

EXCLUSION TO FUSION

THE CHINESE RESTAURANT AS A SITE OF CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

Phil Greenwood
HIS 353: Asian American History
December 6, 2024

In the year 1900, a famished William Donnelly entered a Cantonese restaurant in Sacramento. Noticing his disheveled appearance, the staff requested that Donnelly pay for his meal in advance. In a vicious rage, the young White patron began smashing the windows and beating his Chinese waiter mercilessly. We could only imagine what sort of day William Donnelly was having up until this point, or what exactly brought him to act so abhorrently. The records do not say. We *do* know, however, that in his guilty verdict, his much older White judge felt the need to condemn Donnelly's behavior on a deeply personal level. Rather than criticize the man's rage, however, the judge chose to publicly scorn his decision to dine at a Chinese restaurant, declaring that "any White man who would patronize a Chinese restaurant ought to be confined in jail on general principles."¹

If this judge's principles were to be enforced, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and many other cities would have filled their jails in record time. As many cultural and culinary historians have noted, there was an unprecedented boom in the popularity of American Chinese restaurants between the California Gold Rush in 1849 and the early 1900s, when these establishments proliferated from the Pacific to the Atlantic coasts. Throughout these five decades, the number of Chinese restaurant workers in American cities increased exponentially. In Marysville, California's third largest city at the time, the number of Chinese food cooks increased from eighteen in 1860 to over 1,000 in 1870.² From 1910 to 1920, the number of Chinese restaurants nationwide doubled. In New York City alone, they quadrupled.³ Ironically, just as Chinese cuisine found great success, Chinese people were stripped of their most basic

¹ Yong Chen, *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 106-107.

² Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*, 77.

³ Maria Godoy, "Lo Mein Loophole: How U.S. Immigration Law Fueled A Chinese Restaurant Boom," *NPR*, Last modified February 22, 2016, <https://www.npr.org>.

legal rights,⁴ and victimized by an exclusionary immigration policy, which led to a general decline in the total number of Chinese employed in the United States.⁵

This reveals an important moment of tension and perhaps one of the greatest anomalies of America's layered culinary history. How is it that through this era of vicious anti-Asian racism and exclusion, so many Americans patronized Chinese eateries and ate Chinese ingredients? Historians who have attempted to name one race or demographic as responsible for this shift have failed to see the whole picture. Scholars of one school have argued that Americans' increased interest in Chinese menu items was purely the result of a social shift towards more exciting and adventurous lifestyles open to different cultural traditions.⁶ A separate cohort of historians hands full agency to the Chinese business owners and cooks instead for strategically steering their restaurants down the more profitable path of American assimilation.⁷

Yong Chen's *Chop Suey, USA*, is characteristic of the primary school of scholarship. Chen, a historian of Asian American immigration, contradicts the assumption that the mere taste or gastronomical appeal of Chinese food piqued the interest of White consumers. Instead, Chen argues that the success of Chinese food in the United States is inextricably tied to the rise of the United States as "an empire of consumption." The acceleration of adventurous "dining out" culture exposed a gap in the market that Chinese restaurants were suited to fill. To Chen, the role of the Chinese restaurant was similar to the postwar fast food epidemic in its dependence on

⁴ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*, 76. In 1854 the US Supreme Court's decision in the landmark case of *People v. Hall* ruled that Chinese people could not testify against white citizens in court, declaring them incredible witnesses on account of their race.

⁵ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*, 96. In 1904 the US Congress made the Chinese Exclusion Act permanent in response to the Chinese government's efforts to improve conditions for Chinese travelers to the United States.

⁶ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*.

⁷ Andrew Coe, *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Haiming Liu, *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express: A History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

upper-class trends and middle-class necessities. In fact, Chen repeatedly compares Chinese restaurants to McDonald's.

In the second school belong historians like Andrew Coe and Haiming Liu, who hand over full agency to the Chinese business owners. Coe's *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* demonstrates how American tastes have been shaped by our complicated relationship with the outside world and Chinese immigrants inside the US. He argues that White America relentlessly adapted foreign foods to fit the American conservative palette and that Chinese cuisine reflects this cooperation as well as Chinese inventiveness and an instinct towards cultural survival. Similarly, Haiming Liu's *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express: A History of Chinese Food in the United States* tackles the impossible question of cultural ownership, and how Chinese American cuisine came to be less and less Chinese. She mentions the advent of international establishments such as P.F. Changs. This is an outward-facing text, focusing less on the Chinese immigrant community's ability to adapt and more on the influence these adaptations had on American culture. Chinese restaurants are depicted as places where shared ethnic identity is affirmed.

This paper will explain the trend previously described through neither the profit-driven strategizing of Chinese food vendors nor white America's liberalization and increased open-mindedness but rather a "cultural negotiation." It will prove that Chinese restaurants boomed and exploded in popularity when they became the site of a cultural negotiation between White patrons and Chinese workers, where both sides sacrificed part of a coveted social institution to fulfill other needs. The two demographics "met in the middle." On the Chinese side of this equation, restaurateurs exploited upper-class White clientele by tweaking the atmosphere of their restaurants and Americanizing their dishes to expand the business. They simultaneously

lost the authenticity and “safe spaces” of these ethnic enclaves. Similarly, the first White patrons put their social lives and community status at risk to free themselves from conservative social confines. The “anomaly” that resulted was an impressive feat. It was an important accomplishment for Chinese workers and their White clientele, who contributed equally to the founding of a new subculture headquartered in culinary establishments where they both could thrive.

The first essential step towards this cultural negotiation involved the Chinese restaurateur's decision to transform the atmosphere of the typical Chinese restaurant. The Gold Rush era Chinese eatery, which was not explicitly urban, had a certain flavor that was accordant with the population of manual laborers it served, but completely void in the typical “Chinatown” restaurants that would come. For example, the earliest Chinese restaurants in America, all of which were Cantonese eateries, were both food service establishments and “social resorts.” This “third place” acted as a meeting space where important community affairs were discussed.⁸ Chinese laborers, often local miners or laundrymen, enjoyed social dinners together after work in these pioneer restaurants. Ingredients and dishes were authentic, “solidly rooted in a culinary tradition” that appealed to what Asian American historian Anne Mendelson dubbed “the Chinese bachelor society.”⁹ Asian immigrants reported enjoying the “smell of home.” Familiar, homey food and genuine Chinese culture were important appeals for early immigrants.¹⁰ As one California journalist phrased it, the Chinese don't just come in to have their fill of the ingredients that remind them of home, but also for “a generally good time.”¹¹

⁸ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*, 95.

⁹ Anne Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey : Food and the Chinese American Journey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 99.

¹⁰ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*, 82.

¹¹ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*, 91.

These small-town ethnic enclaves met great hostility from working-class White Americans who, if forced to dine there out of necessity, were served purely American dishes,¹² and still mercilessly critiqued the supposed stench and filth of such establishments.¹³ These accusations of cannibalism, the consumption of cats and dogs,¹⁴ dining rooms coated in human excrement, garbage, and filth that “defies all civilization,” did not die out at the turn of the century. The Chinese restaurants, however, began to steer themselves away from these pressures. Survivors of racial violence and the exclusionary legal policies of mining and manufacturing unions migrated into urban Chinese communities in West and East Coast cities. The new Chinese America thus became more urban, and these restaurants followed suit.¹⁵ Luckily, White America had always preferred that Chinese males fill jobs in the service sector, often those in the laundromat industry. The massive 1860s and 1870s inflation of urban restaurant jobs, therefore, would not ruffle any feathers.¹⁶

Approaching the second half of the nineteenth century, these restaurants had a wholly different air about them, reflecting another essential part of the Chinese cultural negotiation around the restaurant. In urban Chinatowns, restaurateurs refurbished their establishments with gaudy lanterns, colorful wall decorations, and bright red facades to match stereotypical fantasies of “the Orient.” Remembering past accusations of filth, these renovated urban restaurants scrubbed their floors and kitchens meticulously, lest rumors arise to drown the business.¹⁷ Ornate carvings, furniture, wall art, and even chopsticks were imported from China and were marketed as such by restaurant owners. This was done not to enhance the authenticity of the cultural

¹² Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey*, 100.

¹³ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*, 84-85.

¹⁴ Samantha Barbas, “‘I’ll Take Chop Suey:’ Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Change,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 36, (2003): 671.

¹⁵ Samantha Barbas, “‘I’ll Take Chop Suey,’” 674. See also: Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*, 74, 95.

¹⁶ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*, 77.

¹⁷ Barbas, “‘I’ll Take Chop Suey,’” 674.

enclave for Chinese workers, but to appeal to a popular aesthetic. Oriental dining rooms inside the small eateries of San Francisco, New York, and Chicago became the subjects of street art and popular postcard designs.¹⁸ The stereographic photo titled “Song Ying Lo. The finest Chop Suey house in Chicago, USA” depicts a shining, glamorous, chandelier-lit restaurant interior that is markedly different from the meeting spaces Chinese miners would have spent their nights at.¹⁹ Herein lies the partial sacrifice, or negotiation, that made the urban Chinese restaurant a wildly successful business, but also a stark deviation from any sort of working-class Chinese “safe space.”

Apart from the material and atmospheric changes led by Chinese business owners in the late nineteenth century, the social change that took place in urban America, which has been relied on heavily by past historians, is indeed perfectly valid as a *partial* explanation for the Chinese restaurant boom. However, it is important to understand this concept in tandem with the changes that Chinese historical actors envisioned for their institutions. Just as the Chinese laborers of small-town California would never find themselves in glamorous Chinatown eateries, wealthy urbanites, even those deemed “thrill seekers,” would not have frequented these restaurants if they failed to meet their high standards for oriental beauty. Although the White patron contributed to the restaurant’s success, he would have never frequented the restaurants had not the Chinese restaurateurs negotiated too.

Having tried their luck with working-class America and been greeted with racist discrimination from its unions, Chinese restaurateurs deliberately appealed to a different sector of American society they had not interacted with before. Adventurous, rebellious, and

¹⁸ Coe, *Chop Suey*, 108; Dale E. Jenkins, *Chinese Delmonico, 24 Pell Street*, 1910, photograph, New York, NY. https://findingaids.library.nyu.edu/nyhs/pr337_dale_jenkins_postcards.

¹⁹ Song Ying Lo. *The Finest Chop Suey House in Chicago*, 1907, photograph: print on card mount, 9 x 18cm (stereograph format), Chicago, IL. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018649303/>. See also the stereographic image in Godoy, “Lo Mein Loophole.”

upper-class city youths, hungry for amusement and social space, turned to Chinatown restaurants as an escape from conservative culture and a place where they could “slum.” To “slum” was to participate in activities deemed “below one’s station.” But although the “slummers” were the reactionaries of a morally rigid upper-middle-class lifestyle, they were still upper-class. While they only would have *begun* patronizing Chinese restaurants that were sanitary and ornately decorated, they would not have gotten *hooked* on those restaurants if not for the somewhat gritty atmosphere they offered. Clientele sought sensuality and freedom, assuming some small social risk. The most successful restaurants were perfectly balanced this way. Even more enticing than the meal, according to one New York “slummer” in a 1893 account for *Once A Week* magazine, was watching the Chinese “kick off their slippers, their bare stockings peering through the rungs of their stools... an incessant babble prevails; every few moments you will see a Chinese pick up a bone or a bit of refuse food and deliberately send it flying under the table to the dirty floor!”²⁰ Here, we see a growing attraction to non-Western cultures in White America, but also an eagerness to be with them in their domains. Young White Americans thus became infatuated with the late hours, unending drinks, and the large portions of relatively low-priced food to feast on well into the night.²¹

The Chinese restaurant willingly became the new “safe space” for slumming. These young men and women, perhaps a prelude to the “flappers” of the roaring twenties, paved the way for other urbanites seeking a taste of the exotic, who slightly risked their social status by venturing into the most “heightened” Chinese restaurants they could find. These eateries featured elegant white tablecloths and gleaming silverware, rather than imported chopsticks, for their wealthiest visitors.²² Two famous examples of this sort of establishment include New York’s

²⁰ Barbas, “‘I’ll Take Chop Suey,’” 673.

²¹ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*.

²² Barbas, “‘I’ll Take Chop Suey,’” 672.

Chinese Tuxedo and Chinese Delmonico. The Tuxedo, a two-story establishment that is still open today, was once the city's first Chinese theater and restaurant. In the early 1900s, It became an important social resort for wealthy New Yorkers and community members of all kinds.²³ Similarly, the Chinese Delmonico, as depicted in a popular postcard photograph from 1910, served as an all-day hangout for White urbanites. The restaurant offered the risk of adventurous foods, but the safety and insulation of Mott Street. This unofficial main street of Chinatown was far enough from upper-class dwellings that these New Yorkers even felt free to relax outside, under the restaurant's awning, in broad daylight.²⁴

Beyond just the late hours, large portions, and bottomless drinks that Chinese restaurants offered thrill seekers, the contents of the food menus themselves were of vital importance. The real explosion in popularity that set the trend outside the insulated Chinatowns only would have caught if the cooks could offer dishes genuine enough to excite upper-class diners while “safe” enough to defend against the vicious stereotypes regarding what Chinese people ate.²⁵ The first poster child of this new Americanized Chinese cuisine was “chop suey,” a dish with an unrivaled impact on American culinary history. The hundreds of American urbanites who first dined on this stir-fry-like amalgamation in the late 1880s and 1890s did so with real chopsticks in their hands. Their excitement and interest were tempered by some trepidation, no doubt remembering the old stereotypes of “Lizard Soup and Cat Fricassee” propagated by their parents' generation.²⁶

Despite this, the chop suey craze was unstoppable. It was love at first bite for many Americans. As one New York Journalist for *Leslie's Weekly* phrased it: “An American who once

²³ “Hours and Location,” Chinese Tuxedo, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.chinesetuxedo.com/location/chinese-tuxedo/>.

²⁴ Dale E. Jenkins, *Chinese Delmonico, 24 Pell Street*, 1910, photograph, New York, NY. https://findingaids.library.nyu.edu/nyhs/pr337_dale_jenkins_postcards.

²⁵ Samantha Barbas, “‘I’ll Take Chop Suey:’ Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Change,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 36, (2003): 671

²⁶ Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey*. 100.

falls under the spell of chop suey may forget all about things Chinese for a while, and suddenly a strange craving arises [and] he finds that his feet are carrying him to Mott Street.”²⁷ In 1902, The *New York Tribune* reported that “Nothing about them [the 'chop suey houses'] seems attractive...and yet these places thrive and their number increases with astonishing rapidity. Twenty-five cents' worth of some kinds of chop suey served with rice will make a toothsome dish for two people. Tea is served free of charge, and the quantity is not limited.”²⁸ In 1918, Chicago's district attorney's office claimed that it had received one hundred letters from parents complaining that “their daughters have been lured to chop suey houses.”²⁹ This whole new line of dishes, of which chop suey was a part, made its way onto the menus of several elite New York dinner parties. One extra special menu for an event hosted by Mrs. Allen Sommer and Mr. Edmund Russel on a Tuesday evening in 1912 featured chicken chop suey, popular delicacies like bird nest soup, but also fun American Chinese classics from the era like lobster omelets, candied ginger, and Chinese oranges. In perhaps the most tangible example of Chinese-American cultural negotiation, the Chinese Tuxedo, which catered the dinner party, featured a sign advertising the famous “Horton's ice cream” hung amidst ornate Chinese wood carvings and lanterns.³⁰

Later in the 1900s, Chop Suey broke into suburban America. When Chinatowns began attracting newspaper attention in major cities, small-town papers everywhere picked up on the news of glamorous metropolitan trends and new American Chinese dishes. Chop suey took over cafeterias, lunch rooms, cookbooks (one of which recommended it be served over a bed of cornflakes), and even the post-war canned food craze.³¹ This diffusion indicates a cultural

²⁷ Barbas, “‘I'll Take Chop Suey,’” 675.

²⁸ Barbas, “‘I'll Take Chop Suey,’” 675.

²⁹ Chen, *Chop Suey, USA*. 105.

³⁰ Henry Voigt, “West Meets East,” *The American Menu*, June 27, 2015, <https://www.theamericanmenu.com/2015/06/west-meets-east.html>.

³¹ Barbas, “‘I'll Take Chop Suey,’” 676.

negotiation whereby the authenticity of the Chinese eatery was diminished, but a wider base of support was achieved.

Chinese restaurants have encouraged, even in periods of social and political conservatism, the crossing and negotiating of formidable ethnic and cultural barriers. In search of cheaper, quicker, and more interesting cuisine, Americans have often suspended traditional racial prejudices and opened themselves to a range of diverse culinary and cultural experiences. By filling a social niche, the Chinese small business owner also found a place where he and those he employed could thrive. Though the Chinese may have lost the authentic community meeting space that the restaurant once offered, by making the restaurant a site of negotiation, they forged a new subculture. This crossover between cultural and culinary history is an understudied and often overlooked subfield, but it ought not to be. Our cuisine, the variations and adaptations we bring to the food we eat, is a distinctly human phenomenon that is essential to who we are as historical beings.

Bibliography

- Barbas, Samantha. "'I'll Take Chop Suey: ' Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Change.'" *The Journal of Popular Culture* 36, (2003): 669-686.
- Chen, Yong. *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Coe, Andrew. *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Godoy, Maria. "Lo Mein Loophole: How U.S. Immigration Law Fueled A Chinese Restaurant Boom," *NPR*. Last modified February 22, 2016.
- "Hours and Location," Chinese Tuxedo. Accessed December 12, 2024.
<https://www.chinesetuxedo.com/location/chinese-tuxedo/>.
- Jenkins, Dale E. *Chinese Delmonico, 24 Pell Street*. 1910, photograph, New York, NY.
- Liu, Haiming. *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express: A History of Chinese Food in the United States*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.
- Mendelson, Anne. *Chow Chop Suey : Food and the Chinese American Journey*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- North-Western Christian Advocate. "Chinese Slavery in America." *The Woman's Journal*, August 16, 1902.
- Song Ying Song Lo. *The Finest Chop Suey House in Chicago*, 1907, photograph: print on card mount: 9 x 18cm (stereograph format), Chicago, IL.
- Voigt, Henry. "West Meets East." *The American Menu*. June 27, 2015.