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Acculturation and Ethnic-Identification of American Chinese Restaurants

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

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by

Ting Shi

May 2017

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Dr. Martha Copp, Chair

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Dr. Joseph Baker

Keywords: Acculturation, Chinese Restaurants, Ethnic identity, Authenticity

## ABSTRACT

### Acculturation and Ethnic-Identification of American Chinese Restaurants

by

Ting Shi

Immigration reform in 1965 enabled a large number of Chinese immigrants to settle in the United States. Chinese restaurants expanded quickly both quantitatively and geographically. This thesis researches the interactions between Chinese restaurant employers and employees and their customers. I focus on several Chinese restaurants in a mid-size Southeast U.S. city with a university and I analyze their methods for attracting culturally distinct groups of customers—local Americans and Chinese students or immigrants. I conducted participant observation in two Chinese restaurants and in-person interviews with 14 people from four restaurants whose roles are owners, managers, or servers. I found that Chinese restaurants in my sample shifted their cuisine to accommodate local American customers. I also found that they provided unofficial services for Chinese customers. By operating as quasi cultural centers and information hubs, the restaurants I studied cultivated loyal Chinese customers and maintained their claims to ethnic authenticity.

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## DEDICATION

My research is dedicated to my mother and my father, Yaning Hu and Limin Shi. They encouraged me to study abroad and gave me financial and spiritual support. Their love is the primary motivation for me to finish this research.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

According to Lu and Fine (1995), the authenticity of an ethnic restaurant is “negotiated.” Chinese restaurants, one of the most popular categories of ethnic restaurants in America, have steadily evolved since commercial Chinese food first arrived in North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Peters 2015). As restaurant cuisines and tastes have shifted, the “authenticity” of Chinese food for general American customers has also shifted.

This thesis analyzes how Chinese restaurants in a mid-sized Southeastern college town negotiate the expectations of two groups of customers: local American customers and Chinese immigrants. Through field observations in Chinese restaurants and interviews with restaurant proprietors and staff, I explore how the restaurants in my sample offer their American patrons reliable, yet exotic, gastronomic experiences that nevertheless accommodate American tastes. At the same time, they engage in organizational impression management for Chinese immigrants by adhering to Chinese culinary methods and offering a place that can ease immigrants’ homesickness.

Compared to the largest American cities, which have significant Chinese populations, smaller-size cities don’t have enough Chinese people in the population as the main customer group. Serving mainly American customers means that the Chinese restaurants in my study have to accommodate local American tastes: use of premade sauces, shifting of ingredients, Americanized service, etc.; meanwhile, they incorporated Chinese symbols into their décor to manifest their ethnic identity. For Chinese immigrants and students, these restaurants developed multiple functions other than serving foods. They offered information and a space for Chinese



customers to stay culturally anchored. Chinese customers thus helped support the restaurants' ethnic identity even as their expectations of original Chinese foods were not fully met.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Cultural Adaptation**

The metaphor of American society as a melting pot implies that many ethnic cultures assimilate into an American host society to gain acceptance from the majority. Regardless of the validity of the melting pot concept, a “pure” ethnic cultural experience may be impossible to provide for others, given the hybrid nature of American culture (Clair et al. 2011). As Lu and Fine (1995) noted, the perception of authenticity—as a kind of “pure” cultural experience—is a negotiated social product. Thus, for “ethnic” restaurants in America, authenticity may be at odds with gradual changes that result from acculturation. Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits first described acculturation as changes in cultural patterns due to “continuous first-hand contact” between different cultural groups (Redfield et al. 1936:149). Berry (1997:7) states that “in practice acculturation tends to induce more change in one of the groups than in the other.”

Acculturation is divided into four types (Barnett 1954): assimilation, reactive (triggering resistance to change in both groups), creative (stimulating new cultural forms, not found in either of the cultures in contact), and delayed (initiating changes that appear more fully years later). In this sense, the emergence of American Chinese food is the consequence of creative acculturation. Chinese immigrants were defined as subordinate to white Americans for a long time; hence, compared to local American culture, the introduced Chinese culture and foods are “not equal in power” (Berry 1997:8). Other than creative acculturation, American Chinese restaurants also show an essence of “selective cultural adaptation” (Cleveland et al. 2009). According to Cleveland et al., “ethnic groups or individuals can exhibit one acculturation pattern for certain customs and situations, while exhibiting another pattern for others” (2009:198). The process of

selective acculturation explains why certain parts of menus from American Chinese restaurants present a strong American style while other parts stay ethnically Chinese in flavor and style. In addition, many Chinese restaurants now serve “pan-Asian” food (e.g. Japanese, Thai, and Singaporean).

An important factor related to selective cultural adaptation is the ethnic mix of the restaurant’s image. Individuals display different ethnic identities or saliences in different situations; sub-ethnic identities are crucial in intra-ethnic situations. For instance, “when interacting with fellow ethnics from Spain, a Spanish-born Basque is likely to invoke his regional sub-ethnic identity...[but] with non-Basques, his general ethnic identity--e.g., a Basque” (Lyman and Douglass 1973:355). The differences of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic situations influence how exclusively a Chinese restaurant owner will identify the restaurant. Ethnic identity will be more stressed by an ethnic group during the interaction with the majority population (Jamal and Chapman 2000).

Some third- or fourth-generation immigrants may signify their ethnic identity only in museums and ethnic festivals. An ethnic identity may grow less significant after the third generation; instead, ethnicity will turn into a symbolic ethnicity, which can persist for generations (Gvion and Trostler 2008).

### **Organizational Impression Management**

The concept of impression management, coined by sociologist Erving Goffman, reflects people’s micro-level efforts to control how others perceive them (Goffman 1959). In the field of management, *organizational* impression management is defined as organizations using communications tactics to influence public opinion of a company’s image or brand, or to control

the perceptions others form of them (Terrel and Kwok 2011; Zaharopoulos 2015). Members of organizations seek public approval and status through collective impression management (Highhouse et al. 2009; Staw 1991). The term “organizational identity” can be used to describe how organizations wish to be perceived (Highhouse 2009); it may also be fruitful to think of organizational identity as the product of identity work that leaders and workers perform at the organizational level. In addition, DuBrin (2011) considers outside public relations and communication specialists, as well as customers and clients, as participants in organizational impression management.

Chinese restaurants manifest their ethnic identity through continuous impression management. Early Chinese restaurants in the era of the “Gold Rush” tried hard to manage their identity as decent restaurants and struggled against the stigma of “serving rats” (Chen 2014; Peters 2015). After the 1960s, the Chinese restaurants in San Francisco dealt less with stigma management and instead attempted to appear more “real” as Chinese restaurants (Liu and Lin 2009). Chinese restaurants in America continue to offer the opportunity to study how organizations that serve a similar purpose engage in organizational impression management.

### **American Chinese Restaurants**

As the historical and organizational management literature suggest, ethnic restaurants in America have evolved over time. According to Gvion and Trostler’s study of menu changes in American ethnic restaurants during 1960s to 1990s, ethnic restaurants changed from striving to offer familiarity to mainstream American diners to being more daring by serving authentic dishes (Gvion and Trostler 2008). Liu and Lin (2009) describe how Chinese restaurants in Southern California changed from serving American Chinese foods like Chop Suey to serving more

authentic Chinese foods after the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed in 1965.

Following this legislation, a wave of Chinese immigrants arrived; in response, restaurant cuisines and diners' tastes shifted to promote authentic Chinese foods over Americanized dishes.

Chinese restaurants are tied together with Chinese communities. In a study of the history of Chinese food in America, Chen (2014) refers to Chinatown as the cradle of Chinese food. He writes that Chinese food can be “a marker for cultural identity.” Similarly, Lu and Fine argue that “authenticity is not an objective criterion but is socially constructed and linked to expectations” and they use the concept of “Americanized” to describe the consequence of a cultural expectation, noting, “[as] in all cases of cultural diffusion, adjustments are made to accommodate the values of the host society” (Lu and Fine 1995:538).

Socially constructed ethnic patterns have also been noted by other scholars, such as Tuchman and Levine (1993:383), who examine how Jewish people in New York City incorporated Chinese food into their new cultural identity and gave new meanings to this food. In their analysis, ethnic groups no longer “form their identities out of their traditional customs”; rather, both foods and people are related together in the new cultural environment and form new identities.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

To research how Chinese restaurants in my research location adapt to both American and Chinese customers' tastes and dining cultures, I conducted field observation and in-depth interviews as my primary modes of data collection. The restaurants in my study are located in a mid-size city in the Southeastern U.S. with a population of 60,000; only around 200<sup>1</sup> people are Chinese immigrants (residents and students). The city supports around 10 Chinese restaurants (including Pan-Asian restaurants) with Chinese proprietors. I selected four of them to be research sites for interviews with owners, managers, and servers: Panda's Asian Cuisine, Tasty Garden Chinese Restaurant, Jade Dragon Oriental Cuisine, and China Palace Buffet (all pseudonyms). Out of these four restaurants, I selected two for field observations – Panda's Asian Cuisine and Tasty Garden Chinese Restaurant.

The four restaurants in my sample served a range of customer profiles and prepared slightly different kinds of food. Tasty Garden and Jade Dragon had more Chinese students from the local university because of their lower prices. Panda's was somewhat higher-end, serving mainly local Americans with a combination of Chinese and Japanese cuisine. China Palace Buffet, on the other hand, adopted a popular American restaurant layout—the food buffet—and served mainly American Chinese foods and grilled foods.

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<sup>1</sup> Two Chinese universities have exchange programs with the local university. According to the website of those two Chinese universities, about 40 to 60 Chinese students come to the local university for a 2-year exchange program, so there are approximately 100 Chinese undergraduate students at the local university. If we count graduate students, faculty, and residents, there are at least 200 Chinese people in the study location.

During the fall and winter of 2016, I conducted field observations five times each at Panda's Asian Cuisine and Tasty Garden Chinese Restaurant. My observations ranged in length from an hour to two hours. I observed the restaurants' décor and how the owners and wait staff interacted with American and Chinese customers. I conducted 14 in-depth interviews overall. The interviews included three restaurant owners, one restaurant chef/partner, and 10 restaurant servers, most of whom had experience working at more than one restaurant. The interviews were conducted in quiet locations that the interviewees chose and lasted around 15 to 20 minutes. They were asked several open-ended questions (see Appendices A and B); the conversations were recorded into audio files and transcribed afterward. During interviews, the informants provided me with plenty of information about how these Chinese restaurants got started, how they collectively adapted to American customers, and what they did to signify the restaurants' ethnic identities.

An additional source of data I gathered informally and did not systematically analyze were restaurant reviews and comments on the Internet. The data sources included Google Map, Yelp, and some regional information sites for Chinese diners. I gathered representative comments on the four Chinese restaurants in my sample and five Chinese restaurants in Los Angeles, California. Those more varied and cosmopolitan Chinese restaurants located in a major U.S. city helped provide contrasting data because their clientele are primarily Chinese people.

After each field observation, I immediately recorded fieldnotes. Because Chinese is my first language, I wrote my fieldnotes using Microsoft Word in Chinese. Within a few days of each observation, I open coded my fieldnotes (Charmaz 2001). When I finished all coding, I organized my codes into different thematic groups and categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and wrote in-depth analyses on those themes. The main themes include "cultural symbols," "access privilege,"

“familial appellation,” “back-stage interaction,” etc. I used Evernote as the tool to record interviews and store the audio data. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, except with one American server who previously worked at Panda’s Asian Cuisine. I transcribed the interview recordings in Chinese and coded them. To permit ease of analysis and writing, I selectively translated the field and interview data. Only the material intended for use in my thesis was translated into English.



## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### **Defining Chinese Cuisine and Its “Authenticity”**

It is hard to define a cuisine by its geographic characteristics. All ethnic-identified foods - Italian food, Japanese food, Chinese food, etc.--have a long history of continuously reforming and changing. The emergence of new ingredients and new cooking methods regularly alter cuisines. However, even though globalization of food reduces the huge differences among cuisines (Symons 1999), we can still find some key features or characteristics in ethnic cuisine, especially in Chinese cuisine.

In terms of cooking methods, Chinese cuisine often involves the use of steam. Steamed fresh fish and steamed dim sum are popular foods in China; Chinese cuisine is also well known for the stir-fry method, which requires strong heat and a short cooking time to enhance vegetable and meat flavors. As for ingredients, tofu is unique among east Asian cuisine. How Chinese people consume food also reflects historical and cultural patterns. Rather than serving single portions, eating together and sharing dishes is a general habit in China. Although there is a hidden danger of cross-infection (Chen 2003), eating together, as a general habit, reflects Chinese dietary culture and is accepted by most Chinese people.

Ethnic restaurants often advertise authenticity to attract customers. However, as the cuisine evolves, there is no solid answer to the question “what is authentic Chinese food?” In a traditional sense, an authentic Chinese dish should be the same as it would be in China. However, as Chinese cuisine changes continuously, immigrants from different times have slightly different interpretations of “authenticity.”

In the U.S., one of the ways to claim authenticity is to specify the region where the cuisine came from. Of the four restaurants in my sample – Panda’s, Tasty Garden, Jade Dragon, and China Palace -- only Tasty Garden specifies “Chinese” on their signboard. As the owner of Tasty Garden explained:

We are the first one and currently the only restaurant serving pure Chinese food. We didn’t want to add Japanese food into our menu, because we are Chinese. Specifically, we serve Sichuan food, which is highly identifiable for its hot and spicy tastes. Sichuan food is also more famous than any other Chinese food in the world, so that we decided to serve Sichuan food.

Other than Tasty Garden, other Chinese restaurants either identified their foods as “Asian” or “Pan-Asian,” like Panda’s and Jade Dragon, or blurred the ethnic identities of their food, like China Palace Buffet. I will return to the topic of authenticity later in this chapter.

### **Functions of Chinese Restaurants**

Chinese restaurants have multiple functions, compared to normal local American restaurants. As ethnic restaurants, they provide different forms of service for ethnic customers and local customers. In addition, like many other ethnic businesses, Chinese restaurants also play a role as a center for the Chinese community. The degree to which restaurants get involved in ethnic services depends on the nature of the relations between the restaurant owners and Chinese groups. For example, one restaurant in my study location kept closer relations with the Chinese church and another was more involved in Chinese students’ affairs.

## **Information Hub**

Through my observation and interviews, I found that Chinese students and immigrants use restaurants like Panda's and Jade Dragon as information hubs. The owners and servers of those restaurants serve as agents who collect and distribute information. The information they make available includes roommate-seeking, car selling, course information sharing, and flight tickets information sharing. As I noticed at Panda's:

A Chinese student came in, who we call Peter. He is a close friend of the owner. After coming in, he put his GMAT guide book and an iPad on the table and then picked up a drink in the kitchen by himself. The owner sat at the same table with him and talked about the GMAT exam and course with him.

The owner of Panda's is an alumnus of the local university who shares plenty of information regarding courses and professors. Many Chinese students seek his advice in order to select the "nicest" professor. In another Chinese restaurant, Tasty Garden, a Chinese server gives customers information about car selling and roommate-seeking. Students preparing to leave the region and some new students leave their information and preferences with the server. Because most of the Chinese students here are around the same age as her son, the server at Tasty Garden is seen as an "aunt" who is capable of helping those young students.

## **Cultural Center**

In addition to serving as information hubs, Chinese restaurants also play roles as Chinese cultural centers. Especially in the region surrounding my sample, Chinese people are an extreme ethnic minority. For American customers who are interested in exotic culture, Chinese restaurants are essential places to experience culture through food. For Chinese customers, Chinese restaurants provide them tastes of home, which helps overseas Chinese people maintain

their ethnic identity and manage homesickness. The tastes of home do not only come from the foods that Chinese restaurants serve, but also from a familiar feeling in the environment (in contrast to the exotic feeling for American customers). When I observed at Panda's Asian Cuisine, I found that Chinese customers were treated as family members. For example,

It was around 9:30 at night, I had accompanied the owner of Panda's to go to another city and back. The owner decided to treat me to some foods from Fuzhou, where his hometown is located. ... When we were ready to eat, the owner's aunt came to us with two bowls with steamed eggplants in one bowl and fried fish in another. She told me that the food was some leftovers of their (the owner's relatives') dinner. I thanked her. (field notes)

The owners' close friends are usually seen as family members by other restaurant employees. Sharing food is one of the many ways to manifest close relationships and familiarity. Another way is to use a familial appellation. At Tasty Garden, the server, who is also the owner's mother, refers to herself as "aunt" when talking to Chinese students, who are a similar age as her son. The other common method of showing familiarity to students is to allow self-service in the restaurant, which will be discussed in the next section.

Ethnic festivals are essential times for immigrants and international students to manifest their ethnic identities; having parties at an ethnic restaurant is also an effective way to do identity work (Gvion and Trostler 2008; Lu and Fine 1995). During certain festivals, Chinese restaurants provide special treats for Chinese students here. For example, on January 28, the day that the Spring festival 2017 began, several restaurants such as Panda's and Jade Dragon provided free dumplings or even free dinner for Chinese students.

For customers who are not Chinese, dining in a Chinese restaurant provides “exotic encounters,” which are the main stock ethnic restaurants have (Lu and Fine 1995) to compete with other mainstream American restaurants. To provide fully immersive experiences for patrons, ethnic restaurants need to provide not only authentic food but also an authentic atmosphere, which includes décor, music, service, etc. As I noticed at Panda’s Asian Cuisine:

Panda’s Asian Cuisine has a relatively dark brown décor. As I stepped into the restaurant, I saw a dark wooden screen and a Chinese Knot hanging on it. Above the screen, there was a long Chinese kite hanging from the ceiling. The tables and booths were all in a dark color. On the wall, there were several Chinese paintings and Shufa (Chinese calligraphy by brush pen). The sushi bar had a fake roof that was designed to look like curved Chinese eaves.

As the most upscale Chinese restaurant in the city, Panda’s decorations give clients a feeling of higher rank and an exotic atmosphere. From kites to Shufa, the décor and symbols declare the restaurant’s claim to an ethnically Chinese identity. Chinese symbols are also used in other Chinese restaurants. When I observed at Tasty Garden Chinese Restaurant, some Chinese lanterns hung from the ceiling and a lacquered black screen divided the reception desk from the dining area. The restaurant played Chinese pop music as well.

### **Self-Service and Back-Stage Interaction**

As with all restaurants, kitchens are seen as a profane yet protected place, which only employees can access for sanitation and to place orders (Fine 2008). However, as an ethnic business, most Chinese restaurants in this college town partially opened their kitchens for Chinese patrons in specific situations. For most Chinese students, three of the Chinese

restaurants in my sample except China Palace Buffet opened their drink machines and tableware for self-service. Chinese students are allowed to get drinks and chopsticks as well as napkins for themselves. Sometimes in Panda's, Chinese students are even allowed to take rice and cooked dishes from the kitchen by themselves. For example, I once visited Panda's with my friends to have a farewell party for a post-doc student:

We (9 people, including me) went into Panda's and saw Rock (the owner of Panda's, who is a similar age to us) leaning by the sushi bar and chatting with his father. We greeted him. He led us to the party room which was semi-enclosed space reserved for special occasions. We arranged tables and chairs so we could sit in a square instead of sitting in two rows like in America. While we were moving tables, Rock asked us what we want to order. We let him recommend a menu with ten dishes and a soup. After we got all the tables and chairs settled, we entered the kitchen and grabbed napkins, chopsticks and drinks. When the dishes were ready to be served, Rock came in and said (in Chinese), "dishes are ready, someone go take them." Some of us went to the kitchen and got the dishes, the rest of us filled the bowls of rice. ... After we finished eating and chatting, we cleaned the tables and moved the tables and chairs back to the previous setting.

This is a typical scene of self-service in Panda's Asian Cuisine. Different restaurants have different scales of "opening" their kitchens; for instance, Tasty Garden doesn't want customers to take dishes from the kitchen by themselves. Nevertheless, Chinese customers definitely have more access "privileges" in Chinese restaurants than other ethnic groups. By granting those access privileges, the restaurants gain more loyal Chinese customers. Through access privileges, information sharing, and cultural center symbolism, restaurants can cultivate their business as a "third place" for Chinese customers (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982).

Attracting more Chinese customers means that a restaurant needs to take more responsibility as an information hub and culture center and conduct more activities beyond “serving food.” When restaurant owners or servers were involved in “ethnic activities,” such as exchanging information, having food together, or chatting with another Chinese customer, back-stage interactions (Goffman 1959) occurred. In the back-stage interactions, the restaurant employees (owners/servers) played roles as informants or friends, and then they shifted their roles back into owners/servers with other (American) customers. As I noticed in Tasty Garden,

It was around 12:40 pm on a weekday. There were only three tables of guests, including me. At one of the tables were Chinese customers: two females, one male, and a baby in a baby stroller. The server, who is the owner’s mother, was continuously chatting with these Chinese customers after serving the other American customer and me. When talking about the baby, the server held up the baby like a mother and talked with the parents, giving some advice such as how to stop the baby from crying and how to feed him/her. Then she held the baby, walked around the restaurant, and walked over to me. She said to the baby in Chinese, “say uncle!” The baby just stared at me, and I did a funny face to him/her (I was not sure of the gender).

Such back-stage interaction occurs only between Chinese customers and the Chinese server. This kind of interaction makes ethnic restaurants more complex, beyond a regular restaurant that focuses primarily on serving food. The informal interaction also makes restaurants more culturally exotic. Just like a Buddha in an Indian restaurant, or Sushi chefs in a Japanese restaurant, owner’s or servers’ informal interactions with Chinese customers make the restaurant feel more Chinese and give local American customers an opportunity to get a glimpse of Chinese cultural interactions.

Compared to the interaction with Chinese customers, the servers in Chinese restaurants have more stylized interactions with American customers. In my interviews with 10 servers in Chinese restaurants, all of them but one American server stated that interactions with American customers are standardized. For example,

When the customer comes in, there will be another server to lead them to the table. After the customer sits down, I usually give each of them an Americanized menu and a Chinese menu for them all. Then I will ask them what to drink. You see, we do the same thing as what servers in other American restaurants do. (Interview with Bo)

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Some American customers will ask me questions such as “where did you come from?” Sometimes they would ask me to recommend interesting places to travel in China. Most of them just have a stylized conversation with you. There are few American customers who would really discuss Chinese culture with you patiently. (Interview with Di)

On the contrary to the back-stage interaction, interaction between Chinese restaurants servers and American customers are in the front-stage (Goffman 1959) where the servers need to confront the expectations from the “audiences” (Goffman 1959), which require them to offer standardized services.

### **Running Chinese Restaurants in Inter- and Intra-Ethnic Markets**

Chinese restaurants are now one of the most popular ethnic restaurant businesses in the U.S. (Lu and Fine 1995). Many first-generation immigrants consider Chinese restaurants as a first choice for making a living in America (Zhang 2010). The owner of Tasty Garden told me:

This restaurant was started by my uncle and aunt who came to the university for a doctoral degree in the late ‘80s. To make a living, they decided to have a part-time job at



another Chinese-owned restaurant. They started by doing dish washing and serving. In '92, they thought it was time to start their own business, so they opened this restaurant, and they named it Tasty Garden, "Zi Wei Guan," in Chinese. In the early 2000s, the old chef wanted to retire, and he introduced another chef from a famous Chinese restaurant in Atlanta to come here. He brought us the techniques of Sichuan foods, and designed the menu by himself. Gradually, he taught me how to cook Sichuan food.

In an interview with the owner of Panda's, he told me that his family came to America after some friends' successes in the restaurant business, and they designed the menu by combining several menus from other Chinese restaurants.

In small cities where there is no Chinatown, those who open Chinese restaurants mostly rely on social networks formed in China to get started. For instance, the Chinese restaurant owners I interviewed either followed after friends' successful experiences or cooperated with experienced restaurateurs. In large cities, however, ethnic enclaves like Chinatown help channel new immigrants into the larger American society and find jobs in restaurants around Chinatown (Liu and Lin 2009). Those new Chinese immigrants entering large cities since 1965 (Liu and Lin 2009) constantly bring new tastes. Therefore, restaurants in large cities present more diverse and regional-specific tastes than those in small cities.

Furthermore, new immigrants crowding into large cities create two different types of markets compared to small cities. In a large city like Los Angeles (LA), ethnic restaurants have Chinese immigrants as their main customers, so they must compete in an intra-ethnic market and find a more specific niche to succeed. In this market, foods are more connoisseur-oriented (Lu and Fine 1995). In contrast, Chinese restaurants in small cities deal with the inter-ethnic market, where they have significantly more American customers, and are expected to demonstrate more

general Chinese culture while accommodating more local tastes, rather than appeal to connoisseurs.

In small cities, most Chinese restaurants are still family-run, which can be relatively backward and inefficient. Family-run restaurants are usually more casual and less concerned with professionalism when serving their customers. As I witnessed at Tasty Garden, the chef finished a take-out order, took the pack out from the kitchen, put it on a near table, and yelled loudly to his mother to take it. Tasty Garden is relatively small and all employees play multiple roles. The mother takes orders, serves, and sometimes helps cook in the kitchen; the son mainly cooks and sometimes answers phone calls from American customers. Due to its small scale, customers at Tasty Garden need to wait significantly more time for their dishes and may get poor service. As one customer commented on a website:

The service is typically good, though at times it can be a little slow (and on one particular occasion, it was VERY slow). Ordering ahead can alleviate that. I'd be tempted to take off one star for somewhat inconsistent service, but the food is really, really good. Order off of the Szechuan menu. You can't go wrong.

Besides the small scale of operation, another feature of Chinese restaurants in small cities is that they mainly aim to please American customers. Chinese restaurant owners have complex feelings about their Chinese customers. More Chinese customers can contribute more ethnic “authenticity” to the restaurant. However, due to the lack of a tipping tradition in China, Chinese customers who are new to the U.S. may pay very small or even no tips. In my interviews with the owners of Panda’s, Tasty Garden, and Jade Dragon Oriental Cuisine, they all told me that their main customer group is local Americans. In menu designing and cooking they are more concerned about American customers’ tastes. The chef of Jade Dragon told me:

The taste of Chinese food is appealing for local Americans. When we started in the 90s, customers even needed to wait in line to eat our food because we improved the taste of our food to accommodate the local taste. Americans in this area prefer dishes with heavy flavoring, especially more sugar and salt. We like a light taste, but they would find it tasteless. That's why we always put extra salt, sugar and soy sauce on the table.

A necessary feature for a good business is to be good at accommodating customers or clients. Around 2007, two Chinese universities started exchange programs with the local university. A modest number of Chinese students from Beijing and Shandong began to come here. Chinese restaurants then started to create new menus. As the owner of Panda's said,

The second menu is for the Chinese students at the local university. I know they mostly came from Beijing and Shandong, which are both in Northern China, where people have a taste for heavier flavor. So we put dishes with Northern flavors on the second menu.

Dishes like Zhajiang Noodle (noodle with ground pork in sweet sauce) were welcomed by students from Beijing.

Due to a lack of professional chefs, the imitation of Sichuan food or the other cuisines found in Northern China barely satisfied those exchange students in a gastronomic way. I remembered a chat with Rock, the owner of Panda's, who told me that the chefs in his restaurants are his relatives, sometimes his parents would help cook as well. None of them have culinary training in China. However, they indeed provided an acceptable sense of home. Chinese restaurants owners such as Rock are willing to offer home cuisine to familiar Chinese patrons. I once complained to him that their food seemed inauthentic; he invited me to come to their restaurant around 8:30 pm to join their family dinner for "very authentic Fuzhou cuisine" at that time.

Compared to Chinese restaurants in small cities, those in New York or Los Angeles have much larger markets. Chinese restaurants in these cities have larger scales of operation and more diverse service and food. Some chain-operated Chinese restaurants have opened their branches in large U.S. cities, which honestly kept the same decoration and food preparation as in China. Consequently, most restaurants in these more competitive markets provide regionally exclusive food rather than general Chinese food. People can easily find more sophisticated Sichuan food, Hunan food, and even Shaanxi food, which is not even popular in China. These restaurants are more careful in choosing ingredients and culinary methods to meet the definition of their specific cuisine.

For restaurants in large cities, customers can easily find reviews and comments on the Internet. In an information website for Chinese people in LA, I found comments on a Shaanxi restaurant (in Chinese):

Cold dishes and cold noodles are just fine! Yangrou Paomo (pita bread stewed in lamb soup) taste different when I have it the second time. Maybe they have two chefs cooking that.

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There should not be tofu in Yangrou Paomo. And there are too many onions in BBQ lamb! When I told my thought to the waitress, she said that the food was not cooked by her, isn't it funny?

Chinese patrons of these restaurants may care more about specific regional authenticity. To connoisseurs, no taste shift is acceptable. These restaurants also seem to care more about their performance of authenticity. When I traveled to LA, I noticed a Shaanxi restaurant placed two full-size replicas of Terra-Cotta Warriors outside, which is the most famous cultural symbol for

the Shaanxi Province. As large city restaurants' organizational impression management suggests, claims to authenticity may come from displays of regional specificity in food and décor. Specialization in large markets saves these restaurants from having to cater to culturally inconsistent audiences. But they must please more discerning customers' expectations to successfully negotiate that authenticity.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

As long as a degree of population heterogeneity exists, American Chinese restaurants in small cities perform a variety of cultural functions and try to please differing customer tastes. Chinese restaurants that are competing in an inter-ethnic market need to find the balance point between “Americanization” and “authenticity,” between local American clients and Chinese immigrants, and between their roles as restaurants and as cultural centers. Further, the Chinese restaurants are dealing with two different expectations of “authenticity” through constant impression management. Wooden screens, kites, and Chinese Lanterns are classic Chinese symbols, which give enough feeling of Chinese-ness for American customers; Chinese pop music and a menu in Chinese make Chinese customers feel back at home.

We can borrow Sartre’s (1946) famous words to explain these contrasting patterns: “L’existence précède l’essence.” The emergence and acculturation of the Chinese restaurants in my study are not the consequence of chance, but are the result of restaurant owners’ responses to larger patterns of market competition and population mobility. These restaurants don’t need to be the same as the restaurants in China to manifest their “authenticity” nor be the same as American restaurants to fit into the mainstream. “Authenticity” is not a set standard; it is instead the result of a socially constructed negotiation or dialogue between proprietors, servers, and customers. The dishes provided in Chinese restaurants in my study cultivate “authenticity” in how they prepare and serve Americanized Chinese food.

Chinese restaurants and Chinese immigrants develop a relationship of mutual benefits. Chinese immigrants rely on these restaurants to comfort their homesickness and to anchor and uphold their cultural identities. In exchange, Chinese restaurants need these ethnic customers to

manifest their “ethnic authenticity.” As I explained earlier, the main expectation from American customers is an “exotic gastronomic tour”; Chinese customers assuredly contribute “authenticity” to the Chinese restaurants. Chinese customers thus play a critical role in the process of the restaurants’ claims of authenticity. They are not only special customers, but also measures for indicating a Chinese restaurant’s authenticity. A Chinese restaurant with more Chinese patrons will surely be considered more authentic, and its dishes more original.

Chinese customers play multiple roles for the restaurants and the restaurants have multiple functions for Chinese communities. Other than dining places, Chinese restaurants also work as information hubs and cultural centers. In general, Chinese restaurants in small cities cultivate their businesses as a “third place” (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982), which exists as a place other than home and workplace and provides people spaces and chances to establish social contacts. Although these functions work unofficially, they help restaurants maintain regular customers and build personal relations between restaurant owners/managers and customers. The multiple functions of Chinese restaurants also provide an avenue to study the social structures and social networks of ethnic minority communities.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Interview Guide -- Owners

1. What is your country of birth?
  - a. If you were born outside the U.S., when did you come to the U.S.?
2. When did you start the restaurant?
3. Did you have any restaurant experience before you started this restaurant(s) in the US?
  - a. If you did, how is your U.S. restaurant different from a typical Chinese restaurant in China?
  - b. If you didn't, how did you come to choose owning/running a restaurant as your career?
  - c. (to non U.S. born participants) Did you have the idea to do this before or after you arrived in the U.S?
4. Did you seek help from any Chinese organizations in America, or people who own restaurants when you started your restaurant?
5. How did you design the menu? (If they have an English menu and a Chinese menu) How did you come to have two menus? When did you decide to do that? Does it create any extra work for you?
6. How did you decide on the range of food you serve? What does the culture behind the food mean to this restaurant?

7. What cultural groups are your main customers? Do you have more customers who identify as Chinese or more who identify as American? What dishes do they like the most?
8. Do you think your restaurant reflects any Chinese traditions? Have you made your restaurant more or less traditional in any way since you opened the restaurant? Please describe.
9. How did you come up with the restaurant name and the interior design?
10. What do you like the most about running a Chinese restaurant in the U.S.?
11. What do you like the least about it?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Guide -- Servers**

1. When did you start working in this restaurant?
2. Did you have any restaurant experience before you started working here? If so, what kind of restaurant(s)?
3. a. (For ethnic Chinese servers) How do you think this restaurant differs from a typical Chinese restaurant in China?  
  
b. (For ethnic Chinese and all other servers) How do you think this restaurant differs from a typical American restaurant?
4. If the restaurant has an English menu and a Chinese menu: How do you determine which menu to give to your customers? Does it create any extra work for you?
5. What cultural groups are your main customers? Do you have more customers who identify as Chinese or more who identify as American? What dishes do they like the most?
6. Do you think this restaurant reflects any Chinese traditions?
7. Are you required to help this restaurant appear Chinese or “Asian”? If so, please describe.
8. (If the server is not ethnically Chinese) How do you feel about working here and not being ethnically Chinese?
9. (For any server) Are you ever asked about Chinese culture by customers?
10. What do you think about the restaurant’s interior design from a cultural perspective?

11. What do you like the most about working in this restaurant?

12. What do you like the least about it?

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