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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer, 1995), pp. 535-553

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of the [Midwest Sociological Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4120779>

Accessed: 08/01/2013 14:45

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# THE PRESENTATION OF ETHNIC AUTHENTICITY: Chinese Food as a Social Accomplishment

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Ethnic entrepreneurs in American society often carve out an economic niche by means of business enterprises and cultural events that are open to the general public and showcase ethnic culture. These locations depend upon a display of the ethnic culture that is simultaneously seen as “authentic” and within the bounds of cultural expectations (“Americanized”). In a society that values toleration and cross-cultural contacts, many consumers desire a unique, yet comfortable experience, given their own cultural preferences. We focus on the presentation of ethnic food in four Chinese restaurants in a small southern city. Ethnic tradition continues but in the context of a continuous process of adaptation. Authenticity is not an objective criterion but is socially constructed and linked to expectations. We contrast two broad classes of Chinese restaurants—consumption-oriented and connoisseur-oriented—to describe strategies by which restaurateurs fit Chinese food into market niches. We conclude by suggesting some directions for the study of public ethnic culture.

In contemporary American society, ethnicity is revealed as much by symbolism through public display as by any other factor. While the display of ethnicity does not eliminate its social psychological power to affect self-image, much ethnicity is made real through cultural transactions: a viable ethnic identity depends on a set of symbols and signs, products of interaction with other groups (Royce 1982, p. 6; Gans 1979; Van den Berghe 1984, pp. 393-394; Isajiw 1990, p. 87). At least in the American context, ethnic identity is socially constructed and depends on a set of consistent actions that permits others to place an individual in an ethnic category (Alba 1990, p. 75). This is the case even when such cultural placement does not do justice to the complex and multistranded lived experiences of contemporary “ethnic” actors whose ethnic experiences are continually shaped (through acquiescence or resistance) by the responses of members of the societies in which the ethnic group is embedded (Chow 1993, p. 6; Denzin 1994, pp. 76-77). This process is in actuality quite fluid and negotiated.

The understanding of the dynamics of “ethnicity” is bolstered through an approach that emphasizes the transactions between the “ethnic group” and its public. Significantly, many of the transactions by which ethnicity is made “real” are economically grounded: festivals, restaurants, art galleries, clothing outlets, and musical venues. Ethnicity often becomes a marketing tool, part of an entrepreneurial market.

We aim to advance the sociological understanding of publicly displayed ethnicity, acculturations and cultural pluralism by examining a set of mercantile strategies—specifically, the

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preparation and sale of Chinese food to American diners.<sup>1</sup> We examine the choices of food preparation and presentation of restaurateurs whose client base consists largely of those outside the ethnic group.<sup>2</sup>

We ask how ethnic food, as a readily recognized marker of ethnicity and as a major form of traditional culture (Goode, Curtis, and Theophano, 1984; Alba 1990, pp. 85-93) is produced and marketed in contemporary American society. How do Chinese restaurant owners make their food appealing to those outside their ethnic group? We examine the constructs of authenticity and Americanization as contrasting strategies to create an economically viable market niche. More generally, we explore the dialectic relationship between the continuity of tradition and the continuous process of change found in the presentation of "traditional" activities. For clients outside the ethnic group, novel culinary traditions must be situated so as to seem simultaneously exotic and familiar: distinguishable from mainstream cuisine (and thus desirable) yet able to be assimilated as edible creations (Finkelstein 1989).

In contrast to many ethnic businesses, Chinese restaurants rely primarily on an external rather than an internal market (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990; Light and Bonacich 1988). Owners are "cultural entrepreneurs," who use their ethnicity as a "vital part of [their] stock in trade" (Palmer 1984, p. 85). Their strategies permit clients to believe that they have had an "exotic encounter," while keeping the experience within the boundaries of cultural expectations—strategies also found in the tourist industry and public festivals (Chace 1992). Ethnic businesses can succeed by providing desired "exotic goods" and opportunities for "internal tourism" (Van den Berghe 1984, p. 393) that other organizations cannot provide as cheaply or as authentically (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990, p. 117). The scarcity of the experience contributes to its marketability (Palmer 1984).

The members of the group recognize that their traditional culture is being altered, but simultaneously they believe that they are educating their clients to understand their culture. Ethnic food both attempts to fit the market (demand producing supply), while altering that market over time (supply producing demand). As suggested by Frederik Barth (1969), the question is how much change in a cultural tradition is possible before we claim that the cultural tradition no longer characterizes the ethnic group from which it is supposedly derived.

### THE CHINESE RESTAURANT

The ethnic restaurant serves as a propitious setting for observing public ethnicity and the dynamics of culinary adaptation in contemporary American life. Typically, the examination of foodways has been in the context of domestic life. Yet ethnic restaurants, as a locus for the interaction between food production and consumption, provide a significant and unexplored organizational arena for depicting the conflict between continuity and change of an ethnic tradition in a market context. How does symbolism become solidified in economic life (Denzin 1977)? Ethnic dining plays a prominent role in modern American life (Konvitz 1975), particularly as approximately half of the meals eaten by Americans are consumed outside the home.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Americans enjoy "gastronomic tourism" (Zelinsky 1985, p. 51).

The Chinese restaurant has become a nearly ubiquitous feature of American urban and suburban life (Levenstein 1993).<sup>4</sup> It has been estimated that there are now over 30,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States,<sup>5</sup> accounting for nearly a third of all "ethnic restaurants" (Zelinsky 1985, p. 60), with revenues of \$9 billion (Karnow 1994, p. 87). Such figures are particularly remarkable in that Americans of Chinese descent represent less than one percent of the population.

Chinese restaurants serve as a model for the examination of ethnic dining.<sup>6</sup> Chinese food is one of the most popular and sophisticated cuisines in the world and enjoys a long and distinctive tradition. In addition, the success of Chinese restaurants provides a valuable case of the growth and institutionalization of an “alien” culture. Chinese food has been regarded as “a taste of success” (Epstein 1993), as the cuisine has become widely accepted. Chinese restaurants in the past few decades have increasingly become differentiated according to region, cuisine, and audience, ranging from run-down storefronts to elaborate temples of culinary extravagance. Indeed, Chinese restaurants are now found throughout the American landscape, even in small towns and rural areas.

We describe the food preparation strategies of four Chinese restaurants (China Fast-Food Restaurant, China Boat, Guangdong, and Sichuan) in Athens, Georgia, the home of the University of Georgia. Athens has a population of 80,000 and is located about sixty miles northeast of Atlanta. Shun Lu conducted participant observation from April to August of 1992, observing food preparation, cooking, and serving. She also conducted 26 interviews with owners, cooks, and customers. Each interview lasted from one to three hours.

The University, with nearly 30,000 students in addition to its faculty and staff, provides a large proportion of potential customers for local restaurants. Approximately four hundred Chinese students attend the university (largely graduate students), half from the mainland and half from Taiwan, constituting 1.4 percent of the total student population. These students, on a tight graduate student budget, typically prepare meals at home rather than eat at restaurants, and eat at Chinese restaurants less frequently than American students.

Eight Chinese restaurants operate in Athens. Sichuan Restaurant is the oldest one currently in operation, having opened twenty years ago. By contrast, China Boat opened three years ago; China Fast-Food Restaurant has been open for seven years; and Guangdong for eight years. The backgrounds of the owners are characteristic of Chinese who have immigrated since the 1960s—most either have a college degree or had professional experience before they entered the restaurant business: the owners of Guangdong are graduates of the University of Georgia (the male owner is a professor); the owners of China Fast-Food Restaurant are college graduates from Taiwan; the male owner of China Boat used to be a university professor in mainland China and has a doctorate from the University of Georgia. Servers in these restaurants are either university students who work part-time or students’ spouses who work full-time but often are preparing to enter a graduate program once they have earned sufficient income for tuition and living expenses. The cooks are professionals, trained at various Chinese restaurants. The presence of a well-educated staff is a distinctive characteristic of many Chinese restaurants.

Unlike many older immigrants who live in an urban Chinatown, the Chinese in Athens do not form a closed ethnic community. They do not rely on mutual help and support from other Chinese for survival and success. Thus, social ties between Chinese immigrants are looser than those found in a traditional Chinatown. The existence of these restaurants reflects a changing settlement pattern by Chinese immigrants outside tight-knit ethnic enclaves. These Chinese immigrants, unlike their forbears, rely less on their relatives and are less bound by “blood and land ties” (Light 1972). They are career-oriented and settle in places where they perceive economic opportunities.

In addition, their attitude toward their cultural heritage differ from the assimilation-oriented immigrants’ children. The owners are American citizens but believe that they are still Chinese. In other words, they maintain a strong sense of Chinese identity, despite their economic

assimilation. They do not consider these elements—maintenance of cultural tradition and participation in a nonethnic market—as irreconcilable (Wang 1991).<sup>7</sup>

Ethnic restaurants outside a major metropolitan area survive by appealing to an exogenous client base. Even though university communities are more cosmopolitan than many small southern cities, they lack a sufficient Chinese and Chinese American clientele for economic survival. Chinese restaurants surrounded by mainstream American culture necessarily interact primarily with a “European-American” environment as compared to restaurants located in “Chinatown.” The reality that more Americans than Chinese are potential customers and that no closed Chinese community exists suggests that the eating habits and cultural images of Americans will take priority in organizational strategies.

### AUTHENTICITY AND AMERICANIZATION

A prominent feature of much ethnic food in contemporary America is that the ethnic “purity” of the food has been diluted (Alba 1990, p. 86). As in all cases of cultural diffusion, adjustments are made to accommodate the values of the host society. Yet, degrees of Americanization vary by restaurant and by cuisine. By Americanization we refer to the conscious decision of restaurateurs to transform ingredients and techniques of traditional recipes (Tomlinson 1986) to meet American tastes.<sup>8</sup> What constitutes Americanized food is a social construction, as is what constitutes Chinese food. Despite the changes, food is often presented by the ethnic restaurant as being “authentic”—for many consumers, a socially desirable image in a competitive and differentiated market. This is not a phenomenon specific only to Chinese restaurants—signs proclaim “authentic Italian food” or “authentic Mexican food,” despite market-based adaptations of these cuisines. Authenticity is typically defined as being that which is believed or accepted to be genuine or real: true to itself (Taylor 1991, p. 17). Authentic food implies that products are prepared using the same ingredients and processes as found in the homeland of the ethnic, national, or regional group. Americanized ethnic food suggests that the local and traditional characteristics of the dish as indigenously prepared have been modified or transformed. In this “moral” sense, the food does not *deserve* the label of being authentic.

Authenticity as an objective category has become increasingly criticized by cultural analysts (e.g., Bendix 1992) who claim that authenticity is a discursive strategy for sociopolitical ends (Berman 1970; Taylor 1991) and that, at best, it is a matter of degree. Authenticity is a locally constructed folk idea, and those objects that are said to represent authentic experience may become a site of contention. Just as tradition is mutable and contingent (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1984; Fine 1989), so is authenticity. Within a culture, different acceptable models exist for the same practice.

Contributing to the contingent nature of authenticity is that the culture of any social group is in continual flux. Cultures are never entirely closed systems: external changes affect cultural logics. Nowhere is this more evident than with regard to cuisine. From generation to generation, some culinary preparations and foodways absorb features of “alien” foods—perhaps a function of biological succession of foodstuffs, migration, technological change, shortages, or alterations in food-related ideologies (e.g., increased negative attitudes toward red meats, sugar, fat, or animal products; increased positive attitudes toward fish, turkey, or leafy greens). The vitality of a culinary system depends on its adaptability and flexibility. The maintenance of a food pattern does not depend on whether it is identical with an original model but on whether the “fundamental” characteristics of the food are defined as being con-

tinuously present, connected to core cultural beliefs, and recognized as a differentiated food pattern.

The practice of presenting Americanized ethnic food as authentic raises significant sociological questions about the presentation of ethnicity in the marketplace. Specifically, how is authenticity framed for an audience? How does authenticity affect the dishes presented by a restaurant? How does market segmentation affect models of authenticity?

In "Staged Authenticity," Dean MacCannell (1973; see also 1976) argues that many sight-seers are motivated by a desire to see the life of natives as it is *really* lived, a desire for truth, intimacy, and sharing the lived experience behind the performed scenes. The touristic (voyeuristic) gaze is only one example of the desire for authenticity in contemporary American life. Motivated by the same desire, a search for authentic experience is also found in Americans' interest in ethnic foods (Finkelstein 1989; Shelton 1990). If tourists' search for authenticity is reflected by their concern for fabricated scenes, their dislike of the mundane, and their preference for the exotic, many diners feel that the culinary authenticity of ethnic food allows them to experience and perhaps identify with the "true foreignness" of the ethnic group: eating out becomes food for the "soul" (Pillsbury 1990)—a form of identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987). Through the consumption of ethnic cuisine we demonstrate to ourselves and others that we are cosmopolitan and tolerant: our character is expressed through our behavior in the market. In this sense, the cliché—"you are what you eat"—has sociological validity. The construction of authentic food responds to American's quest for authentic experience and identity transformation (Gergen 1991).

Due to the sensory characteristics of food and dining, demands for authenticity and the actual, more conventional practices of most diners diverge. Our proclaimed identity may diverge from our comfort level. In other words, a discrepancy exists between ideal and acceptance, even when diners are unaware of the contradiction in their desires. The seemingly contradictory requirements of ethnic food—ideally, it should be authentic; practically, it should be Americanized—make it necessary for the restaurant to construct both the meaning of authentic food and a market niche, in the process creating an image of their cultural traditions for their customers, as they create images of their customers. As a result, the naming practices of owners of Chinese restaurants—Jade Lion, Lotus Flower, Sichuan Gardens, Pearl River—are strategies designed to reinforce the desire of diners for exotic experience (Karnow 1994, p. 87) and to generate an exotic hyperreality.

In the literature on ethnicity, ethnic food is typically located within families and ethnic communities. Many social scientists expected that distinctive foodways would weaken or disappear with increasing assimilation and acculturation (Freeman and Grivetti 1981; Jerome 1975). In fact, later generations of immigrants tend in some measure to discard the eating habits of their parents or grandparents and adopt the standard American diet, saving their ethnic cuisine for special occasions (e.g., Brown and Mussell 1984). The survival and modification of ethnic culture in public life is made possible largely through the continuity of ethnic food in restaurants and fast-food establishments. While this contrasts with a purist belief in authentic ethnic experience, it generates a dialectic between assimilation and cultural pluralism (Alba 1985; Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Newman 1973).

### THE AMERICANIZATION OF CHINESE FOOD

When asked, many Chinese customers comment—not surprisingly—that the food served in Chinese restaurants in Athens differs from the food they ate in their homeland. These restaura-

rants serve “Americanized Chinese food” (Yancey 1992). Given the alien environment, is it possible to serve authentic Chinese food to American diners? Each owner and cook interviewed answered in the negative.

While American customers explained that they selected Chinese food for its difference from American cuisine—its otherness—this display of otherness had to remain within the context of American foodstuffs and presentation. Exoticism was a concept that was not absolute but related to the standards of the American palate. The owner of Sichuan Restaurant opined:

When we opened the first Chinese restaurant here eighteen years ago many customers had never eaten any Chinese food. They were attracted by the reputation of the food, but they would have been disappointed if we had served all those kinds of authentic food. We have made changes according to their taste. They could not accept our food all of a sudden. But bit by bit they accepted our tofu, our dishes cooked with green onion and ginger, and even the hot and spicy dishes. I say, only bit by bit. We must make some changes.

The presentation of authentic Chinese food is prevented by social, cultural, and economic constraints of the market, coupled with the perceptions of those constraints. In our interviews and in their talk with restaurant owners, American customers did not complain about the lack of authenticity of the food and may have been unaware of alterations that would have been obvious to a Chinese diner. The food fit the definition of exotic cuisine and was accepted as such. Ethnic food can only be accepted by adapting it into a cultural matrix and by creating a set of culinary expectations. In most settings, such a process is gradual. While we cannot know the reaction of local diners to such delicacies as wax gourd and duck feet, the segmentation of Chinese restaurant markets in larger urban areas with relatively more exotic restaurants located in “Chinatowns” and areas of cultural and artistic capital and more “Americanized” Chinese restaurants in suburbs and working-class neighborhoods suggests that the meaning of appropriate Chinese food is locally constructed. Cultural segments use local criteria for judging foods, limiting the acceptance of cultural traditions.

Ultimately, the meanings of food depend on the social location of those who consume it. A prized dish in one culture may be rejected in another due to different habits and beliefs and different degrees of culinary adventurousness or appreciation of sensory domains, all related to the habitus of the diner (Bourdieu 1984). For example, while “steamed fish” is a traditional and frequently ordered dish in restaurants in China, it is absent from the menus of all but a few Chinese restaurants in the United States. The owner of Sichuan explains:

The steamed fish relies less on the enhancement of spices than other dishes and has a high requirement on the freshness of the raw material; ideally, it should be alive. Chinese enjoy the original flavor of the fish and a Chinese gourmet takes the fish’s head and tail as the most delicious parts. But Americans do not like to eat fish with head and bones; they like fillet. Besides, they like food with a stronger flavor; the steamed fish is too light-flavored and too fishy for them. They do not care for the original flavor. That’s why we do not include it in our menu.

In addition, the tendons of beef or pork and beef tripe are two favorite dishes in Chinese restaurants on the mainland and in Taiwan. Other dishes using inner organs or extremities of

animals, such as ox's tail, pig's tongue, and duck's feet, are very popular. Chinese preferences for dishes of this kind are closely connected to their belief system. They consider these dishes delicious as well as nutritious, connected to a Taoist belief in the unity of the human body (Rin 1982). In contrast, Americans define internal organs as dirty, of unpleasant texture, and unhealthy. The production of authenticity is constrained by aesthetic standards, linked to cultural discourse about health and cleanliness.

Economic reality also constrains authenticity. Ethnic restaurants operate within a highly competitive capitalist free market (Fine forthcoming). In order to survive, a restaurant must minimize its fixed, labor, and material costs, while charging enough for what they serve, in order to make a profit. In doing this the restaurant must balance the cost and quality of their dishes to maintain a steady and dependable clientele. If the food does not appeal to the customers and does not sell, the restaurateur cannot afford to wait for the customers to change their attitudes.

The restaurant owner who wished to cook food as served in mainland China would confront a problem of the costs of authentic raw materials. All four restaurants, in spite of their differences in orientation (discussed below), use "American vegetables"—carrots, snow peas, green peppers, broccoli, and mushrooms. These vegetables are locally available and preferred by American customers. In contrast, these restaurants avoid authentic Chinese vegetables. Some frequently used vegetables in China such as fresh bamboo shoots, hotbed chives, garlic bolt, and wax gourd are difficult to obtain. Although some are available in Atlanta, they are more expensive than local American vegetables and are less acceptable to American diners. Since the acceptance of Chinese items cannot happen "at once," it is not wise for the restaurant to cook with authentic vegetables even if they are available and cost efficient. When some authentic vegetables are both more expensive and more likely to be rejected, owners have little incentive for maintaining their culinary traditions. While some wish to educate the palates of their customers, this process depends upon a change in taste and has an uncertain outcome as the competition may be better able to provide for diners.

### NEGOTIATING AUTHENTICITY

Culinary activities are socially constructed. The constraints, while present, are not inevitable. Many customers desire the "illusion of authenticity," which motivates chefs and owners to cook according to tradition, even when bowing to customer preferences. Although constraints cannot be avoided, they can be negotiated. By combining tradition, adaptation, and innovation, continuity of an ethnic food tradition is possible, maintaining for the ethnic group a distinctive place in the public arena.

While holding to an illusion of continuity, modification and change are crucial for obtaining culinary acceptance. The strategy of the Chinese restaurateur in modifying the culinary tradition is to make the unfamiliar seem sufficiently comfortable, thus making the exotic qualities of the food pleasurable. Consider two examples: Chow Mein and Mongolian Beef, which are among the entrees most frequently ordered by American customers. They are widely known markers of Chinese food. Both are traditional Chinese dishes but also have been adapted to demands of "American taste," one in the process of cooking and the other in the ingredients.

#### Chow Mein

In preparing Chow Mein for American tastes, many restaurants alter the process of cooking. Chow Mein in China is made by boiling oriental-style long noodles, then stir-frying the boiled



noodles. In Athens, noodles are first dry-fried because Americans like fried foods. The noodles are only an inch long—suitable for forks rather than chopsticks. The main entree is marinated in sauce, which is then poured over the fried noodles. When the dish is served, the mein (noodle) still tastes crisp.

### **Mongolian Beef**

In contrast, the ingredients of Mongolian Beef have been altered. The basic procedure of cooking does not differ substantially from traditional stir-fried dishes that emphasize high temperature and rapid cooking (Sakamoto 1977):

Cooks at Sichuan prepare Mongolian Beef by stir-frying sliced, marinated beef for thirty seconds, and then draining the oil. They then add mixed spices, mainly sugar, soy sauce, ginger, water, and cornstarch to oils and bring to a boil. They add the cooked beef and green scallions, stir-frying for another ten seconds, finally pouring it over fried crystal noodles. The whole process takes less than three minutes. Since the beef is sliced and stir-fried in hot oil for a short time it remains tender and not oily. (field notes)

The chef at Sichuan describes his changes in spices and condiments:

Americans like sweet things. They consume much more sugar than Chinese. In Mongolian Beef we add a lot of sugar—it takes up the largest proportion of the spices. But the combination of beef, scallion, and sugar works well. You can call this an Americanized dish, but it really tastes good, and our American customers like it and recognize it as a real Chinese dish.

By acceding to American tastes, the Chinese cook transforms the alien and unfamiliar to the conventional and familiar to “assist the customer to relate and interpret what is presented to him and to appreciate the novelty in a different cuisine” (Rosenberg 1990).

### **Meal Format**

Modifications are not limited to the choice of ingredients and the processes of cooking but also include the structure of the meal. Each restaurant has adopted an American meal format, the buffet lunch, and serves soup as the first course of a meal according to American eating habits (instead of at the end, as in China).

Speed of service has also increased. Chinese not only enjoy eating but also talking at a meal—talk expands the satisfaction of the restaurant experience. In comparison, Americans are more “food-oriented” than “talk-oriented.” In China, diners do not mind waiting for an hour for their entrees, whereas Americans want food served quickly (Hall 1978). One Guangdong customer explains:

I get cravings for [Chinese food] every once in a while. It takes ten minutes for me to drive here, but it's still convenient. Everything comes fast. I have a one-hour break. That's sufficient for me.

In meeting Americans' requirement for speed, Chinese restaurants select equipment, raw materials, preparation, cooking techniques, and serving styles to maximize efficiency. Many of these restaurants use powerful gas burners to shorten cooking times. Food preparation now involves a combination of the elaboration of Chinese food and standardization of American fast food. For instance, the use of multiple spices is simplified by a "house special sauce" with many dishes. Although each dish is freshly cooked when ordered, a limited set of ingredients increases efficiency.

Despite modifications in the food items, spices, processes of cooking, and styles of service, the fundamental principles involved in Chinese food have been retained. By using multiple ingredients and mixing of flavors, dishes of various kinds and flavors are prepared. Chinese principles of abundance, multiple ingredients, and mixing of flavors (Chang 1977; Anderson and Anderson 1988) remain evident. Another major feature of the Chinese food system, the separation of the *staple* (rice or noodles) and *dishes* (meats and vegetables) in the meal structure has also been retained. The food served in Chinese restaurants is simultaneously Chinese and American, traditional and changed.

### AUTHENTICITY AND ITS VARIATIONS

Although modifications of a "native" food model are necessary for the success of any Chinese restaurant outside its indigenous community, the amount of Americanization is situated and selected by owners to fit into a market niche based on their image of potential customers. The food in Chinese restaurants in small southern cities may be considered authentic, but in New York's Chinatown the same food would be scorned as Americanized; in China, it may be "an imitation"—or even considered "American" food. Authenticity lies in "its perception in the public mind" (Shelton 1990) rather than in the food itself.

Authenticity also has a relational character. People define authenticity in association with their own social experience. Our informants chose these restaurants because they liked and wanted to eat "Chinese" food, whatever that might mean to them. For those who have been to China, consumed similar dishes elsewhere, or acquired expert knowledge of Chinese food, their evaluation of the food occurs largely through a comparison with previous experiences (Fine 1992a). For those with little experience of eating in Asian climes (the vast majority of American diners), a comparative basis for questioning the authenticity of the food is lacking, but *all diners with whatever cultural capital want food suitable to their taste*. No one claims a preference for "fake" food, but some diners care more about authenticity than others. The actual and assumed choices of classes of customers (based on philosophical biases, aesthetic preferences, economic positions, and temporal demands) affect the strategic choices of management.

The customers we interviewed share a common realization that affects their choice: they have selected *Chinese* food, which they perceive as a distinctive class of cuisine. The success of an ethnic restaurant does not depend on its capacity to produce the food as consumed in the home community (cuisine that is itself somewhat variable). Rather, it depends on how much the restaurant can accommodate local needs while retaining characteristics of the ethnic tradition—making it "identifiable" (Levenstein 1986). Authenticity thus becomes a potential resource to attract customers. To differentiate itself from its competitors, each restaurant emphasizes the uniqueness and special quality of the food and service it presents.

While a major reason to dine at a Chinese restaurant is that "the food is different," orientations differ in choosing restaurants. Some eat primarily as an instrumental act, whereas for

others eating is expressive: eating for the “body” versus for the “soul” (Pillsbury 1990). The latter emphasizes the sensory characteristics of food (its taste, color, smell, and texture), as well as the environment in which it is served. Yet, an emphasis on aesthetics does not require that customers care about the authenticity of the food, essentially an ideological choice.

When asked whether they prefer authentic or Americanized Chinese food, the large majority of customers opted for authenticity, but when questioned further about how authentic they thought the food was at the Chinese restaurants they patronized, many were uncertain and claimed they did not pay much attention, and they rejected foods that were defined as “unpleasant” and well outside of their experience. Thus, only a small proportion of customers are highly conscious of authenticity. Elements that affect customers’ orientations include aesthetic preference, economic status, and activity schedules. These orientations combine to create distinct market niches and shape restaurants’ business strategies, affecting the construction of authenticity.

We focus on the culinary strategies of two types of restaurants: *consumption-oriented* and *connoisseur-oriented*.<sup>9</sup> The former provides inexpensive food for relatively indiscriminating palates; the latter considers the aesthetic characteristics of their food (and the overall “dining experience”) more self-consciously. Obviously these categories overlap and involve a matter of degree. For instance, even the most connoisseur-oriented restaurant in Athens is relatively unsophisticated by the standards of large American cities.

China Fast-Food and China Boat are *consumption-oriented* restaurants and serve the equivalent of Chinese fast food. Both are located near the University of Georgia. China Fast-Food operates across the street from the main campus; China Boat is a few blocks away, close to the student dormitories. The majority of their customers are university students, staff members, and workers in downtown government agencies, banks, and stores. Lunch and dinner are served daily, with weekday lunches particularly busy.

The other two restaurants are *connoisseur-oriented*, catering to more sophisticated diners, and are further from campus. At the east end of the town lies Guangdong Restaurant, about ten miles from the university; Sichuan is five miles to the west. The regular customers of these two restaurants are professionals, business people, and professors. Although these restaurants also serve a buffet lunch, their heaviest business is in the evenings, especially during weekends.

### Consumption-Oriented Restaurants

Consumption-oriented service is characterized by efficiency, low price, and informality. The menus of these two restaurants have fewer categories and entrees, emphasizing the most popular foods such as Mongolian Beef, broccoli beef, sweet and sour chicken, and egg rolls. Lunch is served cafeteria-style. Tips are not expected. Lunch dishes in China Fast-Food are cooked in large batches rather than by the customer’s order:

At 11:30, the ten food containers on the buffet table are filled with seven freshly cooked dishes, two types of hot soup, and fried rice. The customer picks up a tray and the server provides two entrees, a soup, and fried rice, according to the customer’s choice. Although there is always a line of people waiting in front of the buffet table, customers are served within two or three minutes. (field notes)

China Boat is a newly opened restaurant. Hardly noticeable in a plain house, the owner decided to attract customers with the food rather than the decor. Although it serves a limited number of simple dishes, the owner claims that simplicity should not prevent serving high quality food. Each dish is freshly cooked according to the customer's order. The lunch, priced at \$2.69, includes one dish (from a choice of ten entrees), one egg roll, and fried rice. This low price is based on labor savings—the female owner works as the cook. The tactic of “selling more through low profit” has been rewarded quickly. Every noon the plain dining area of China Boat is crowded with a waiting line of diners who are unconcerned with the atmosphere, attracted by the value of the food. One student customer comments:

I like Chinese food. I've been to several Chinese restaurants here, but you pay the least in this restaurant. Why do I bother paying twice in a fancier place?

Such customers desire variety, but they also consider their financial need, preferring lower prices. Their practices reflect “realistic choices.” Guided by the need for “realism,” these customers do not emphasize the taste of the food or its authenticity. One student customer at China Fast-Food Restaurant claims:

I like Chinese food. I come at least three times each week. . . . How authentic the food is? Well, it does not bother me. I don't pay particular attention to whether vegetables are fresh or not either. You have good quantity and price. Mongolian Beef with garlic sauce, hot and sour soup, and fried rice, costs \$3.95, but in Guangdong, the same thing costs \$2 or \$3 more. I don't bother about the taste so long as it's OK.

Some customers are more conscious of the differences in the taste of the Chinese food. Another student recognized that the food at Guangdong tastes better, but despite this awareness she still comes to China Fast-Food for lunch, because spending almost twice as much on a regular basis is beyond her budget. The image of authenticity may bow to necessity.

### Connoisseur-Oriented Restaurants

In contrast to the consumption orientation, the connoisseur orientation is often found among diners who have greater temporal and economic resources and more extensive cultural capital. These consumers are concerned about how the characteristics of the food meets their expectations.

For instance, one American professor stated that he did not like the food in some Chinese restaurants because “it has lost the *character* of the Chinese food.” The main reason he gave for eating in Guangdong was that

the food is more authentic than the food I eat elsewhere in Athens. It is neither too sweet nor too salty. It is relatively similar to the food I had in China.

The food presented by these restaurants has an aura of being either more artistic or more authentic. Accordingly, service at these restaurants is relatively elaborate and formal, emphasizing the *occasion* of dining. The menus of these restaurants have more categories of food and more entrees under each, providing more choices. In addition to popular entrees, “chef's

specialties” or “house specials” are presented. Some dishes involving complicated procedures are served, such as Hot Braised Fish, Double-Sauteed Pork, Peking Duck, and Golden Triple Delight. The connoisseur orientation is further expressed by the use of spices and sauces that define the taste of food. Both Guangdong and Sichuan have created their own special house sauce from a combination of soy sauce, vinegar, preserved or fresh garlic, seafood sauce, sugar, dried red pepper, white or black pepper powder, oyster oil, plum sauce, cooking wine, tomato sauce, ginger sauce, and black bean sauce.

The ingredients generally are of a higher quality and price than at consumption-oriented restaurants. For instance, Shaoxin cooking wine made in Zhejiang, China, is generally considered to have a better quality than other cooking wines; Kikkoman soy sauce is also favored because of its quality. Both are more expensive than American cooking wine and soy sauce. Yet a successful combination does not necessarily imply the combination of the most expensive items. The key to a tasty sauce is to find a pleasing result through experiments, including a mixture of expensive and inexpensive ingredients—the goal is to find the best outcome at the lowest cost (Fine 1992b). In order to create a satisfactory and unique house sauce, the cooks at Guangdong tried more than fifty mixtures, experimenting with different combinations before settling on the final formula. The owner comments:

Before we made our sauce, the quality of our food was not stable. When a cook left, the newcomer may not produce the same taste because it is hard for two persons to use the exact amount of spices, even if they observe the recipe strictly. I was troubled by this problem until an idea occurred to me—an inspiration drawn from Coca Cola. No matter how many cans and no matter where it is produced it tastes the same because it has a set formula. Then we experimented with our sauce, Shifu [the cook] and I. In 1987, we tried different combinations for several months. We used it in some dishes and requested the customers’ opinion of it. If they said it was not very nice, we continued to change the formula. Finally, we used the soy bean sauce made in Taiwan, dried red pepper powder in mainland China, cooking wine in America, et cetera. The formulated sauce has increased efficiency in cooking and helped to maintain a stable quality, and more important, it has improved the taste of our food, making it different from others.

The creation of aesthetically pleasing food, while responsive to the taste of their customers, is not based on an allegiance to authentic recipes or fixed styles of preparation (Lim 1994). Ultimately, the image of the customers and their responses determine what is served, as the goal is more a good reputation than good food. The owner of Guangdong notes:

Before we provide new entrees, we often talk with our customers, making improvements by taking their advice. Take Spicy Vegetables with Tofu for example. At first they say tofu is too light and the whole dish doesn’t look nice. Then we stir-fry tofu first and apply spices separately. After several times’ trial, our customers say the dish is really appealing to the eyes and tastes very well. Tofu is golden, with pepper still green, carrot red, and onion jade-yellow.

Some infrequently ordered “authentic” dishes have, in fact, also been Americanized. The cook at Sichuan comments:

People in Athens do not like braised fish. They find it fishy. You know I cannot always cook the way I like. I must listen to the boss. He wants me to change according to the customers. The first time I changed the way of preparing the fish here I tried to bake the fish first to get rid of the fishiness, then boil in hot sauce for a couple of minutes. It works. The fish tastes fine.

The creation of more aesthetic or authentic food imposes demands on the cooks. They must be flexible, cooperative, and creative. Cooks are expected to alter their cooking techniques according to the vagaries of customers' tastes, while simultaneously making the dishes appear artistic and authentic.

Neither type of restaurant, whether consumption- or connoisseur-oriented, has authenticity as its primary goal. Tradition *as such* is not the primary object of concern for social actors (Shils 1981); most are more concerned with their immediate satisfaction, and few see adherence to tradition as anything but secondary. While the *idea* of adhering to tradition may bring some satisfaction, it is not as important as primary sensory satisfactions (or, for restaurateurs, financial ones). The style of food provided by Chinese restaurants is the consequence of an adaptation to the demands of a market. The owner of Guangdong illustrates the process:

When we started our restaurant, we heard some complaints about the Chinese food. Some customers say certain dishes are too sweet or too salty. We realized that we need to have our own market. We decided to provide something "light." You know the restaurant business has been affected by the economic situation in this country—the customers have been more cautious and thrifty in spending money, but our business has continued mainly because of the patronage of our regular customers. They like our food and come regularly.

This strategy of differentiation is common. Some restaurants present their food with a stronger flavor, others with a lighter one, but in either case, the decision is made on the basis of customer responses, mediated by servers and interpreted by the owner. Objects acquire meaning through the responses of those who experience them, not through a global ideology of how they should "truly" be. Through a process of adjustment, these restaurants have established regular clienteles.

## CONCLUSION

The social construction of authentic ethnic food is bounded by social, cultural, and economic constraints. These limits challenge the survival and diffusion of foreign cuisines, but through cultural modification the limits can be transcended. Some modification is inevitable. Yet, while a mere transplantation of the original culinary tradition is not feasible, if food is defined as too Americanized, customers will be dissatisfied, and the food will no longer be seen as representative of a distinctive ethnic tradition. If the food is totally assimilated into the American food pattern, it will lose the patronage of American clients who like it not only because it has been made to suit their taste but also because it is symbolically representative of an exotic other; they experience a self-validating "ethnic experience," a mark of their tolerance and sophistication. Ethnic food validates the self, as dining out is identity work.

The secret of the acceptance of ethnic food resides in the harmonization and compromise between seemingly contradictory requirements: being authentic and being Americanized, maintaining tradition while consciously modifying it. In other words, the restaurant requires

organizational legitimacy (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) as a place in which consumers can encounter the other, while not straying too far from their own tastes.

The focus of our research has been on the typification of customer preference by restaurant owners and employees, but customers also, if less explicitly or articulately, recognize that the exoticism and authenticity of their meal contributes to, but does not determine, their satisfaction. The experience of a segmented ethnic restaurant market in large metropolitan areas suggests that customers select the type of "exotic" experience that fits their aesthetic preferences from a range of possibilities (Lim 1994). The restaurant owner must typify the market niche and prepare the food accordingly (Fine forthcoming).

Ultimately, food preparation and consumption are social activities. The success of the Chinese in the restaurant world demonstrates that the continuity of a public ethnic culture depends on the capacity of ethnic entrepreneurs to accommodate themselves to their host environment. This capacity has several implications:

First, ethnic restaurants are sensitive to desires for variety and diversity. The American embrace of multiculturalism in the past few decades has fueled the rapid growth of Chinese restaurants. In spite of substitute food ingredients and changes in cooking techniques, Chinese food remains recognizable as Chinese, an identity that is valued.

Second, ethnic restaurateurs desire to meet the needs of distinct customer groups and therefore market to these groups. By their organizational arrangements, Chinese restaurants have adjusted to conflicts of aesthetic preference, economic status, and activity schedules, gradually establishing their own market niches.

Third, ethnic chefs and owners modify their cultural resources. The dynamic properties of ethnic cuisine benefit both the ethnic group and the larger society. As a result, the Americanization of Chinese food is a process of innovation, reinvigorating a dynamic culinary tradition. All cultural traditions are responsive to their environment. This practice should not be depreciated as a manipulation of ethnic boundaries (Van den Berghe 1981) but as a maintenance of them in the face of a changing context. Neither can the food be condemned for being inauthentic; *authenticity* has been changed. If the construction of the authenticity of ethnic food is a "lie," then it is a legitimated lie. Moreover, authenticity is a folk idea, grounded in identity politics and desires of ethnic differentiation.

The challenge for an ethnic restaurant is to differentiate itself from others, while avoiding the liability of newness, or customers' rejection of an uncomfortable strangeness. In other words, the organization must appear distinctive to capture public attention, but be sufficiently similar in its core characteristics to promote acceptance (Elsbach and Sutton 1992). Thus, a restaurant may wish to market itself as more distinctive than it actually is (Robert I. Sutton, personal communication, 1994).

The success of ethnic food depends on the participation of its audience. Late modernity has produced certain homogenizing effects as well as strong tendencies toward cultural heterogeneity (Tuchman and Levine 1993); it has blurred the borders of ethnic groups but also provided an open atmosphere for recognizing the value of diversity and the desire to participate in the cultural life of groups outside our own (Lim 1994, p. 8). Under such conditions an ethnic culture may be reconstructed, shared, and popularized. Many Americans gain satisfaction from their excursions into a multicultural ethic of consumption. As the most "pleasant way to cross ethnic boundaries" and with its "shareable" character, ethnic food has served as a paradigm of ethnicity (Van den Berghe 1984). For an American audience eating ethnic food is

not a mere reflection of their need for differentiation but also a process of creating shared symbols of diversity by which they make sense of and embrace their own fragmented culture.

This suggests a direction for addressing issues concerning multiculturalism and fragmented cultures. Rather than preserving cultures through enforced and artificial incorporation, the market has demonstrated the potential for generating voluntary inclusion. By this we do not suggest that governments should reject the incorporation of multicultural models in institutional forums but claim that we can understand the dynamics of cultural integration by examining the strategies that ethnic entrepreneurs have successfully used to bring their culture to a larger audience. The richness of cultural traditions, modified though they may be, is evident through all cultural media—music, film, festivals, clothing, and food. The project is to analyze those conditions and modifications that promote acceptance rather than rejection or apathy. If we recognize that all cultural traditions are constructed, then the goal of presenting authentic traditions can be understood as primarily a rhetorical strategy. Presenting our ethnicity in the late twentieth century has increasingly fallen under the rubric of “impression management.” We can rely upon a variety of ethnic images and claims in which to create a meaningful and situated public self.

With the emergent questioning of the essentialist character of race and ethnicity, researchers should examine those arenas in which ethnicity is displayed and presented in contemporary American life (e.g., ethnic businesses, festivals, political movements). An individual’s ethnicity is a strategic resource that at certain times and places can generate simultaneously a sense of “otherness” and “in-group cohesion,” without disclaiming ties to the core values and traditions of the polity that proclaim one as “American.” Displayed ethnicity links both identity types of “hyphenated” Americans: here Chinese and American.

The American model of diversity, grounded in public display, permits each ethnic and racial group to use its culture for economic profit, selling itself in the name of tolerance. Even when largely excluded from social participation in the past, ethnic groups used their culture for economic benefit and survival (Light 1974), but today, where there is a “favorable” atmosphere, the practice has become more conspicuous and developed. Through our purchases and presence, we validate the legitimacy of the group and of the American polity, all the while altering the ethnic culture to make it congruent with mainstream values and tastes. Nowhere is this process more evident than in our choices of cuisine.



### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank Richard Alba, Howard Aldrich, Hubert J. Chen, William Finlay, Barry Schwartz, and Robert Sutton for comments on an earlier version of this article. This article was completed while Fine was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. He is grateful for financial support provided by National Science Foundation grant #SBR-9022192.

### NOTES

1. In speaking of "American" diners throughout the article, we refer to those Americans who are not of Chinese American descent. Chinese Americans are, of course, Americans.

2. Our focus becomes the business owner, management, and employees, only touching briefly on the attitudes of customers and the community base in which the establishment is located. These other groups are deserving of more explicit treatment than this analysis provides.

3. According to Richard Pillsbury (1990, p. 152), 126 distinct ethnic cuisines are served in Pennsylvania alone.

4. The first Chinese restaurant in the United States, Macao and Woosung, opened in San Francisco in 1849. Most Chinese restaurants of the nineteenth century were modest affairs, primarily catering to working-class diners, and spread throughout the western United States along the rail lines (Pillsbury 1990, p. 51; Karnow 1994, p. 92). The growth and cultural legitimation of Chinese restaurants began in the 1890s as Chinatowns were transformed from vice districts to tourist attractions (Light 1974, p. 368).

5. Gaye Tuchman and Harvey Gene Levine (1993, p. 397) suggest that there are about 1,500 Chinese restaurants in the New York metropolitan area, which they label "the Chinese food capital of the United States."

6. Obviously, each ethnic group provides its own case. Our model, emphasizing the taming of authentic cuisines, may be more relevant for "exotic" cultures than for Northern and Western European cuisine (e.g., German or Swedish [Richard Alba, personal communication, 1994]). Chinese cuisine may be the archetypal example and, therefore, not wholly representative, because it is both widely accepted and exotic—although Mexican and Italian cuisines also would seem to fit this model broadly.

7. Restaurant owners of Chinese descent may be more or less socially assimilated into their community. Many see themselves as "outsiders," absorbing American customers for economic purposes but not in their personal lives.

8. Restaurants in other nations alter food to conform to local tastes. Chinese food in Germany does not taste precisely like Chinese food in the United States. In this case, we might say that the food has been "Teutonified" (Richard Alba, personal communication, 1994).

9. Chinese restaurants can be divided into many categories or be placed along a continuum; we dichotomize Chinese restaurants for convenience, while recognizing that this lumps dissimilar restaurants together. The dichotomy is multidimensional. The connoisseur-type restaurant is involved not only in providing more authentic food but is also involved in staged authenticity (Van den Berghe 1984, p. 394) in the performances by servers as part of a dining experience (Finkelstein 1989). In these restaurants customers expend more time and resources. In addition, the placement of a restaurant may vary by time of day, as lunch may be more consumption-oriented than dinner.

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