MOSTLY MISSISSIPPI: CHINESE CUISINE MADE IN AMERICA

Chinese restaurants are ubiquitous in the cultural landscape of North America. In a Chinatown, restaurants and other types of businesses are expected; but in a small town with no noticeable Chinese American population, a Chinese restaurant is also common. It is an outpost of Chinese culture as represented by the food and the restaurant itself. As noted by Indigo Som, restaurants "are the most pervasively visible manifestation of Chinese American presence in this country".[1] The development of the Chinese restaurant in America is a statement of entrepreneurship and the adaptability of a cuisine that reflects regional and/or local context.

When Chinese first arrived in the United States, they were like every other immigrant who came for economic and other opportunities.[2] The gold rush of 1848 was the initial draw for many who wanted to do well and go home; some eventually viewed the United States as a place they wished to also call home. Opening and operating a Chinese restaurant was not first on their list as a means to make a living, since the majority lacked the necessary English language skills.

The case can be made that Chinese restaurants developed after Chinese Americans had found employment originally in other businesses.[3] In the southern states, many Chinese Americans became grocery store owners with some eventually opening restaurants.[4] Such is the case of How Joy in Greenville, Mississippi,[5] one of the restaurants visited by Indigo. In her blog, she includes a painting of How Joy in its earliest incarnation.[6] What is striking in the picture is the restaurant's signage—"How Joy Chop Suey"—and architecture—the building is adorned with embellishments that suggest a traditional Chinese rooftop. Both of these signify to the potential consumer that the business serves Chinese food, especially of a particular kind. By identifying the restaurant with "chop suey," the restaurateur is indicating that you will find other comparable dishes (egg rolls, sweet and sour, etc.). In other words, this was a Chinese *American* restaurant—an establishment with a cuisine that had evolved and adapted to its environment and clientele.

The words "chop suey" are particularly significant because in North America, the dish has become known as a stir-fried vegetable medley in a sauce, sometimes with the addition of beef, pork, or chicken. There is no such item in China; like fortune cookies, chop suey is an American invention.[7] To remain and succeed in business, Chinese American restaurateurs have had to be inventive and flexible. Another consideration has been the ability of non-Chinese consumers to accept a "foreign" food. This provides the rationale of Chinese American restaurants to also serve traditional American fare or "Chinese" versions of local foods. For example, Southern cuisine includes fried breads (such as hush puppies)[8] so a Chinese buffet offering deep-fried biscuits[9] seems not so odd.

Restaurants outside of a Chinatown rely on a clientele that might or might not be familiar with Chinese culture or cuisine, especially in the southern states where the Chinese American population remains relatively small. According to the U.S. Census 2000, Mississippi has less than 0.1% Chinese Americans.[10] For this reason, dining in a Chinese restaurant provides a cultural experience to the uninitiated. But how are you to know that the restaurant is the "real thing"? You are told that the establishment is "authentic"; through your own eyes you see symbols and icons

that seem to affirm this. The business acumen of these restaurateurs explains the choice of restaurant name, the typeface or font used in the name, and the identifiable Chinese décor or artifacts embellishing the establishment. The lettering on signage often resembles the brush strokes of Chinese calligraphy. As well, through association the words "chopsticks," "wok," "panda," "phoenix," and "dragon" are identified with China or Chinese culture, as well as known place names: Peking, Hong Kong, or Hunan. Of the 62 establishments seen during Indigo's southern road trip, two-thirds have either "China" or "Chinese," or an associated Chinese object in the name. In many senses by using these markers, the restaurateurs unconsciously help to stereotype Chineseness, or more specifically help to define what the larger public views as "Oriental".[11] The calligraphy-like lettering, or what Indigo calls "the evil chinky font,"[12] establishes Chinese Americans and their restaurants as the "other" and/or "exotic." The enterprising businessperson comes to realize that the public expects to see these markers, whether calligraphy-like lettering or pagodas, to authenticate Chineseness. Consider San Francisco's Chinatown restaurants: they range in variety from the large ornately decorated to the small "hole-in-the-wall" ones. For a *real* encounter with Chinatown, hotel concierges send guests to the most extravagant in décor. These signifiers are like those of early roadside restaurants "designed for visibility, instant recognition, and brand identity"[13]—in this case, the Oriental exotica found in America.

In establishing a restaurant as Chinese, the question may arise as to the authentic nature of the cuisine. Those less familiar with China may not be aware of regional diversity or local specialties. The early Chinese pioneers who first arrived came primarily from the Guangdong area so restaurants prior to 1965[14] presented Cantonese-style cuisine. Since then, a wide variety of regional styles has become available in the United States (e.g., Hunan, Peking, Szechuan). With their introduction, Chinese American restaurants for the most part have become a bit of everything to their clientele. For example, the buffet will have hot and sour soup as well as wonton soup. Each dish represents a different adapted regional cuisine, yet the restaurant is generically "Chinese American" rather than Szechuan, Hunan or Cantonese. Business tactics require that the restaurateur serve an American palate that recognizes something called "Chinese" rather than a distinct style; to the consumer there is no realization of the heterogeneity found in China and its culture. Regional styles in China reflect the availability of specific local food products. In this sense, Chinese cuisine is as much about the techniques of food preparation and cooking, as it is about flavors and ingredients.[15] New ingredients can readily be incorporated in Chinese cooking, whether in the United States or in China itself. Culture is not static and that includes food culture; it is constantly changing.

Chinese cuisine promotes using the freshest ingredients so when local fresh foodstuffs are used in the southern states, whether crawfish, catfish, or alligator, the cooks are following in the footsteps of tradition. Like the regional cuisines of China, the local context is emphasized. That context is one that is American, as well as being southern. As the exhibit title expresses, *Mostly Mississippi* is just that—a southern version of Chinese American restaurants uniquely made to order.

Imogene L. Lim

ENDNOTES

1 Indigo Som, chinese restaurant project intro, 2002. http://www.well.com/user/indigo/crpintro.html

2 There have been a number of different waves of Chinese immigration to the United States. The first was from gold rush days to 1882 (Chinese Exclusion Act, repealed in 1943); the second followed the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, which changed U.S. immigration law and policy [see Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989)].

3 See Imogene L. Lim and John Eng-Wong, "Chow Mein Sandwiches: Chinese American Entrepreneurship in Rhode Island," *Origins and Destinations: 41 Essays on Chinese America*, eds. Munson A. Kwok and Ella Yee Quan (Los Angeles: Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, 1994), 417-36.

4 Charles Reagan Wilson, "Mississippi Chinese: An Ethnic People in a Biracial Society," *Mississippi History Now*, 2002,http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/features/feature33/chinese.html and Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias: The Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 81-2.

5 John Egerton, *Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, in History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987) 94.

6 Indigo Som, chinese restaurant project notes, archives 10.01.2004-10.31.2004. http://www.well.com/user/indigo/2004_10_01_archive.html

7 See James Trager, *The Food Chronology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995) 352; and Lim and Eng-Wong 427.

8 Egerton 216-31.

9 Som, notes.

10 General Demographic Characteristics: Census 2000 (DP-1, Mississippi). http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=04000US28&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_DP1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U

11 For a larger discourse on stereotyping, see Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

12 Indigo Som, pers. comm. 2005.

13 John A. Jackle, "Roadside Restaurants and Place-Product-Packaging," *Fast Food, Stock Cars, and Rock 'n' Roll: Place and Space in American Pop Culture*, ed. George O. Carney (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 102-3.

14 This date is related to the change in immigration policy.

15 See Yan-Kit So, *Yan-kit's Classic Chinese Cookbook* (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 1993), 7-10, for regional cooking, and 32-45, for techniques; and Kay Halsey, ed., *The Food of China* (North Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 2001), 10-16, for regional foods.

IMOGENE L. LIM

Imogene Lim is an anthropologist at Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo, BC. A third-generation Chinese Canadian, she is a foodie from birth, having been raised "at the table" of a Vancouver Chinatown restaurateur. Her Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship research examined early Chinese American entrepreneurship in Fall River, MA.