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Importing and Exporting the Ethnic

Thoughts on American Chinese Cuisine, Globalization, and the Dinner Plate

ANNESSE ANN BABIC

Takeaway, or takeout as Americans dub it, serves as a national standby. Americans have crafted fast food into a national product, and they have packaged, frozen, rehydrated, and exported this quick and ready-made creation. Yet, the lure of these high-fat, excessively salt-laden foods goes beyond the popular American drive-through and freezer section at the local grocery. American fast food has woven its way into the global food market, and standby chains like Burger King, McDonald's, and Kentucky Fried Chicken abound in numerous tourist locales. They can also be found in emerging tourist centers like Ecuador; there is a KFC in Quito.¹ In short, the quick, greasy, eat-on-the-go food common to Americans is now familiar around the globe.

The rise of American fast food is not a shocking surprise. Ease, comfort, and even idealist notions of modernity play at the fast food table. Standardized chain food allows American tourists to capture a "taste of home" in the Philippines, or elsewhere, while a local can also "taste America." Fast fare also serves as a cultural ambassador, permitting consumers to travel vicariously from the dining table while never leaving home. Ironically, Chinese food has emerged as a "familiar yet exotic" all-American meal. However, the complexities on the plate

extend far beyond the choice of brown or white rice. As journalist Jennifer 8. Lee has remarked, “Our benchmark for Americanness is apple pie. But ask yourself: How often do you eat apple pie? How often do you eat Chinese?”² Such questions capture the essence of this discussion at its core. Its availability, pervasiveness, accessibility, and class-crossing undercurrents not only reflect the mobile and fast-paced life of Americans, but also inadvertently bring a sense of community, as pretty standard Chinese takeout fare can be procured from coast to coast. The pluralism of American society intersects with the classic melting-pot analogy to bring a continuous fusion of tastes, cultures, and expectations onto the dinner plate.³

In the United States, Chinese takeout restaurants account for more than 43,000 food venues, with 84 percent of Americans reporting they eat ethnic food at least once a month (dining out or takeaway).⁴ Since the birth of P.F. Chang’s, Panda Express, and Manchu Wok, the nature of American Chinese fast food has changed. Previously, Americans found Chinese restaurants lurking around corners in suburban strip malls, in the middle of historically white, small Midwestern towns, and in an array of urban locations. However, Chinese food has a long history in the American diet. The first Chinese immigrants settled in San Francisco in 1847, mainly to build the transcontinental railroad, and the rapid influx shortly thereafter established their presence in the social landscape. Californians, in particular, saw their foods influenced by this ethnic group. As Chinese communities grew and Americans relied upon them for labor and food services, their cuisine became more diverse. Traditional Chinese food used all of the animal, and Americans were shocked to discover what gave their noodles and rice such rich and distinctive flavor. These restaurants, especially those outside the largest and most vibrant urban Chinatowns—San Francisco, Seattle, Tacoma, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Honolulu, Boston, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.—altered their menus to create a palatable selection for locals. They also self-described as Chinese American, versus labeling themselves Chinese as did restaurants in Chinatowns. Gradually, the American landscape became dotted with chop suey houses, with dishes rich in cornstarch, thick batters, and sweetened sauces that differed greatly from traditional Chinese cuisine. Wonton soup, egg rolls, barbecued spareribs,

sweet-and-sour pork, and beef with lobster sauce were specifically created for, and targeted to, American consumers.⁵

The rise of chain restaurants post-World War II created a conformist culinary culture. Just as Disney World rose to fame in the postwar era, providing ready-made and guaranteed fun-filled family vacations, as this essay will argue, American Chinese chain restaurants gave patrons a safe ethnic experience. They could consume Chinese cuisine without the fear of not liking it. Most importantly, national chains made it “user approved.” Moreover, packaging the chain and shipping it abroad enabled non-Americans to interact and engage with American products, voyeuristically consuming modernity and so-called Americanism in much the same way Americans imaginatively travel with their own Chinese dinners. The packaging of Chinese food by (trans)national American chains became a form of modern cultural imperialism, a geopolitical consumer-based force that Americans did not invent, but made their own.⁶

Americanizing Chinese Cuisine

Foodways authors, like Andrew Coe, serve up the gastronomic reader a light and entertaining overview of Chinese food, and examine how the cuisine is largely a commercial and cultural hybrid. Hidden within the cuisine’s history are moments of political comedy, such as when national security advisor Henry Kissinger, on a state diplomatic mission to China in 1971, failed spectacularly at using chopsticks. However, such moments also reveal the politics of food, and Chinese food in particular, both within the United States and beyond its borders. As Coe conveys,

The status of Chinese food in the American culinary scene has always been linked, albeit often loosely, to the state of international relations between the two countries. In 1989, the brutal squashing of the Tiananmen Square protest shattered the illusion of China evolving into an American style democracy. Cultural exchanges ground to a halt; tourist cancelled their China trips; and the US government instituted economic sanctions against the communist government. At the same time, the American culinary world’s attention was directed elsewhere, particularly

toward the Japanese and New American restaurants that dominated the white-tablecloth end of the market.⁷

Yet, despite such politicized moments, a worldwide, politically resistant acceptance of ethnic foods has become a part of global cultural dynamics. In the United States, Chinese eateries began to boom in 1848 in Sacramento Valley, California, as the quest for gold drove scores of settlers there. By 1851, more than 25,000 Chinese had moved to California, not entirely in search of gold but in the quest for a stable and prosperous life. San Francisco's Chinatown, with its inexpensive restaurants aimed at miners, served as a strong cultural and economic current that encouraged the formation of other Chinatowns. However, even with their positive social contributions, the Chinese still remained stereotyped as dirty, shifty, rat-eating undesirables.⁸ Nevertheless, by World War II, Chinese cuisine had triumphed over such discourse, prompting the *St. Louis Dispatch* in 1940 to call it "among the best in the world."⁹

Yong Chen provides another provocative look at this story by intertwining memories of China and his own immigrant encounters with America and its eateries. He remarks that by 1980, Chinese food served as the nation's most popular ethnic cuisine, and traces the roots of contemporary American Chinese restaurant chains to the social and economic networks established by Chinese immigrants working in the restaurant business. As the Chinese carved out lives, communities, and homes on the American landscape, they came to represent "America's first truly national network of public dining, Chinese restaurants played a vital role in expanding the meaning of abundance and democracy," and the connection between nation-building, imperialism, and food.¹⁰

The spread of Chinese food was inseparably connected to the geographic and socioeconomic expansion of the United States. This connection is best captured by the notion of "empire food," which was created in the process of empire building for the pleasures of its citizens. Consumption was indeed a significant goal and consequence of empire building, and recognizing Chinese food as empire food helps us appreciate its basic characteristics: ubiquitous but cheap.¹¹

Perhaps the true litmus test for Chinese food as a marker of American cultural imperialism is a comparison to McDonald's. McDonald's

has long stood as an icon of cheap (and unhealthy) fast food and the problems of the American service industry. However, Chinese restaurants fail this litmus test, mainly because there are far more complicated social, cultural, ethnic, racial, and geopolitical forces at play with this particular cuisine.¹²

Chinese restaurants, as journalist Jennifer 8. Lee remarks, are comparable to apple pie. There are twice as many Chinese restaurants as there are McDonald's locations, and the sheer abundance of them suggests the importance they hold on the American culinary landscape. Her story, encompassing forty-two states and three years of ethnographic research, reveals that the driving force and longevity behind this ethnic cuisine lies in its chefs, particularly its cooks' abilities to integrate local ingredients into dishes, making them feel exotic yet familiar, all at once.¹³

Chinese food, unlike McDonald's and other ethnic foods, has endeared itself to Americans at home and abroad like no other cuisine. A cheap, urban dinner for metropolitan dwellers and a staple of the suburbs, Chinese cuisine has transcended class, race, and culture. It is particularly popular among American Jews, who often celebrate Christmas Day with Chinese and a movie. Even though the Chinese diet is rather free and flexible, and the Jewish diet is bound with restrictions like eschewing pork and shellfish and not mixing meat and dairy, the affinity between these two ethnic groups speaks to the transnationality and adaptivity of Chinese food, which is precisely what has made it a global favorite. Perhaps the shared experiences of the two cultures might have also contributed to this bond. The Jews largely fled Europe because of religious and ethnic persecution, and the Chinese became the target of American racism beginning in 1882 with the first Chinese Exclusion Act.¹⁴ On the surface, this shared history of racism could be one reason for Jewish sympathy. But, with respect to the stomach, any person who has ever had the faintest ache of hunger can attest that emotion is only half of the equation. Taste and accessibility really make the case for culinary desire.

Even though pork and shellfish are used in Chinese dishes, Jewish consumers, especially those who do not follow kosher dietary rules, flock to the satisfying cuisine. Within the Jewish community, it has come to be known as "safe treyf," a mixture of the safe and forbidden,

because ingredients like pork are cut up so finely that customers can “safely” overlook their inclusion.¹⁵ Dining on Chinese food has also served a communal purpose as it has become a de facto Jewish tradition on Christmas and a go-to “all-American” family meal. Yet, the beauty of American cuisine is that its constant (re)cycling allows it to fuse elements that are seemingly unconnected. Moreover, interaction with food on a personal, familial, and national level reinforces connections between memory and identity. Chinese food has certainly filled this function in the United States.

The chain restaurant, another American creation, was probably destined for marriage with Chinese food, a national favorite.¹⁶ The first chains—brimming with “American fare” such as ribs, chops, and steak and potatoes—were designed to feed travelers efficiently, while keeping trains on schedule. They were based on an intricate system of organization, but not the fast food and ready-to-eat items of the modern era. Rather, these chains represented the standardization of home food cooked for the masses. However, these restaurants, with their finely-tuned assembly-line kitchens whose style was reminiscent of Taylorism in factories, laid the groundwork of today’s fast-food-chain culture.

In the 1980s, only 10 percent of American restaurants were ethnic. By 1997, this number had risen to 33 percent. These ethnic kitchens brought in an annual revenue of \$29.5 billion, and by 2005 the income from ethnic restaurants reached \$48.75 billion. Throughout, Chinese restaurants have long remained the core of American ethnic eateries. With more than 43,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States alone, it is no surprise that they serve as an international envoy of the American culinary experience. To put the 43,000 in perspective, this staggering number exceeds McDonald’s, Wendy’s, and Burger King restaurants combined. Moreover, the Chinese eatery typically remains family owned.¹⁷ Ironically, through an ethnic endeavor, the Chinese have achieved the American dream. The tragedy here is that even though Chinese American families have become economically successful, many have still not obtained middle-class status, remaining the “foreigner within.” Studies consistently show that Chinese restaurants actually bring in low profits because consumers expect good food at cheap prices. Thus, even the busiest Chinese restaurant in the

neighborhood might only see revenues that barely keep the owners afloat.¹⁸

According to the 2010 census, individuals identifying as Chinese only accounted for 1 percent of the United States population. Yet, the Chinese have blended foods that have become a permanent part of most American diets. Chinese food, which itself is an adaptation, has been further adapted according to regional tastes, with examples including honey pecan shrimp in Louisiana and Szechuan alligator found in Florida and Louisiana. Though, most interestingly, cashew chicken, a long-standing staple of Chinese menus, is not a Chinese dish at all. Cashew chicken is actually a mainstream, middle-class American dish that was rendered Chinese with the addition of exotic nuts: it consists of a gravy type sauce, chopped vegetables, and fried chicken. Likewise, General Tso's chicken is a hybrid Chinese/Taiwanese/American creation. However, the American version with sugar, vinegar, and sriracha or red pepper sauce, occupies a stronger place in U.S. and international markets.¹⁹

Globalizing American Chinese Food

Consistently, Chinese food remains cheap, but labor-intensive. The small pieces of meat, chopped vegetables, and sautéed dishes require the chef to remain constantly vigilant and engaged. Chinese food remains relatively cheap in the United States because Chinese labor is equated with cheap products in general, with many consumers refusing to pay more than other types of fast food. Not surprisingly, the expansion of Chinese markets globally parallels the growth of American Chinese food chains, such as P.F. Chang's and Panda Express, in Asia, which essentially sell Americanized Chinese food back to Asian consumers as "American food." This dizzying transnational recycling of fast food was catalyzed by changes in eating habits in the 1990s, which is when American taste buds expanded in a new world of trade and connectivity. This largely occurred due to the free, open, and expanded global trade and economic boom that came after the Persian Gulf War. Exotic ingredients like tarragon and raspberry vinaigrette first appeared on grocery store shelves in the 1990s, and in 1993, the first chocolate yogurt tantalized American, and later global,

taste buds. The same year, we saw the term “gastroporn” enter the vernacular. A rise in packaged goods and processed foods also fueled our gastro revolution, resulting in the perfect recipe for the expansion of American tastes.²⁰

In many ways, one can look at American Chinese food, and our obsession with it, as a case study of American idiosyncrasies. We live in an age when being considered a foodie, or a self-proclaimed one, is considered a cultural medal of honor—when fusing cuisines (a popular Gen-X fad that now seems passé) and reading food magazines are considered everyday activities. Withstanding it all, Chinese food has woven its way into the American market, mixing seamlessly with hamburgers and fried chicken to become, for many, quick comfort food. The geopolitics of the 1990s, the rise of exotic ingredients (everything from mushroom variations to lemongrass), and cheap travel created a unique context, opening the door to other American adaptations (exploitations) of Asian culture, such as kimono dresses, chopstick hair accessories, and Chinese symbol tattoos, all of which, much like Chinese food itself, can be seen as creative examples of ethnic adaptation.²¹ However, the reality is that just as Chinese food was appropriated and altered to suit the American palate, the Chinese language has also been hijacked, manipulated, and often outright fictionalized in the name of body art.²² Yet, these appropriations are largely in the eye of the beholder. For most Americans, partaking in these trends is nothing more than a form of consumerism, filling a cultural or spiritual void, or hunger, in much the same way food does.

By the time Panda Express entered the market in the 1980s, it did not need to mask its fast-food appeal. That cute panda, the glowing red lights, the distinctive take-out box (which has even been used as inspiration for women’s handbags over the years), and the comforting guarantee of predictability, even banality, in flavor, told us that we did not have to be brave. Drive-thrus even allowed us to remain in our climate-controlled cars with heated seats, air conditioners, sunroofs, and posh interiors. Safe treyf came in little boxes, wrapped up safe, and the chances of it being inedible, or something we would not recognize, were slim. When exported out, American products convey this mixed bag of feelings, beliefs, and ideas. On the flip side, the foreign becomes the local when we add a dash of alligator, a side of pecan, or simply create a new cuisine staple, like cashew chicken.