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Salute to the Kitchen Ritual

A history of the transformation of Chinese food in America

Shuxin Zhang

A Chinese traditional style of steamed Chicken starts with dissecting the chicken. For dissecting, it is important for keeping the bones and flesh together, so that the bones can “help preserve the fresh flavor of the flesh”—that was what my dad told me. He is the most excellent chef in the world.

As an international student, I consider cooking my own food as an essential way to link myself back to my own home while making my stomach happy. On a Saturday night, I was doing the dissecting in the dorm kitchen of Trinity College, while some other American students were watching a movie. I placed a whole chicken on my chopping board and began to use a huge knife to cut the joints. Joints were not easy to dissect, and I generated a loud thud which attracted the students’ attention. They shot me terrified looks with wide open eyes. They leaned backwards, trying to stay as far as they could from me. I was terrified by their terrified looks. Why? I was just chopping a chicken, which I did every week at home!

I boiled the chicken and the whole common room was filled with an appetizing smell. They squeezed in front of my pot, and one of them said: “It smells so good! May I have some?”

“Not yet,” I said, throwing the chicken to another pot. “I need 8 more hours to fully steam it.”

Now I saw the terrified looks. Again.

Rumor has it that Chinese people eat everything. In the late 1800s, when Chinese food was first introduced to America by early immigrants, it was welcomed by Americans due to its cheap prices and satisfying flavor. But soon the situation changed because of the arising misconception of Chinese cooking style. The Chinese cooked meat with bones, and their food-chopping techniques gave Americans difficulty with recognizing the origin of the food. Pork and beef were served to Americans in a way that Americans were unfamiliar with, therefore they thought the meat Chinese served was different from the meat they were used to having. What else should those barbaric Asians with darker skin color who lived in the “ground floor” of the whole society eat? Rats!

According to American news and press¹, Chinese cooked rat as main courses and snakes as appetizers. Those misconceptions drove Americans away from Chinatown and Chinese restaurants, and therefore there was no way to eliminate those misconceptions. Even rice was considered barbarian food. The strong hostility towards Chinese food made Chinatowns in cities isolated from American society. Chinese food remained a nasty and barbaric eating style in American stereotypes, and Chinese restaurants were only attended by Chinese immigrants.

I dug into the most famous Chinese cookbook, *Sui Yuan Shi Dan* (*Cooking menu of Suiyuan*), which was written approximately the same time that early Chinese immigrants came to America, to look up whether Chinese people really have recipes for mice and snakes. The weirdest animal in that book is pigeon. There are no rats or snakes. Even snails aren’t in the book.

¹ See Chen, 14-20. Also mentioned in Roberts 147

I was really excited to head to the Asian cuisine of Mather hall, the dining hall in my college, until I saw the food served. It was “General Tso’s Chicken,” a fancy name for crispy chicken cut in small pieces, which has nothing relevant to authentic Chinese food. Along with the chicken are broccoli—Chinese call it “Western cauliflower,” since it was not authentically Chinese vegetables—pepper, long beans, and other I-never-know-what vegetables.

“Sweet and sour sauce,” I said, smiling reluctantly to the Hispanic cook behind the station. He nodded, quickly grabbed sauce and raw materials, dumped them all in the huge frying pan. A strong fizzle sound caused by frying the food in the hot fire immediately bursted. It reminded me of the fizzle sound I generated while I was cooking in China.

It was my first time cooking individually, without the help from my parents.

“Ahhhhhhhh!!” I cried out when I was adding round long beans to the frying pan. Water vapor rushed out uncontrollably from the frying pan with the strong fizzling sound, and I felt I had burned my fingers, and I was going to burn the whole kitchen.

My dad ran in and closed the frying pan cover. The vapor immediately stopped. I stood there, still frightened, but I knew the crisis was gone. The beans were now being fried silently in the pan.

“You’re raising the oil temperature to too hot a level, so the water immediately vaporized and went out with hot oil. Controlling the oil temperature and the fire temperature is the most crucial part in Chinese cooking. If you were a few more seconds late to put your beans in, then the beans would no longer maintain their best flavors. Be friends with fire. Get to know it. Don’t be afraid of it. Then you’ll do fine.”

My dad said it took a chef several years to get to know fire and control it. I don’t know when I could manage the fire, but so far I have never burned down a kitchen. And whenever I fry, I can generate a gentle fizzle sound instead of a jarring one.

But the staff in Mather’s Asian Bar did not care about fire temperature. All food materials in my plate were covered with strong sweet and sour flavor. My tongue could not distinguish chicken from corn or broccoli. Their best and unique flavors were gone with the extremely hot fire and loud, noisy fizzle sound.

Ironically, what helped Chinese food gain extreme popularity was the “Chinese-Excursion Act,” which aimed to repel Chinese immigrants from working in the United States. Jobs such as railway builders or other heavy-duty workers were no longer open to Chinese people. The only things Chinese could do to make a living were subservient jobs—cooking, cleaning, laundry, because those jobs were regarded as “less threatening,” since those jobs were usually jobs for women. The Chinese could not survive in their own Chinese world anymore. They needed to attract Americans to their restaurants.

On the other hand, the more government tried to repel the Chinese, the more curiosity in American society was raised towards Chinese. The exoticism of Chinese food attracted some rebellious population of Americans such as Bohemians² and lower-class workers. They became frequent customers of Chinese restaurants. Despite those brave “curiosity seekers,” middle-class

² See Chen 106

Americans still regarded Chinese restaurants as “up to no good.”³ Chinese restaurant owners had to change to attract customers.

After the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, the Chinese redesigned their Chinatown with “white-stereotypical-oriental” decor.⁴ Lanterns were hung, and walls were painted in red paint. Chinese cleaned their kitchen to construct a healthy and safe dining environment for white Americans. But the most important thing was to create a menu that sounded less strange to Americans, which contained only food materials that they heard of, although that meant giving up many traditional and excellent Chinese authentic dishes.

Hybrid dishes, represented by Chop Suey, had been widely served in Chinese restaurants since then. Lots of people, both Chinese and Americans, claimed that they created Chop Suey,⁵ but I would rather believe that it was an event that occurred simultaneously in many places. Meat and eggs were chopped and fried together with onions and peppers. This is a dish that was both “safe” and “exotic” to Americans, because it had a Chinese name and it was made of American food. Americans were satisfied. In their opinions, they were guaranteed “oriental taste” with the food they were familiar enough with. Though, sadly and funnily enough, Chop Suey was created especially for them. In Chinese, the direct translation of “Chop Suey” means the fragments of animal guts that were usually disposed when preparing food. Chop Suey, as a dish, never appeared on dining tables in China.

Second-generation Chinese-Americans contributed to the chop-suey-mania that soon swept all of America by opening new restaurants that offered this dish⁶. Those Chinese-Americans, who were actually born in America and had little in common with their parents, were the first to take Chinese food out of Chinatown and offer it elsewhere. Chinese restaurants were opened in White communities and began a trend of “oriental taste” in American middle-class areas. Second-generation Chinese-Americans in America altered their parents’ favorite dishes to “American-Chinese” dishes. Cheese and sweet-and-sour sauce were often added to every American-Chinese meal. Bones of chicken and beef were removed. Meat was fried more often than it was stemmed or boiled, going against the traditional Chinese method of cooking. Pineapple chicken, Tso’s chicken, chow mein, and other hybrid dishes prospered in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s⁷. American housewives were crazy to try out “Chinese food” recipes in their kitchens, serving Chop Suey and Chow Mein to the entire family⁸. Those dishes were quick and easy to prepare, giving Chinese food a reputation of “easy fast food”.

The American view of cooking sometimes considers food as simply a mixture of calories and vitamins. As long as the number is “healthy” enough, then the food is okay to eat- no matter how it is cooked. Efficiency of the cooking is usually the priority. Many Americans cannot accept the concept that food can take hours or even days to cook. This is probably why authentic Chinese food, which takes time to be cooked, was shunned, and instead, quick and fast American “Chinese food” became popular.

However, authentic Chinese food is never easy.

³ Quoted phrases of this paragraph are from Barbas 671-673

⁴ Mentioned in Roberts 145 and Barbas 674

⁵ Mentioned in Roberts 138-139

⁶ See Roberts 148 and Chen 102-103

⁷ See Roberts 140-160

⁸ See Coe 185-187

In China, every Saturday, I would put away all my school work, dive into the tiny, but cozy, kitchen with my dad, and try out new dishes. It took three or four hours to unfreeze a piece of frozen meat with cold water, because microwaving it would make the meat no longer tender. We would sit there, listening to the soft, cracking sound of ice breaking at a slow pace. To me, this is the most appetizing sound; and yes, sound can be appetizing.

The meat was then boiled to remove excess blood and fat. After being boiled, it would look like a piece of flawless white jade, a supreme luxury in Chinese culture. An even more important step involved soaking the meat into a mixture of wine, soy sauce, and green onion for an hour. After being soaked, the fishy smell of raw meat would be completely eliminated. Those time-consuming steps were a social ritual to show the cook's hospitality. In Ancient China, when serving a guest, how well the food was prepared showed the level of respect for a guest. The slow food-preparation required patience, an important characteristic of the Chinese definition of "a gentleman". Being Chinese, we respect every piece of food we consume and we try our best to preserve its best flavor.

"Real" Chinese food did not gain popularity or a good reputation in America until the 1970's. Due to the political turbulence in China at this time, many upper-class Chinese scholars immigrated from China to America. Those scholars were knowledgeable in both Western culture and Chinese culture, so they soon gained respect in American society. Those intelligent scholars helped the Chinese populations in America to win a reputation of "smart," which soon turned into "nerdy." The change in the stereotype of the "Chinese" greatly raised the American's interest towards Chinese food, as Chinese people were now accepted by middle- and upper-class Americans.

Also, because of the more open diplomatic policies in China since the 1970's, the communication between the United States and China increased dramatically. These new policies led to an increase in the Chinese population in America. Because of the population increase, there was now a greater demand for more authentic Chinese food. Chinese food began its transformation from a lower-class fast food to an upper-class gourmet food. Better Chinese chefs were hired by more elite restaurants. The food took a greater time to prepare and was served at a higher price. Chinese restaurant owners began to value the importance of management. They designed finer interiors and hired more skilled servers to market themselves to higher-class Americans. Therefore, Chinese restaurants occupied a portion of the "elite food" market in the late 20th century.

The increasing interaction between the United States and China also made the American society more exposed to the Chinese. Americans began to appreciate the cultural value of Chinese food. Chinatowns began to be visited by Americans. More high-class Chinese restaurants left Chinatowns because of the increasing demand. The number of Chinese restaurants now exceeds 40,000 in the United States⁹. Though a huge portion of Chinese restaurants in America still sell hybrid dishes rather than authentic dishes, there is no doubt that Chinese food is one of

⁹ See Yabroff 56

the most popular kinds of exotic food in America and that Chinese food is no longer stereotyped as “lower-class.”

My dorm hall community reviewed my chicken soup as “savory.” The eight hours I spent in the kitchen paid off.

The kitchen in my dorm connected me to my home. Every dish I cooked there has a story associated with China. Chicken soup reminds me of the debate my mom and dad had about whether to cook chicken or pork for weekend treats. Vegetable noodles leads me back to my favorite Shanghai restaurant in which I always had lunch with my boyfriend. Steamed buns lets me recall the food cart in my neighborhood and the old lady who always told me, “Sisi (my nickname in China), I reserved your favorite flavor especially for you!” I usually worked in the dorm kitchen alone, but I could feel a whole world surrounding me.

This is the real magic of Chinese cuisine. Every dish is given meaning and stories. Practicing cooking techniques for hours is like saluting to the old, complicated Chinese kitchen ritual back in China, which I suspect might be washed out in the pursuit of efficiency.

After I had finished reading all of the related materials for my research on Chinese-American food history, I went to Shu Restaurant, a Szechuan restaurant near Trinity College, to enjoy some authentic Dan Dan Noodle and Squirrel Fish. The dishes I ate there tasted almost the same as the dishes I had enjoyed in Szechuan, China. Besides the group of friends I went with, the other customers at the restaurant were all White, and were enjoying all sorts of authentic dishes while feeling comfortable with the bones in the meat.

Could authentic Chinese restaurants like Shu restaurants have prospered without the emergence of Chop Suey and General Tso’s chicken? Would authentic Chinese food have survived in the 1900’s? History has given an answer of “no.” Without the prosperity of hybrid dishes in American society, authentic Chinese food would never have had a chance to be tasted by American people.

I believe in one philosophy in all aspects of life: “fit in first, then make an impact.” I have learned through my own experiences that following this simple sentence is the best thing to do when facing cultural collision and cultural misconceptions. Minorities need to be accepted in order to gain the right to talk, and through talk they can gain power. The transformation of Chinese food perfectly corresponds with this belief. Chinese people and Chinese food strived for decades to be accepted by Western culture and Western society. They “fit in” to the America food industry through hybrid dishes, and, once accepted, introduced authentic dishes to American society to “make an impact” on American cooking styles.

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