

Chow Mein Sandwiches: Chinese American Entrepreneurship in Rhode Island

**IMOGENE L. LIM and
JOHN ENG-WONG**

Department of Anthropology, Brown University, Providence,
Rhode Island

...Carol led them in a dancing procession to the dining-room, to blue bowls of chow mein, with Lichee nuts and ginger preserved in syrup.

None of them save that city-rounder Harry Haydock had heard of any Chinese dish except chop soeey [sic]. With agreeable doubt they ventured through the bamboo shoots into the golden fried noodles of the chow mein...

-Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*

"Chop suey" and "chow mein" have been in the American English vocabulary since the late 19th century. The inclusion of these food item terms in Sinclair Lewis' award-winning novel, *Main Street*, marked their early mainstream status in middle America (79). Both the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) and *A Dictionary of Americanisms* (Mathews 1951) note the American appropriation of these Cantonese words, citing examples of their usage as early as 1898 and 1903, respectively, for chop suey and chow mein. This is an indication of the foothold established at the beginning of this century of Chinese-style foods in the American dietary landscape.

Chinese eateries evolved as natural service accompaniments to the emerging settlements of migrant Chinese seeking futures and fortunes in North America. After mining and railway building vanished as industries, Chinese food service establishments became one of the two major economic opportunities open to Chinese immigrants. These restaurants, as well as hand laundries, were often the first sites of contact for most Americans with Chinese. This simple observation is the foundation for our positing that Chinese (or ethnic) restaurants are "cultural outposts"—places where the transactions of daily life take on

representational meanings that tend to fix American notions of ethnicity; in this case, Chinese-ness. Restaurants, like laundries, were spread across the landscape. Establishments in American towns were usually the enterprises of single men or a single family. These places especially deserve the label of "outpost" because the proprietors were either the sole member or members of ethnic communities numbering no more than a few hundred. And the proprietors, distinguished by color and appearance, almost always were perceived as acting for all of China. By extension, the Chinese restaurant also represented all that was/is China. Laundries were outposts as well, but we argue that restaurants assumed a larger significance in this role of cultural outpost.

Beyond the abstraction of the restaurant being a cultural outpost, the restaurant was, and continues to be, a meaningful source of income for many Chinese, providing for families in China and in North America. Food service became one of the primary fields of entrepreneurial activity for Chinese Americans. This paper is a first step toward documenting this activity and creating a framework for analysing its impact.

Chinese words and persons provided restaurants with instant credibility in the marketplace. The decision to open a restaurant created surplus value in a Chinese identity by profiting from being an outsider; thus, transforming a social negative into an economic positive. Beyond image, there were substantial barriers to success as a restaurateur. The first barrier was financial (start-up capital), then skill in cooking and managing, and, finally, labor (staff). Also, even though Chinese cuisine acquired a popular following in America, neither the regulatory climate nor the society at large was always friendly. Since restaurants were family businesses for many Chinese, the study of Chinese restaurants also presents an opportunity to examine the social adaptations of the Chinese American family.

In this case study of Chinese American restaurants in Rhode Island, we explore the development of entrepreneurship and this idea of Chinese restaurant as cultural outpost.¹ Through the social history of Chinese restaurants, we learn how these immigrants survived by adapting to local clientele and foodways. This adaptive strategy is exemplified in the serving of a food item known as a chow mein sandwich.

¹From initial interviews and enquiries in Providence and vicinity, the research has expanded into the southeastern portions of Massachusetts. For this paper, we specifically focus on Rhode Island businesses. This attention to Rhode Island does not exclude supporting data from Massachusetts.

Chinese in America: Image and Reality. Rhode Island was an early participant in the China trade, so there were many merchants in Providence who had direct experience with China. Such experience was not the case for the general public, whose perception of China and Chinese was of exotica and curiosities.

Before any census record of Chinese in Rhode Island, the people of Providence were introduced to "The Chinese Lady—Afong Moy" in 1835. She was presented as a curiosity at the Providence Museum. Since direct contact was limited for the majority of the populace, the early image of the Chinese and their culture was more often formed through familiarity with the China trade and the portrayal of the Chinese in magazines and newspapers, such as the following description of Afong Moy:

Afong Moy will be richly dressed in her Chinese Costume and seated in a "Splendid Saloon" tastefully composed of beautiful Canton Satin Damask, figured in crimson and gold, decorated with Paintings of their deities, Beauties and Chinese Characters, Brilliantly illuminated in the evening with Chinese Lanterns. The whole presenting a correct and imposing scene of Eastern magnificence. Various curiosities will be shown and explained to the visitors. Afong Moy, is about 16 years of age, mild and engaging in her manners. She will occasionally walk before the company, in order to show her astonishing *little feet*, being little more than four inches in length. [original emphasis] (*Providence Daily Journal* 8/31/1835)

Afong Moy's display in a museum was typical of the time, that is, revelling in the differences of people as curiosity or exotica. Also, since admission was based on the payment of 25 cents, viewing Afong Moy was limited to a more select audience than the distribution and/or readership of the *Providence Daily Journal*.² This display of an individual to represent a culture to an audience (of primarily European background) has occurred even more recently as illustrated in the frontispiece of Sally Price's *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989). The photograph shows a Māori warrior bare-chested with spear in hand on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the occasion of the Te Maori 1984 exhibition.

America's Chinese restaurants had inherited an "exotic" pedigree from early perceptions of Chinese promulgated by magazine and newspaper descriptions. From this exoticism, they were able to exploit and create a cuisine distinct and different in sight, smell, and taste. Part

²In 1835, twenty-five cents was half the fare for travelling on the steamer "King Philip" from Providence to Fall River. Subscription to the newspaper was \$8.00 per annum.

of the marketing of this kind of food was an image that promoted this pedigree. Therefore, this difference, a difference that was simultaneously self-conscious and imposed by the dominant culture, helped to develop and perpetuate the restaurant's role as a cultural outpost.

The Chinese in Rhode Island. The first official documentation of Chinese was in 1865 when the RI Census began listing nativity; previous censuses had not. By 1905, the Chinese numbered 301 and now included four women (see Table 1 below). This latter figure is deceptive in its interpretation if viewed alone. On reading the description, one learns that of these native women of China, "[t]hree of them are whites born in the Flowery Kingdom, while only one—the wife of a Chinese merchant—is a genuine Chinese female" (RI Census 1907: 37). The majority of these people located in Providence County and initially began laundry businesses, since minimal language skills and start-up costs were required. In Footnote 2 of the 1885 RI Census (1887: 413), Rev. J.P. Root noted: "About a dozen years ago two Chinamen opened a laundry in Providence. The number of this people has gradually increased in this city, till 47 of them are now industriously pursuing their humble avocations." Prior to 1940, the number of Chinese in Rhode Island (366) peaked in the same year of 1900 as did the number of Chinese laundries (109) (see Table 2 next page). Both Chinese populations and laundries decreased after 1900, with only the Chinese population seeing a resurgence. In 1992, there were only two Chinese laundries left in Providence.

Table 1. Rhode Island Census: Number of Chinese

1865-1905			1900-1940		
Year	Men	Women	Year	Men	Women
1865	1	0	1900	361	5
1875	9	0	1910	262	10
1885	31	0	1920	201	24
1895	135	0	1930	170	27
1905	297	4	1940	227	30
			1950	299	104

Note: For 1885 and 1895, 2 and 9 Japanese, respectively, were included.

The profits of the laundry business appear to be one important source of capital for the building and founding of restaurant dynasties. Such was the case for the Tow family, founded by Ting Tow (a.k.a. Chang You Tow), who reputedly operated a hand laundry during the late 19th century in Pawtucket (home of the first textile mill in

America), a town immediately north of Providence. In one account, Ting's son, Fong, was Rhode Island's first Chinese restaurateur. He operated in succession the King Fong and Young China restaurants (*Providence Journal* 1935 and *Evening Bulletin* 1974). The latter of these was probably one of the two Chinese restaurants in Providence documented in an 1896 article on Chinatown in the *Providence Sunday Journal*. In 1906, this number had grown to six, and by 1910 to 13. Of these 13, the Port Arthur, founded by Fong Tow and his son, He Gong "Charlie" Tow, in the heart of the downtown (191 Weybosset Street, later moved to 123 Weybosset Street), was the longest-lived, surviving into the 1960s. The Port Arthur in 1918 was the first Chinese American dine and dance establishment in New England (*Providence Journal* 9/7/35).

The names of the other establishments competing with the Port Arthur would be familiar in any town today: Pacific Cafe, Hong Kong, The American-Chinese. At the same time, there were places with Chinese names like Hong Fong Low, the Mann Far Lo, the Bun Fong Low, and Hing Mee Wah Eatinghouse; others in Sampson & Murdock's Providence Address Directory (1910) were identified only by the address and/or notation, such as "Chinese restaurant and Weybosset Bowling Parlor."

Table 2. Chinese laundries in Providence, Rhode Island

Year	Total
1876	3
1880	10
1890	41
1900	109
1910	87
1920	56
1930	44
1940	48
1950	33

Note: The year 1876 marks the first documented presence of Chinese laundries. Compiled from the annual Sampson & Murdock, Providence Business Directory.

Beginning in the 1890s, the Chinese began to congregate on Burrill and Chapel Streets, where a number of Chinese businesses were established. The Chinese here were basically a labor community which worked in laundries and restaurants, with no real merchant or well-to-do class. As such, there were few who could support the cultural activities (temple, opera, and theater, to name a few) found in

larger Chinese communities as in Boston and New York City. At this time, the area was not considered a Chinatown:

"CHINATOWN" here in Providence is not confined to a given portion of the city, as it is in Boston, on Harrison Avenue, or in New York on Mott Street. There is no district here which is populated abnormally by representatives of the land of the pig tail, the sacred yellow jacket and the pagoda. The little Chinamen are scattered all over town, locating wherever they see a chance to earn a living... (Providence Sunday Journal 11/15/1896)

Prior to that, and for nearly 20 years, Chinese had been operating laundries in various parts of the city, but there had been no attempt at colonization until a descent was made on the old rookeries of Burrill and Chapel streets. This was in 1902. Here was established the first Chinese grocery store, flanked on either side by laundries. Eventually a Chinese restaurant was added, then the colony was extended down both sides of Burrill street, from Weybosset to Westminster and along Chapel street to the Music Hall building. There came an overflow which was accommodated by taking in two of the buildings on Westminster street, next west of Burrill street. It was on Burrill street that the first Chinese Masonic Temple was established (Providence Sunday Journal 2/16/1913).

The U.S. Census of 1910 shows that Chinese were concentrated in the 4th and 5th Wards of Providence. The embryonic Chinatown had also shifted a few blocks north to include much of Empire Street at the western edge of the downtown district. On Empire Street, at numbers 47, 55, 56, 57, 61, and 63, were boardinghouses filled with Chinese; at numbers 62 and 64 were Chinese fancy-goods shops, and at 51 and 53 a Chinese grocer occupied the storefronts.

These Empire Street establishments were demolished and/or dispersed with the widening of the street in 1914 (Providence Sunday Journal 12/13/1914). The scattering of the Chinese population was encouraged as they were viewed as unlawful in the extreme. According to Police Superintendent Murray:

If the Empire street Chinese are well scattered we will know that the appearance in any location of any considerable number of them means that gambling is going on. The Chinese are inveterate gamblers; the vice is inherent in the race. Only by scattering them can we ever hope to minimize the unlawful practice.

...I don't mind having you say that I will do everything in my power to check the licensing of not only the chop suey houses, but all other eating places maintained on the second story of a building because of the menace they are to young girls who foolishly frequent

them and are there made the recipients of attentions which bode them no good. (Providence Sunday Journal 2/16/1913)

Chinese establishments were regularly under surveillance and were not desired by other merchants in the area. The above comments of the Police Superintendent and the 1909 order by the Police Commission that all draperies be removed from every booth, stall, and room of Chinese restaurants for full viewing at all times was, in part, a response to the murder of a young woman by a Chinese suspect in New York City (Providence Daily Journal 6/25/1909, Providence Sunday Journal 6/20/1909). Besides the negative stereotype of unlawfulness (gambling and opium smoking), Chinese were believed to prey on the sympathies of young women who were in charge of Chinese at the Sunday schools. With complete, open viewing, the police believed that they could prevent non-food related activities from occurring in restaurants and prevent suspicion and inuendo of such.

The authorities exploited these negative stereotypes toward hindering and blocking the settlement of this particular immigrant group. This was during a period of increasing anti-Chinese sentiment throughout the continent that culminated in the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone policy that virtually banned immigration from all Asia.

The actions of the authorities were supported by other downtown businesses. Letters written by merchants to the Providence Sunday Journal (2/4/1917) voiced opposition to Chinese restaurants due to "damage, both to property and to retail trade, that these establishments [Chinese restaurants] would cause right in the centre of the store district on our main shopping district." City ordinances in restricting Chinese restaurants were successful. The number of establishments was constant for the years 1910 and 1920, it declined thereafter (as Table 3 shows).

Table 3. Chinese restaurants in Providence, Rhode Island

Year	Total
1895*	2
1906	6
1910	13
1920	13
1930	7
1940	17

*1895 information from Providence Sunday Journal (November 15, 1896).
Compiled from the annual Sampson & Murdock, Providence Business Directory.

The record shows that the opposition of downtown businesses spoiled the ambitions of several would-be Chinese restaurateurs. The negative images were compounded when the murder of a Chinese brought the Chinese community into the public view in the headlines of the 1920s. This act of violence may have contributed to the decline of the restaurant trade in Providence. However, by 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression, the general economic climate probably contributed to its decline. The Chinese restaurant count in Providence for that year was seven.

The period of the Depression proved to be a time of renaissance for Chinese restaurant businesses in Rhode Island. The most likely factors which led to this entrepreneurial revival were: the price of meals, improved Sino-American relations, and the unmistakable resurgence of Chinese immigration. By 1940, there were 17 Chinese eateries operating in Providence, the majority of which were in the downtown business district. Since then, there has been a steady decline of businesses in the downtown area, as well as the number of Chinese restaurants. Of the many Chinese restaurants that were located in the downtown area, there are now only two reminders of this past. There is, as well, one lone remnant of downtown Providence's Chinese settlement—the On Leong Merchants Association building on Snow Street.

Restaurants and the American Dream. As alluded to earlier, laundries and restaurants provided early Chinese immigrants with basically their only means of economic opportunity. Even for Chinese Americans with formal educations, opportunities were limited, and many returned to operating restaurants or related businesses (noodles, bean sprouts, groceries).

Only in the last three decades have Chinese Americans increasingly moved into the larger labor force and out of traditionally associated jobs (Amott and Matthaei 1991). And of these traditionally associated jobs, only the restaurants have managed to survive in any number. Chinese laundries decreased in number with the development of steam laundries, the increasing presence of washer/dryers in the home, and, of course, permanent-press fabrics.

The story of one immigrant arriving in a town and eventually being joined by another family member is a common tale among the diaspora of Chinese. As already mentioned, some of the early restaurants were the "schools" for later restaurant operators, so one is able to find families of restaurateurs in Providence. Typically, the relative arrived and was put immediately to work as a dishwasher. Gradually, he (not she, since the majority of immigrants who came during the first half of this century were men) learned all the other kitchen skills from butchering the meat, to prepping other ingredients,

to finally cooking. One informant (JL), who arrived in Providence in 1937, followed in the footsteps of his grandfather's and brother's passages to the United States. He came at age 14 and immediately began working in a restaurant, and he continued to do so with his brother prior to World War II. After serving in the war as an electronics technician, he returned to restaurant work in order to save enough money to open his own restaurant. That early restaurant schooling helped in his successful operation of two restaurants.

In this particular case, JL managed to open his first restaurant on his own (with bank assistance), but in the 1930s, restaurant spin-offs were frequently the result of several workers pooling their resources as partners. These workers were often related, as well. For example, according to JL, the Hon Hong was opened with seven shares in total, held by several partners. Some of the partners had only half a share (like his brother) and only two or three partners had full shares. Each share was worth \$1500. Besides the Hon Hong, other workers later opened the Hon Fong, and the Mei Hong (JL 1992).³ This cycle of spin-off restaurants has continued. From the 1970 period, 90% of those who had worked at the Cathay Den opened the following: Tai-Dee Garden, The Islander, China Bright, Ho Ho, Imperial Villa, and Golden Pacific (AL/DL 1992). Spin-offs were not always a case of wanting to be more than just an employee in order to reap the benefits of one's own business, but sometimes from discontent with the manner of the operation of the "parent" restaurant.

The number of spin-offs may be a reflection of the various waves of Chinese immigration. After the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, many Chinese were afforded the opportunity to come to the United States as "paper sons" in the following years as the children of merchants or native-born American Chinese. With birth records destroyed, the Chinese were able to take advantage of this loophole in the Exclusion Act.

The Immigration Act of 1965 also opened the door for many other Chinese immigrants. It abolished the national-origins quotas and exempted from the quota of numbered immigrants the immediate family members, namely spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens. Through this new immigration act, the number of Chinese immigrants increased dramatically from 1960 to 1985, that is, 236,084 to 1,079,400, to make them the largest Asian group in the United States (Kwong 22).

Changes to the immigration act increased the number of immigrants from all parts of the world and saw changes in the settlement pattern from urban to suburban areas as former immigrants and their children moved away from the city proper. The Chinese,

³Initials and date indicate an informant source.

likewise, moved to outlying areas of Providence, seeking opportunity in the movement of Rhode Islanders. According to one restaurateur, JL, he was the first to open Chinese restaurants in Warwick and in North Kingstown. Although JL's moves occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, there had been other Chinese who predated him in establishing restaurants outside of Providence. There is one in Woonsocket that has been in continuous operation since 1908, despite changes in ownership and restaurant names. In each of these families, the son took over from the father (JC 1992; CR 1992). Other multi-generational operations are notable in several of the older Chinese restaurants. One such restaurant is the Young China Restaurant of East Providence. It has been in operation since 1935 and is under the aegis of the second- and third-generation, serving fourth-generation clients (EY 1992).

The niche in which this family has found acceptance is evident by the continuity established between the restaurant and its clients. This is particularly striking, given the rather negative reception of early Chinese businesses and settlement in Providence (as noted earlier). The Young China Restaurant family was the first Chinese in East Providence. When the family had to move from the original location of the Young China Restaurant (due to a dramatic increase in rent), the community rallied around the recent widow and her six children and found the present location for them. One of the town councilmen was in real estate, and he checked the zoning so that the mother could continue operating the business and still look after her young family. This was only possible if the family could live over the business establishment. From a beginning of four booths in 1940, there was a total of twelve by the end of the war (EY 1992).

To survive in a fluctuating economy, restaurateurs must know their business and clientele. And the existence of these multi-generational operations is testament to their acumen. What strategies have they adopted to survive?

Survival Tactics of the Restaurateur. For many of the early restaurants, the menu consisted of variations on chop suey, chow mein, and fried rice, plus the standards that might be found in an American restaurant, that is, veal cutlet, pork chops, etc. These restaurants were of a hyphenated variety, Chinese-American: not truly one or the other. This combining of food types was a way in which the restaurant could accommodate the tastes of its dining clientele who might be less familiar or adventuresome in experimenting with foods different from the home. In fact, one restaurateur commented that veal cutlet and roast beef were on the menu because of, respectively, Italian and English customers (JL 1992).

Anglo Americans found most acceptable those foods that resembled the cooking of England. Root and de Rochemont note that

there was a tendency toward the Americanization of a dish rather than risk introducing a genuine foreign dish. This might even mean creating "an American dish with a foreign name and a vague resemblance to a foreign creation, but which is actually, and reassuringly a native-born citizen of the American kitchen" (276-277).

Chop suey is an example of this Americanization phenomenon in Chinese cookery. Prior to the 1890s, chop suey had not been invented. Different stories have circulated as to its origin (see Root and de Rochemont 277; Hooker 286; Anderson 212-213), from railroad gang cooks to Chinese cooks. The Americanization or transformation of chop suey into the item served in today's restaurants was not likely an immediate conversion. Boiling or stewing was counter to traditional Chinese cooking of stir-frying or quick sauteeing of vegetables. In the 1896 *Providence Sunday Journal* article on Chinatown, the reporter noted "the unusually short period of time" in which the waiter-cook reappeared with "smoking hot dishes." One of the dishes sampled was chop suey, which he translated as "stewed mixture of meat." The readers were provided with a list of ingredients so that they might try the dish themselves. The only cooking instructions were to "mix well and fry." One can only speculate that these instructions became translated into a more American dish than that served the reporter. And through this transformation, chop suey was re-invented for the Chinese restaurateur. It became popular because it now fit in with the Anglo American conviction of vegetable preparation, that is, it should be boiled for a long time. In the 1932 *Pictorial Review Standard Cook Book*, the recipe for chop suey called for an hour and a half cooking time (Hooker 287).

Through the creation of chop suey, Chinese were able to gain the patronage of the dominant culture. It permitted the Chinese to acquire a clientele that, almost a century later, still requests this item. Its acceptance in the American food repertory is noted by its inclusion in *Larousse Gastronomique* (261-262).

The one other food perception that Chinese restaurateurs had to overcome (or adjust for) was the idea promulgated by professionals of the New Nutrition during the early decades of this century that the food habits of immigrants were uneconomical (in terms of energy expenditure to digest). Nutritional science took exception to mixtures of food and the spiciness commonly found in immigrant diets: "Strong seasonings that made bland but cheap foods tasty were denounced for overworking the digestive process and stimulating cravings for alcohol" (Levenstein 103). Blandness was considered healthy, and prior to World War II, blandness was also viewed as more patriotic than exotic seasonings (Stern 12).

Both restaurateurs and clients have commented on the increasing acceptance of spicier foods. One client commented that her impression

of Chinese food was that it was "very spicy" and "more exotic than before;" another stated, "back then [in the 1950s], it wasn't spicy, almost bland compared to the taste of today" (DM 1992; CR 1992). Restaurants that considered their cuisine to be basically Cantonese began adding the spicier dishes of Szechuan cooking to their menus in the 1970s (BC 1992; JC 1992). Of course, the addition of such dishes is based on clientele tastes and in some cases, this is modified to the specific area of business. For example, EY commented, "our customers [are] more on the conservative end and don't go for hot-hot but mild-hot [food]" (1992).

With traditional Chinese cooking, there are also regional variations. This also shows up in Chinese American restaurants, not so much in terms of Chinese regional cooking styles but in the manner of chow mein styles. In this area, the restaurants distinguish between Boston-, Fall River-, New York-, and Chicago-style chow mein. Sometimes the difference is only in the sauce:

If we hire a person from Massachusetts, we always explain that they must make the sauce darker; in Rhode Island, people are used to a darker sauce—New York and Massachusetts have a lighter [colored] sauce. (EY 1992)

Fall River chow mein is strained chow mein, that is, noodles and sauce, no vegetables; Chicago chow mein has green peppers, onion, bok choy (bigger large pieces), dark brown sauce, and regular fried noodles; Boston chow mein is mostly shredded celery, bok choy, onion in light [colored] sauce and deep-fried straight noodles; Cantonese chow mein is grilled noodles [with] ingredients sauteed in light sauce garnish[ed] with meat on top. (BC 1992)

Since these perceptions of chow mein are almost institutionalized, a new restaurant entering an area learns quickly if it is to survive. For example, one well-established restaurant in Providence opened a branch in Fall River. Though it originally did not serve chow mein, but only lo mein, soon thereafter, a sign appeared outside stating that it sold chow mein (RS 1992). To the people of Fall River, "real" Chinese restaurants serve chow mein. Fall River chow mein is unlike others because of the sauce's watery consistency. The sauce's thinness is, in all likelihood, an adaptation to the people of Fall River's needs. As a predominantly Catholic area, customers would request that the gravy be strained so that they could abide by their religious stricture of meatlessness on Fridays. With a thick gravy, you could not strain it (AW 1992). This adjustment to religious needs is also seen in the chow mein served at the Young China Restaurant. No meat is included in

the regular chow mein or chop suey on Fridays unless requested (EY 1992).

One accommodation made by Chinese restaurateurs that appears unique to the area is the serving of the chow mein sandwich (also chop suey sandwich or chow mein/chop suey mix sandwich). The senior author has sampled several of these sandwiches (all variations of the regular). It is served between a hamburger bun or between sliced white bread; if the latter, brown gravy is served over it in the manner of a hot turkey sandwich. At one restaurant, it was even served between thick slices of Italian bread. To an information request, over 60 respondents, up to 70+ in age, recall eating this sandwich in the New England area. Two restaurateurs in Providence continue to maintain this item in their repertoire even though it is no longer on the menu. This is strictly for customers of an older generation (basically individuals who are in their late 50s or older) (SC 1992). It is less popular than during its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, but for some restaurants, its popularity has not changed. Young China Restaurant sells between nine and 10 dozen a day (EY 1992) and one restaurant in Fall River has reputedly sold over two million during its 40-year existence (WC 1992).

Although this food item is typically found on the menus of older establishments, it was discovered in a restaurant that is no more than 10 years old, serving Chinese and Vietnamese cuisine. The owner, when asked about the sandwich's menu inclusion, stated that since the restaurant was located in an economically depressed area, he had wanted to have something on the menu that locals could afford. The idea for the sandwich came from looking at old menus.

The rationale for serving the chow mein sandwich today and in the past was most likely the same—an item that many people could afford. As noted by the maker of the chow mein noodles, "for low cost, you could get a meal that would fill" (AW 1992). And those who ate these sandwiches reveal the same sentiment:

The Chow Mein sandwich was a real treat in the early 1930s. The Chinese restaurants were a real God Send [sic], to us who were on the poor level. We were able to be served a whole Chinese dinner (Chow Mein or Chop Suey) for 25 cents. (CD 1991)

We went quite often for chop suey sandwiches and, as I recall, were made on what was much like a hamburger bun. Well, it was so loaded with filling that when we took them home, my mother made two sandwiches from one. I recall the price at the time [late 1930s and early 1940s] was 25 cents each. I might add here that they were delicious and it was considered quite a treat. I also recall going there about once a week for an old aged couple who operated a small

variety store in the neighborhood. This would have been their dinner that night. (RC 1992)

My mother gave me 15 cents per day for my cafeteria lunch. I would fudge my lunch money, go without the bottle of milk, and after school, on my way to the library, joined the clique at a restaurant run by a Chinese family... I can't tell you when or how they originated but I have a strong suspicion that they may have been concocted by restaurateurs because most people simply could not afford the 30 or 40 cents for full orders [during the 1930s]. (LH 1992)

The chow mein, as well as the chow mein sandwich, served in Rhode Island is particular to this area. And as noted by Root and de Rochemont (277), such food inventions "are often restricted to the areas which created them." The maker of the chow mein noodles (AW 1992) commented that his business is "of limited appeal, a radius of 50-100 miles, in southeastern New England in particular." AW also noted that Boston did not like this noodle (compare with BC's description of Boston-style chow mein). Not surprisingly, the chow mein sandwich does not appear to have existed in Boston. A fan of the sandwich wrote to say that in 1944, when she and her husband attempted to get one in a Boston restaurant, they had to describe the sandwich. They ended up with two sandwiches, each consisting of a whole order of chow mein between two pieces of bread (BF 1992).

Restaurateurs managed to discover the specific tastes of their clientele, as well as discover general Chinese restaurant trends, by listening to their clientele, talking with friends who were restaurant people, testing out new items on their menus, trying out other restaurant's food, as well as studying others' menus (BC 1992; JC 1992; JL 1992; EY 1992). One informant (JL) was explicit in describing the manner of menu selection. He had three criteria for an item's inclusion: popularity (he collected menus for the names and prices of dishes), profitability, and timing, that is, the turn-over time in order to give better service. Relying on another's menu is a common strategy; for example, the chow mein sandwich at several was a carry-over from a previous restaurant (BC 1992; JC 1992).

By basing a menu on the popular standards and experimenting with the new, restaurateurs satisfy a wider range of tastes without alienating any of their clientele. Chan's Fine Oriental Dining of Woonsocket manages to cater to both local and non-local clientele with its menu. Chan's owner (JC) notes that two different groups patronize the restaurant. Those who come for the live entertainment (jazz) are typically not from the area and are more experimental in their tastes, whereas the locals prefer the older menu of chow mein, chop suey, and fried rice.

Part of the attraction of the older menu is the quantity of food obtained for the cost, as well as the familiarity of the items. As one informant said, "This is New England, nothing changes" (RR 1992). Some restaurant goers are completely consistent in their orders, never varying from their standard, whether it be combination plate #3 or fried rice and chicken wings (SG 1992; JR 1992).

Restaurateurs managed to survive by adapting traditional Cantonese cuisine to the tastes of Anglo Americans and the general perceptions of the time of good and healthy foods. Flexibility in adaptation may be the hallmark of Cantonese cuisine since the manner of cooking is as critical to the product as are the ingredients. As noted by Anderson (209): "No other cooks can be so eclectic while maintaining the spirit of the tradition."

Chinese restaurants in Rhode Island are dispersed throughout the state. In many cases, those first restaurants represented the only contact between Chinese and the local population of the outlying areas. As noted in the brief history of the Chinese in Rhode Island, what was considered Chinatown disappeared relatively quickly after its formation. Thus, direct first-hand knowledge of Chinese and their culture was somewhat limited to the contacts obtained at restaurants where there were intra- and inter-personal transactions.

Cultural Outposts. The Chinatown that had existed in Providence was unlike the other east coast Chinatowns of Boston and New York City. It was more of an enclave for the population rather than a tourist locale for the dominant culture to experience the "sounds, the sights, and the smells of Canton" or "wander in the midst of the Orient while still in the Occident" (advertisements quoted by Takaki 247). Takaki (1989) has implied that Chinatown was a cultural island or ethnic island, but in Providence it was one closed to the outsider. Notions of Chinese-ness thus were limited to representations in the media and, more directly, to those perceptions of ethnicity accessible through Chinese restaurants.

For the ethnic European populations of Rhode Island, the Chinese restaurant was a "cultural outpost." The use of the term "cultural outpost" for an ethnic restaurant is helpful in thinking about the introduction of one culture to another's, that is, an outpost in a cultural frontier. Of the three definitions of "outpost," we have appropriated two for this discussion. From the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), an outpost implies a settlement "near a frontier or at a remote place in order to facilitate the commercial contacts of a larger and more centrally situated town or settlement," which in this case is either Boston or New York City. The other meaning for outpost, as used here, is "the furthest territory of an empire," that is, a representative of a main group. In this case, the group is the Chinese

or, if in keeping with the notion of empire, as noted in early newspaper articles, "the Celestial Empire."

As a cultural outpost, one can also find the sounds, sights, and smells of another culture in an ethnic restaurant. Besides the difference in the cuisine itself (sight and smell), there are other markers of a culture to be found in a restaurant—eating utensils and decor (sight) and perhaps language and/or music (sound). For Chinese, there are chopsticks and perhaps lanterns, figurines, embroidered or shell pictures, to name a few items; or for Mexican, there are sombreros, textiles and ceramics, murals, pictures; or for Indian, there are replicas of monuments and deities, carved screens, traditional dishware. Each item is in some way representative of the culture, and collectively (the total context of sight, smell, and taste) they evoke ideas or memories associated with an ethnicity. Various informants (restaurant clientele) have commented on the sensory impact of their early recollections of Chinese dining: "impressed by vivid smells—ginger, Oriental tea" (AL 1992); "looking Oriental-fans, dragons, chrysanthemums, ... range of motifs" (JG 1992); "that type of restaurant in '50s [1950s] outside had an architectural element, [such as, a] roof line which I saw right away as an identifier of a Chinese restaurant" (DR 1992); "exotic-different tastes, mixtures" (DM 1992); Chinese restaurant "obviously with the Chinese people working there, the food was different, a whole different environment from what you were accustomed to going to" (RR 1992).

This notion of introducing a culture through foodways is notable in this example of children visiting a Chinese restaurant for a meal after their study of China:

[The] children from the schools would come to the restaurant for a Chinese meal after finishing their study on China. I would take them down into the cellar to see the sprouting beans. It was a big thing—the children would be fascinated by the process. Their eyes would open up wide to see the lids of the crocks being pushed up by the growing sprouts. (EY 1992)

Restaurateurs are very much aware of their representing what is Chinese culture at that surface level. As noted by one restaurateur (JC 1992), "people who come to a Chinese restaurant like to see Chinese objects. If I liked Chinese music, I would play it [in the restaurant]." Another restaurateur (JL 1992) emphasized the "use of Chinese symbols" in his Chinese restaurants in order to present a "Chinese cultural image." Also discussed by JL were the three factors that contributed to his choice of names for his restaurants. Two of these applied specifically to the Chinese-ness of the restaurant, that is, a famous name that would be easy to remember (Canton) and

something strongly associated with China (Pagoda). His other factor in considering names was ease in pronunciation.

Chinese culture was sometimes introduced to non-Chinese indirectly by the restaurants through food service contracts (another survival tactic of early restaurants, prior to this service being known as catering). Through that initial contact, some would then go to the restaurant itself.

Old Colony Bank was a customer for 30–35 years, every third week was "Chinese meal day" in the cafeteria ... Some of the employees who ate the food service contract stuff knew which restaurant made it so [they] would come into the restaurant. (EY 1992)

As an outpost, the restaurant served as an agent of change in diet, as well as fixing notions of ethnicity. This dialogue between restaurateur and client affected both in their perception of one another and their responses to these views. One result was the Americanization of the cuisine into Chinese American; another was the appropriation and exploitation of certain stereotypes. For example, the catering service of Chan's Fine Oriental Dining is known as "House of No. 2 Son Catering." Indeed, the owner is the second son and he felt that the play on words was humorous, as well as familiar to a populace that had grown up with Charlie Chan films (JC 1992). Also, Chinese men were often called Charlie or John by non-Chinese, rather than their given names (even when they had a Christian name). These names were based on media presentations of "John Chinaman" and "Charlie Chan." Such responses between restaurateur and clientele were active. This dynamic has distinguished in one significant way the impact of restaurants, versus laundries, as cultural outposts.

The laundries were cultural outposts, but with a difference. As outposts, they, too, were often isolated in ethnically European neighborhoods. Chinese were associated with laundries, but the service they provided was not Chinese per se. Laundries were typically family-run and did not require outside local workers, so that in some senses, the people were less known than those who owned restaurants. Also, the time spent interacting with launderers was minimal—exchanging dirty clothes for clean.

For the observant, there were material artifacts to identify the Chinese-ness of the business beyond the individual. Paul Siu's landmark study (1987) on the Chinese laundrymen documented markers of ethnicity, including physical ones such as the abacus, the laundry ticket, and the "ironing" bed. Even today, ethnicity is marked in the hand laundry's successor, the laundromat. During a rare visit to the corner laundromat, the senior author noted that a Chinese couple

appeared to be operating the business. They could have been either new employees or the owners, but minor changes to the decor indicated that the latter was the case. A Chinese painting now hangs where paintings reminiscent of an African folk art tradition once hung, and a silk flower arrangement in a Chinese vase now sits where the counter had been bare. Although Chinese laundries were also cultural outposts, their impact on the larger society was less than a restaurant with its full range of sights, sounds, and smells.

The interactions of restaurant workers (non-Chinese) and the public with the owners also increased the understanding of what is Chinese at a level beyond the material culture among these people. One informant who had worked at two different Chinese restaurants in Woonsocket commented on the big New Year's parties hosted by one of the restaurateurs that included everyone from employees and friends to lawyers and councilmen. At these parties, "special dishes, things you don't normally get in restaurants (although perhaps not special in some restaurants today)" (CR 1992) were served. This individual also became aware of Chinese medicinal food practices, such as foods given to a mother after the birth of a child. Perhaps this knowledge of Chinese culture was a result of the relationship held between employee and owner. Working for Chinese owners was "not like [an] employee-boss relationship," it was "more like family, at least for me" (CR 1992).

The Chinese restaurant as a cultural outpost is a useful construct in thinking about how perceptions of Chinese are generated and perceived between Chinese and non-Chinese. The authors also believe that this construct has utility in examining other ethnicities, as alluded to earlier, and suggest further study of European and non-European cultures to test this out. Cultural representation is ascribed by the self-definition of an ethnic restaurant; thus, an ethnic restaurant is an outpost in a cultural frontier.

Works Cited

- Amott, Teresa L., and Julie A. Matthaei. 1991 *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1991.
- Anderson, E.N. *The Food of China*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Census—Rhode Island: 1867 Report upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1865; 1877 Report upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1875; 1887 Rhode Island State Census, 1885; 1898 Census of Rhode Island, 1895; 1907 Rhode Island State Census, 1905.
- City Directories: 1887–1939 The Providence Directory and Rhode Island Business Directory. No. 47 (1887/88)—No. 99 (1939/40). Providence, RI: Sampson, Murdock & Co.

- Hooker, Richard J. *Food and Drink in America: A History*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1981.
- Interviews with consumers of Chinese food: JG 29 June 1992; SG 16 June 1992; AL 26 June 1992; DM 3 July 1992; CR 18 July 1992; DR 2 July 1992; JR 13 July 1992; RR 13 July 1992; RS 26 April 1992
- Interviews with restaurant owners: BC 21 July 1992; JC 30 July 1992; SC 14 July 1992; WC 26 April 1992; AL/DL 8 February 1992; JL 6 July 1992; AW 20 July 1992; EY 15 July 1992
- Kwong, Peter. *The New Chinatown*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1987.
- Larousse. 1984 *Gastronomique*. London: Paul Hamlyn, 1988.
- Letters: LH 3 January 1992; RC 1 January 1992; CD 24 December 1991; BF no date, postmarked 10 January 1992
- Levenstein, Harvey A. *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Lewis, Sinclair. *Main Street: The Story of Carol Kennicott*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920.
- Mathews, Mitford M. *A Dictionary of Americanisms: On Historical Principles*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Providence Daily Journal*. "Order to Chinese Restaurants—Proprietors Are Ordered to Remove Draperies at Rooms." LXXXI(151): 25 June 1909: 1.
- Providence Daily Journal*. "Great Attraction for the Commencement Week Only at the Providence Museum—The Chinese Lady: Afong Moy." VII(35): 31 August 1835: 2.
- Providence Journal Evening Bulletin*. "Charlie Tow Keeps Tasting." 21 February 1974: A-1.
- Providence Journal Evening Bulletin*. "Yat K. Tow; Civic Leader Owned Chinese-American Restaurants." 18 July 1990: G-4.
- Providence Journal*. "Mourners Throng Chapel for Funeral of Fong Tow." CVII(215): 7 September 1935: 3
- Providence Sunday Journal*. "A "New China" Here Too." XXVIII(33): 16 February 1913: V-5, 10.
- Providence Sunday Journal*. "Chinatown on the Move." XXX(24): 13 December 1914: V-7.
- Providence Sunday Journal*. "Chinatown." XII(20): 15 November 1896: 18.
- Providence Sunday Journal*. "Letters—Merchants Opposition to Chinese Restaurants." XXXII(32): 4 February 1917: III-3.
- Providence Sunday Journal*. "Murdered Sigel Girl Enamored of Chinese." XXIV (51): 20 June 1909: I-1
- Root, Waverley, and Richard de Rochemont. *Eating in America: A History*. New York: The Ecco Press, 1976.
- Siu, Paul C.P. *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*. New York: New York University Press, 1987.

Origins and Destinations

Stern, Jane, and Michael Stern. *American Gourmet*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991.

Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.