hierarchy. The inverse relationship between authentic dishes and dining habits and CSPI’s unhealthy dishes and habits, is not lost on these respondents.

“I can tell from the customer if they [know] Chinese food or not . . . Like [if] they eat General Gau’s Chicken, Crispy Beef with Tangerine Flavor, Lake Tung Ting Shrimp, I know that they know about Chinese food. But if they start ordering Sweet and Sour Chicken, things like more like those foods to please Americans, I know they haven’t got the hang of it.”⁶⁸

The general consensus is that the researchers’ conclusions were gravely flawed. Part of the misapprehension is due to their failure to note the lack of consistency between Chinese restaurants. Philip remarked that many Chinese restaurateurs will

maintain the inexpensive characteristic of Chinese food at the cost of quality and that, like all restaurants, ingredients vary from establishment to establishment. They are also faulted for not noting that it is the unauthentic way Americans eat Chinese food which is unhealthy. The recommendation to eat more rice and less entree is essentially Chinese. Philip, in particular, notes the contradiction that Chinese food, once touted as healthy, now modified for the American palate, is certified as unhealthy.

“Suddenly everybody come[s in and says] ‘What kind of food is not unhealthy?’ No salt, no sugar, no MSG, no oil, no fat. So many call every day . . . What can we do? Are we angry? Yes, we are angry. Is the kitchen angry? Of course, [the] kitchen is angry. It’s [a] kind of insult, you know, that Chinese food is unhealthy. I don’t think so. It could be . . . Because as I said before, it’s too different between one Chinese restaurant to the other restaurant . . . As I say, American memory [is] very short . . . [Now] nobody’s talking about it . . .”⁶⁹

If diners ordered traditional Chinese dishes and ate them in traditional Chinese configurations and combinations the result would be far from unhealthy:

“Contradiction, right? . . . Look at the Chinese people [on] average. They’re skinny and they’re healthy, less cancer . . . Think about detail, more detail about the tradition of what American people eat.”⁷⁰

There are many factors, which contribute to the difference between ethnic cuisine in the home country and immigrant cuisine. Ingredients change, lifestyle changes alter old cooking patterns and contact with new foodways influences immigrants to varying degrees. When the immigrant foodways are vended to a market outside that ethnic community, the cuisine takes on additional meanings and changes. In some ways, the commercial foodways marketed to those seeking authenticity and exotica are more static than home meals. May, Robert and Philip eat many of their meals at the restaurant, but their meals at home are at least partially Americanized. May and Robert have a young son who has influenced the contents of their

⁶⁵Ibid, p. 10.

⁶⁶Interview with Robert.

⁶⁷Interview with May.

⁶⁸Interview with May.

⁶⁹Interview with Philip.

⁷⁰Interview with Philip.

kitchen cupboards. The presence of children often has this effect on immigrant foodways.⁷¹ In other ways, commercial foodways are the most dynamic, constantly transforming to reflect the customer's desires and expectations. Chinese restaurant food has accommodated these market imperatives in a variety of ways. Dishes have been invented, altered, renamed and recombined. Some differences between restaurant and home fare owe more to the setting than to the audience:

"My father cook[s a] very commercial kind of cooking. Actually, at home my father doesn't cook because my mother won't allow him. With my father, [it's] always very quick."⁷²

It may be that the "One from column A and one from column B" stereotype has grown into an expectation on the part of American customers that they can modify or structure Chinese food to suit their preferences. Although special requests are on the increase in all American restaurants, Philip is convinced that Chinese restaurants get more than their fair share. Perhaps the American audience feels the need to modify "exotic" cuisines more than other less challenging foods.

May, Robert and Philip are all very aware of the modifications they have made to traditional Chinese foodways. Their reactions are, in general, pragmatically inclined. Some changes are to be expected and accepted. Chinese food can be characterized as both highly structured and codified and as fairly adaptable, as the folktales and their own testimony reveals. Their negative reactions to modification seem centered around the fact that the customers lack knowledge of Chinese cuisine. The necessity to Americanize Chinese foodways is not resisted vehemently. Paradoxically, May and Philip both say that they do not feel particularly American.

". . . I understand, you know, I know I won't be the same as American people. Not because [of] the look. I mean because [of] the status. Even born here, even my nephew [was] born here . . . I don't think even [though] he's American, he always says 'I'm American' . . . You still look Chinese, your last name [is] Chinese."⁷³

It may be that there is a relationship between these

two issues, that it is possible to be flexible with a vended cultural element if it is combined with a strong unassimilated ethnic identity.

The CSPI report came out before Chinese culinary practices and Chinese herbalism reached current new heights of popularity. Pan-Asian menus are increasingly prevalent. Several years ago, Legal Seafoods even combined the healthy reputation of Chinese food and Chinese herbalism into a special "Cuisineast" promotional campaign. This paradoxical representation of Chinese food as dangerous and as healthy continues to influence the Chinese restaurant customer and menu. The influence on the Chinese-American immigrant restaurateur continues as well. Their culinary adaptation to the desires of the dominant culture is a microcosm of the broader process of ethnic accommodation that they continue to negotiate decades after their arrival.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, E. N. 1988. *The Food of China*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Belasco, Warren. 1989. *Appetite For Change*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Brown, Linda Keller and Mussell, Kay. 1985. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Daniels, Roger. 1990. *Coming to America*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Douglas, Mary, editor. 1984. *Food in the Social Order*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Hurley, Jayne and Schmidt, Stephen. 1993. "Chinese Food: A Wok on the Wild Side," in *Nutrition Action Newsletter*. Washington D.C.: Center for Science in the Public Interest, September.
- Levenstein, Harvey. 1993. *The Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- "American Response to Italian Food" in *Food and Foodways*, Vol 1, Great Britain: Harwood Academic Published, 1985.
- Lim, Imogene and Eng-Wong, John. "Chow mein sandwiches: Chinese-American entrepreneurship in Rhode Island"; paper presented at the Conference on Chinese Americans: Origins and Destinations, Los Angeles, CA. 8/28-30/93.
- Lin, Hsiang Ju & Lin, Tsuifeng. *Chinese Gastronomy*, (New York: Perigee Books/G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969).
- Rozin, Elisabeth. 1983. *Ethnic Cuisine*. Lexington, MA: The

⁷¹Anderson, p. 258.

⁷²Interview with May.

⁷³Interview with Philip.

Stephen Greene Press.

Takaki, Ronald. 1989. *Strangers From a Different Shore*. New York: Penguin Books.

van den Berghe, Pierre. "Ethnic cuisine: culture in nature," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 7, #3, 7/3/84.

Yee, Rhoda. 1977. *Dim Sum*. San Francisco: Taylor and Ng.