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Chinese-American Foods: Geography, Culture and Tourism

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(Abstract)

Food is a major way that Chinese, and other ethnic groups, engage with their cultural heritage. Behavioral perspectives from tourism studies give insight into the range of food neophyllics (love of new foods) and food neophobics (fear of new foods), as well as the role of authenticity in food experiences. Three general types of Chinese food are identified in the US: Chinese American (restaurant) Food, Real Chinese (restaurant) Food, and American Born Chinese (home) Food. Traditional Chinese American restaurant food is suited to non-Chinese, dominant American taste palates, and is mostly safe for food neophobics in the US. Real Chinese restaurant food is more suited to the palates of first generation Chinese immigrants and non-Chinese food neophylics. American Born Chinese home foods consists of the family recipes that were brought from the regions in China where first generation ancestors came from, and may be the most authentic of all Chinese foods in the US.

Keywords: Ethnic food, Chinese food, American Born Chinese, Chinese immigrants, Chinese restaurants, Food neophobic, Food neophilic, Authenticity

"Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are."
(French gastronome, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, 1755-1826)

Chineseness

The Chinese people of the world comprise what Kotkin (1993) referred to as a one of the five "global tribes". Like those of Jewish ancestry and Asian Indian decent, the Chinese are geographically dispersed on every continent, have a strong sense of common racial origin in China, and are often connected to one another through business and other social networks. They are an essential and growing segment of the new global economy of the 21st century, which is characterized by borderless transnationalism and flexible citizenship (Ong, 1999). The Chinese tribe comprises four segments, each of which has significant internal variations. The first, and arguably most dominant, is the mainland People's Republic of China. Beyond the mainland, the Overseas Chinese diaspora can be divided into three domains (Lew & Wong 2002): (1) ethnic Han Chinese living outside of mainland China, but within the "greater China" region, which

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includes "compatriots" in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan; (2) ethnic Chinese living in Asian regions beyond greater China, mostly in Southeast Asia, Japan and Korea; and (3) ethnic Chinese living outside of East Asia and Southeast Asia, which is the smallest of the three groups. The majority of this last group are in North America, though they are also living and working in almost every country of the world. The 2011 census estimates for the US indicates 4.01 million ethnic Chinese in the country, which is the largest of the Asian ethnic groups in the country (EWC, 2015). This was an increase of 47% over the 2000 population, and made up about 1.2% of the total US population.

Chinese food plays a mixed and sometimes complicated role in the life and identity of diaspora Overseas Chinese Americans. It is, for example, one of the fundamental ways that Overseas Chinese engage with their "Chineseness" in forming and maintaining their personal identity (Tsai et al. 2000). In addition to Chinese food, Overseas Chinese engage with their ethnicity through speaking a Chinese language or dialect, being affiliated with Chinese social organizations, participating in Chinese related activities (such as celebrating festivals), and being exposed to Chinese culture through various media. However, even for these other activities and institutions, Chinese food often plays a significant identifying role. The foods we eat, the way we cook them, what we call them, and how we eat them displays subtle nuances that have the ability to include and exclude through their similarities and differences in comparison to prescribed norms (Lu & Fine, 1995). Simply talking about food in the "right" way, can demonstrate the speaker's heritage fluency (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Hall-Lew & Starr, 2010; Shavzin, 2014).

Chinese food engagement (defined as eating food as a way of performing one's personal identity) tends to change over time, with an especially large difference in the transition from first to second generation Chinese. First generation immigrants (born, and at least partially raised, in the greater China region), were immersed in Chinese culture in their formative early years, and upon arriving in the US they had the option of selectively dropping some Chinese cultural traits and selectively adopting some American traits (Tsai, et al., 2000). Their Chineseness, therefore, is measured by the degree to which they keep or drop Chinese traits, some of which they may readopt in different social circumstances or at later stages in life. This generation of Overseas Chinese tend to maintain a very strong Chinese food identity after migrating to the US, usually preferring it over all other cuisines.

Second, and subsequent, generation American Born Chinese (ABCs), on the other hand, are much more selective and diverse in their engagement with Chinese foods. Being racially Chinese, they grew up in both Chinese and American culture at the same time. For most, Chinese culture is experienced in the family, the Chinese community (associating with other Chinese), and through Chinese food. American culture for them is experienced through school, work, non-Chinese friends, and in most public spaces. Their Chineseness is measured by the degree to which they engage with Chinese culture, including food. Some will engage more than others, and their engagement may change over time.

An example of the transition between first and second generation Chinese food habits is see in Nan and Brown's (2010) interviews with 20 first generation Chinese couples from China and Taiwan, but who had moved to the state of Pennsylvania. They found that the couples mostly ate American breakfasts, which were more convenient, but maintained Chinese meals for lunch and dinner. Their children, however, preferred "unhealthy" western foods when outside their home, and generally refused to eat vegetables even when at home. These generational food preferences resulted in considerable conflict between the parents and their children, though some of the differences may be more universal than specific to first and second generation Chinese American families. Epidemiological studies have also found that Chinese Americans have higher rates of several chronic diseases than their Asian counterparts, including diabetes and heart disease, which have been shown to be diet related, at least in part (Nan & Cason, 2004).

What may make the situation more significant for Chinese Americans is the context of traditional Chinese food culture, which places great importance on food (Quan & Wang 2004). For ethnic Chinese, meals, especially dinner, serve as a center point for family and peer group social interactions. In some ways, the event is more important than the particular food that is being served. Where the type of food becomes important for the Chinese, including Chinese Americans, is in the pursuit if high quality foods (Lu & Fine, 1995; Chang 1977; Newman 2004). Quan and Wang (2004) suggested that Chinese culture encourages the "broadening of culinary knowledge" in pursuit of authentic "peak experiences" through eating. On the other hand, empirical studies of Chinese tourists traveling overseas indicate that, while they are interested in exotic non-Chinese foods, they generally prefer these in a Chinese context (Chang et al. 2010). In other words, either purely Chinese food, or some form of Chinese-local fusion cuisine, is preferred over authentically pure local food, which may be less appealing to their palate and thus resulting in a degree of culture shock. This pattern exists for many other travelers, as well, especially mass tourists.

Diversity of Ethnic Culinary Experiences

Going out to eat at an ethnic restaurant in the US is what Zelinsky (1985: 51) referred to as "gastronomic tourism," because it gives the diner a glimpse of a culture that is different from the dominant American culture. Models of tourist behavior can also provide insight into how people approach ethnic food experiences, which can be as diverse as is the human palate. A major dichotomy is between "food neophobics" (afraid of new food experiences) and "food neophylics" (seeking out new food experiences) (Cohen & Avieli 2004). A second major dichotomy is related to food authenticity, with more locally authentic foods tending to be preferred by food neophylics. Lu and Fine (1995), in their study of Chinese restaurants in Athens, Georgia in the early 1990s, saw this as the difference between mass consumption oriented restaurants,

serving Chinese fast-food, and connoisseur oriented restaurants, serving more discriminating diners. Cohen (1979) extended these dichotomies to identify a range of ways that tourists encountered food when they travel:

(1) **Recreational/Mass Tourists** (passive hedonists) - self-indulgent, seek relaxation and enjoyment; highly food neophobic with no special interest in local food authenticity;
(2) **Sightseeing Tourists** (gazing on "others") – neophylic interest in local dishes and food habits; but neophobic in consuming local foods; might try local foods in a safe tourism setting, such as in an upscale hotel;
(3) **Experimental/Participatory/Adventure Tourists** (trying local life) – neophyllic interest in local food and mildly neophylic willingness to try local foods in local establishments; but still prefer the familiar foods of home;
(4) **Existential/Identity Tourists** (adopting local life) – strongly neophyliic interests and consumption habits; seek out the most authentic local food when traveling to a destination; only eat local foods when traveling, thereby participating in a culinary switching of worlds.

In an empirical study of Chinese tourists from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan visiting Australia, Chang et al. (2010) found a somewhat similar typology in food behaviors. They suggested three categories of food attitudes. "Browsers" were those who were ambivalent toward local foods, as they feel they will never be up to par with their home foods. Browsers tended to focus more on other aspects of travel instead of food. "Observers", the second type, showed an interested in the exoticness of Australian foods and were willing to try them as unique experiences. However, they tended to prefer fusion versions of Australian and Chinese foods, because they still felt a need for Chinese food for sustained their nutrition. The third group were "Participators", who indulge in Australian local food and sought out peak local food experiences, which became an important part of their tourism experience.

In terms of diaspora ethnic cuisines, however, authenticity can be complicated (Wang, 1999). "Object authenticity" refers to food that are an accurate replication of dishes made in the homeland, either cooked in a restaurant or in a home. However, from the perspective of the consumer, that may be less important than "Subjective Authenticity", which is their personal perception of its authenticity. Subjectivity can be influenced by many external sources, including movies, life experiences, friends, and characteristics of the restaurant in which the food is served (Chhabra, et al., 2013). An ethnic waiter, along with ethnic art and music, can make the food subjectively more authentic. A third type of authenticity, "Existential or Experiential Authenticity", refers to a peak, euphoric or perhaps even spiritual food experience, in response to the food's taste, presentation or context. This can occur independent of objective and subjective authenticities, but may be the most meaningful of the three to the consumer.

Three Types of Chinese Food in the US

Tourism-based behavioral typologies provide insight into the range of Overseas Chinese foods in the US, and possibly other ethnic foods in the US and elsewhere (Chhabra, et al., 2013). This range of foods exist on a continuum, with Chinese foods that have evolved for an exclusively mass American palate on one extreme, and those for a mostly China-born immigrant palate on the other extreme. For the purposes of this present analysis, these are referred to as "Chinese American Food" (based on the common phrase "Chinese American restaurant") and "Real Chinese Food," respectively. There is a third type of Chinese food found in the US that is not encompassed in these tourism-based typologies. The third type is food that is cooked at home by ethnic Chinese families, and may best be described as "American Born Chinese Food," even though this gives some preference to second generation Chinese experiences.

Chinese American Food

Fusion cuisines that give local flavors to traditional Chinese ingredients and cooking methods are common throughout the Overseas Chinese world outside of Greater China. These foods are created by Chinese immigrants who open Chinese restaurants, but need to adjust the foods they know to the palates and preferences of local residents (who are almost entirely non-Chinese) (Lu & Fine, 1995). In the US, the first Chinese restaurant (a buffet) opened in San Francisco in 1849 when Chinese immigrants were attracted to the US to work on the railroads and to mine gold (Karnow, 1994). Over several decades, these immigrants evolved a standard "Chinese American food" menu by adjusting their food for the Euro-American palate. Today, the standard Chinese American food restaurant is found in almost any city or town in the US with more than a thousand people, and their menus are largely identical, though some regional variations exist among east coast, west coast, and in some parts of the South. Some of the most characteristic dishes that are distinct to Chinese American restaurants are listed in Table 1 and Figure 1.

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Table 1. Standard Chinese American Restaurant Menu Items in US.

- Sweet and sour pork
- Orange chicken
- Chop Suey
- General Tso's Chicken
- Beef and American broccoli
- Mongolian Beef
- Crab or Cream Cheese Fried Wontons
- Fried Rice preferred over white rice; Brown Rice as an option
- Fortune Cookies (for dessert)

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Figure 1. Chinese American Restaurant Menu from the 1950s.

CHINESE MENU A LA CARTE

SOUP CHINESE STYLE

Chicken Noodle Soup	25c	Chicken Rice Soup	25c
Chicken Mushroom	45c	Chicken with Egg	30c

CHOP SUEY

Pork Chop Suey	95c	Tomato Chop Suey	$1.00
Beef Chop Suey	95c	Green Pepper Chop Suey	95c
Extra Fine Cut Chop Suey	$1.10	Subgum Chop Suey	1.35
Fresh Shrimp Chop Suey	1.10	Chicken Chop Suey	1.35
Chicken Chop Suey with Mushroom	1.60	Chicken Subgum Chop Suey	1.60
Grand Canyon Special Chop Suey	1.60	Beef with Green Pepper and Tomato	1.35

CHOW MEIN

Pork Chow Mein	$1.10	Fresh Shrimp Chow Mein	$1.35
Beef Chow Mein	1.10	Subgum Chow Mein	1.45
Chicken Chow Mein	1.45	Chicken Mushroom Chow Mein	1.75
Grand Canyon Special Chow Mein	1.60	Crabmeat Chow Mein	1.35
Fried Shrimps, Chinese Style	1.35	Sweet and Sour Pork Spare Ribs	1.45
Sweet and Sour Shrimps	1.60	Chicken Subgum Chow Mein	1.75

EGG FOO YONG

Pork Egg Fo Young	95c	Ham Egg Fo Young	95c
Fresh Shrimp Egg Fo Young	$1.05	Green Pepper Egg Fo Young	95c
Crab Meat Egg Fo Young	1.10	Mushroom Egg Fo Young	1.35
Chicken Egg Fo Young	1.20	Grand Canyon Special Egg Fo Young	1.45

NOODLES

Pork Noodles	75c	Tomato Noodles	85c
Beef Noodles	75c	Chicken Noodles	90c
Plain Warmein	95c	Chicken Warmein	$1.10

FRIED RICE

Beef Fried Rice	85c	Crab Meat Fried Rice	$1.05
Pork Fried Rice	85c	Ham Fried Rice	85c
Fresh Shrimp Fried Rice	$1.05	Chicken Fried Rice	1.10

Steamed Rice (per bowl) 15c

(Rice Served with Chop Suey and Egg Fo Young Orders)

(Single Order Service for Two 25c Extra)

BEVERAGES

Coffee	10c	Postum	15c	Iced Tea	10c
Milk	10c	Hot Tea	10c	Soft Drink	10c
Malted Milk	30c	Hot Chocolate	10c	Chinese Tea (per pot)	15c
Milk Shake	25c				

Source: Grand Canyon Café, Flagstaff, Arizona (used with permission)

Chinese American restaurant food differs from traditional mainland Chinese offerings in that it has more meat, much of which is heavily battered (covered with flour) and fried, and it is served with very few vegetable (and no leafy green vegetables). American Chinese foods are mostly stir fried and covered with sweet, sticky sauces. Steaming and boiling are quite rare. These dishes are generally not intended for ethnic Chinese consumption, and especially not for first generation new immigrants. The cooks in Chinese American restaurant were traditionally first generation Chinese who would cook very different foods for themselves. (Today, increasing numbers of Chinese American restaurant cooks in some parts of the US are Mexican immigrants.)

Real Chinese Food

From the very beginning, some Chinese American restaurant had two menus: one for non-Chinese and the other for ethnic Chinese. The second menu comprises dishes that the cooks would make for themselves and was often written in Chinese only (resulting in their being referred to as "secret menus" by non-Chinese) (Huang, 2012). This was Real Chinese Food. While many non-Chinese restaurant-goers were aware of these second menus, they tended to stay away from them because of their more exotic flavors and ingredients (at least to a standard American palate).

For first generation Chinese Americans, the second menu food options also had a nostalgia value, bringing them back to their China homeland. For second generation Chinese Americans

(ABCs), knowledge of these menus, and the potential they offered for a peak food experience, became an identity indicator of their Chineseness. Some of these Real Chinese Foods (as opposed to Chinese American Food that is intended for non-Chinese diners) have especially high "Chineseness" status value for second generation American Born Chinese. To eat and enjoy them is a sign that one is truly Chinese. Some of these are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. "Chinese American" Menu Items found in some US Chinese Restaurants.

- Most Dim Sum (Dian Xin) dishes, but especially Chicken Feet
- Most Clay pot dishes
- Chinese sausage (lahp cheong in Cantonese), Roast pork, BBQ Duck
- Bittermelon and leafy green vegetables, such as Gai Laan (Chinese broccoli)
- Pomelo, Jung zi (Chinese tamale), Mooncake, Tofu pudding (dou hua), Congee (Jou zi)
- White rice only, preferably very fluffy

Real Chinese Food dishes are also sought out by Chinese food connoisseurs who are looking for peak eating experiences, as they are closer to traditional dishes served in mainland China. Opportunities to savor Real Chinese Foods have grown considerably in the US as major metropolitan areas have welcomed growing numbers of ethnic Chinese immigrants from Southeast Asia, after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and from the People's Republic of China as it gradually relaxed emigration starting in the 1980s. In the largest cities of the US, Real Chinese Food is widely available, although the Chinese "secret menu" can also still be found, as well.

Characteristics of these two different cuisines are show in Table 3. Large numbers of non-Chinese Americans find the Chinese American restaurant palate foods to their taste, which explains why so many restaurants serve these foods across the country. On the other hand, the existence of Real Chinese Food provides an element of adventure and potential peak culinary experiences for ethnic Chinese, as well as for the more adventuresome non-Chinese. The continuum also shows that there is some variation in degrees of "authenticity", reflecting the diverse origins of different Chinese dishes (both within China and in the greater East and Southeast Asia regions), as well as the degree to which different restaurants will offer a more Asian-market oriented food option.

Table 3. American palate and Chinese palate characteristics in Chinese-American cuisine.

American Palate Chinese Foods of the US (Chinese American Foods)

- Made for the Non-Chinese American taste palate
- Preferred by food neophobic eaters
- Preferred by more Americanized second generation ABCs ("bananas")
- Menus always in English, and mostly with no Chinese
- Wok-based stir frying and deep frying; mostly Cantonese dishes, but more meat
- Individual dishes, chopsticks optional
- Considered "Authentic" Chinese American food by most non-Chinese Americans
- Considered "Inauthentic" by many, but not all, ethnic Chinese Americans

Chinese Palate Chinese Foods of the US (Real Chinese Foods)

- Made for Chinese American who were born and raised in China
- Preferred by food neophylic eaters
- Preferred by first generation Chinese Americans and second generation who identify more with Chineseness
- Preferred by non-Chinese with strong interests in Chinese culture ("eggs")
- Menus mostly in Chinese ("Secret Menus"), though some may have translations
- More steaming and boiling; more regional dishes; more vegetables
- Family style (shared) eating with chopsticks
- Considered "Authentic" by most ethnic Chinese Americans
- Considered potentially "upalatable" by many non-Chinese Americans

American Born Chinese Food

The third type of ethnic Chinese food found in the US is the home cooked dishes found in ethnic Chinese homes. Although referred to as American Born Chinese Food, this includes meals made by first generation immigrants to the US, as well. Many, if not most, of these dishes are relatively rare in Chinese restaurants because they reflect the unique foods that the first generation immigrant Chinese brought with them from their local regions in China. China is a very large and extremely diverse country in which each county can have its own distinct food specialties. It is impossible to capture this diversity in the commercial food landscape of the US, and so the home cooked Chinese foods may be the most objectively authentic of the three types of foods presented here.

Immigrants are often more likely to maintain traditional ways of doing things, such as cooking, than are those in the homeland from which they came (Ong, 1999). This is because the have a greater sense of nostalgia from their home, and by maintaining traditions, it helps to them to maintain their identity in the face of displacement and uncertainty. Eating foods that are based in family tradition strengthens their personal heritage and attachment to their motherland. At the same time, they also need to adjust to the opportunities and limitations on food ingredients available in their adopted land. This requires innovation, resulting in home cooked American Born Chinese Foods becoming a mix and fusion of Chinese American (restaurant)

Foods, Real Chinese Foods, and traditional family recipes.

Unfortunately, with each successive generation, the recipes of the first generation ancestors are more likely to be either transformed or lost altogether. Social media, such as ethnic cooking classes on YouTube, and increased international travel to homeland regions can help lessen this dilution, but only if later generations have an interest in pursuing those opportunities. On the other hand, each new generation of immigrants brings new foods from China, where the cuisine is evolving and innovating much more so than among Overseas Chinese.

Because of the diverse regional background of the many ethnic Chinese in the US today, it is not possible to chronicle the foods that comprise American Born Chinese Food. There is, however, one dish that is probably a uniquely first and second generation ABC food that cannot be found in a restaurant, but is served at least once a year in almost every Chinese home in the US. This is turkey congee (*juk* in Cantonese; *zhou* in Mandarin). Congee is a rice porridge. A roasted turkey is the traditional American meal for Thanksgiving, a harvest festival that is held annually at the end of November. Americans cook a full turkey, which is far too much meat for one meal. The day after Thanksgiving, ethnic Chinese Americans take the bones from the turkey and make one of the most flavorful versions of congee possible. This dish is not found outside of the US (and maybe Canada) because turkey meat is not common anywhere else in the world. Somewhat different from the dishes above, turkey congee might be more of an identifier of being a Chinese-American, rather than just being Chinese.

Conclusions

For many Americans, going to a Chinese (or other ethnic) restaurant in the US is a lot like a travel and tourism experience to a foreign country. There is an element of experiencing something that is beyond the mundane and ordinary daily life routine. There is even a sense of adventure and an exotic, though also very safe, crossing of cultural and racial territories. For Chinese Americans, going to a Chinese restaurant is also like travel and tourism to another place. However, in their case, the other place is part of their personal heritage – like visiting China. Eating at a Chinese restaurant becomes a way to connect with their cultural heritage, perhaps experiencing different versions of that heritage than one might experience at home.

The fundamental differentiation among the Chinese cuisine options that are available today in the US reflects the differences between Chinese food as an external and exotic experience, and Chinese food as an internal and identity experience. These experiences will vary considerably from one person to the next, no matter their ethnic background. For those who are lucky enough to live in one of the major population centers of Chinese and other Asian peoples in the US, the range of opportunities to engage their tastes and identities in peak and identity supporting ways is enormous and growing every year.

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