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“Did You Eat?”:

A Cross-Cultural and Comparative Ethnography of Chinese and Korean Food in

Flushing, New York

Grace Park & Angela Zheng

26 August 2023

Acknowledgments

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谢谢! (*Xièxiè!*) | 감사합니다! (*Gamsahamnida!*)

Thank you!

Introduction

你吃饭了吗? (*Nǐ chī fàn le ma?*) | 밥 먹었어요? (*Bap meogeoseoyo?*)

Did you eat?

Interwoven within the fabric of Chinese and Korean cultures, these seemingly simple phrases hold a profound significance, embodying a shared question: "Did you eat?" Yet, beyond the surface lies a rich cultural tradition. In both cultures, posing this question is not merely about sustenance, but a gesture of genuine interest for someone's well-being. Much akin to the universally familiar, "How are you?" in English, the utterances of “你吃饭了吗?” (*Nǐ chī fàn le ma?*) and “밥 먹었어요?” (*Bap meogeoseoyo?*) initiates conversations and asks about one's welfare through the mechanism of food.

In our modern world, food is a basic necessity woven into our daily lives. While we all consume food, we often overlook the implications behind what we choose to consume. Our culinary preferences are often driven by our cravings, yet there exists a deeper layer — one that is meant to satisfy more than mere hunger. Food is a conduit, with the potential to foster diverse dimensions of cultural exchange, both positive and negative. This propensity is perhaps most significant in areas with large immigrant populations, where food plays a key role in emphasizing and preserving one's cultural identity in the face of assimilation.

Over the span of six weeks, we conducted a cross-cultural and comparative ethnography of Chinese and Korean cuisines in Flushing, New York. Situated in the borough of Queens, this neighborhood stands as an ideal canvas for our research — predominantly made up of Chinese and Korean communities and well-known for its food culture. Restaurants and cafes of both ethnic groups are within close proximity to each other in this densely populated neighborhood. When faced with so many choices of what to eat, we are curious as to why certain cuisines are

preferred while others are overlooked. We suspect that people often select options based on their preferences and preconceived notions, not just about the food, but also broader culture that the cuisine is associated with.

Using a qualitative ethnographic research method, this paper aims to unravel the nuanced dynamics of consumer perceptions surrounding Chinese and Korean cuisine. Despite both being East Asian cultures, the degree of acceptance they receive in the United States varies due to the complex interplay of American-Chinese and American-Korean relations. This paper explores how historical trajectories, cultural narratives, and societal attitudes may influence consumers' decisions and their expectations of certain food establishments. By addressing these dynamics, this study contributes to the general discourse on assimilation and tolerance of foreign cultures in a multicultural context.

Overview

In the pages that follow, we begin by acknowledging the influence of our positionalities on the data collection process and interpretation. We then delve into the historical stigmatization of Chinese culture and popularization of Korean culture in the United States. After establishing this solid historical and cultural framework, we address the methodologies employed in our research, including observations and interviews. By articulating the strategies used to collect and analyze data, we lay the groundwork for the subsequent discussions.

The core of our paper explores three central themes. Firstly, we found that for many of our immigrant informants and their children, dishes from their country of origin serve to reestablish ties with their cultural heritage after relocating to the United States. These culinary traditions play a pivotal role in nurturing familial ties and preserving customs and traditions. Secondly, our

fieldwork has informed us of how changing landscapes and urban dynamics in Flushing have catalyzed shifts in the local cuisines. Due to gentrification and the gradual adaptations in seemingly “authentic” food, “authenticity” as a concept has become challenged. Foods such as Chinese takeout and Westernized offerings within "Korean-inspired" establishments are often perceived in a negative light, but are reflective of societal and economic circumstances. Thirdly, the pervasive influence of ranking systems and social media leads public discourse and culinary trends. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing dialogues encompassing these themes we found through our fieldwork.

Food for Thought

The comparison between Chinese and Korean restaurants and cafes in Flushing — and the relationship between cultural traditions and cuisines — is important to us on a personal level. As collaborators in this anthropological exploration of Chinese and Korean food cultures, we each bring these distinctive personal backgrounds and perspectives to inform our research.

Angela Zheng

Born and raised in New York as the daughter of Chinese immigrants, my upbringing has fostered a deep connection to both my cultural heritage and American society. Both of my parents used to work in Chinese takeout restaurants and shared their experiences interacting with customers. Through their stories, I gained firsthand knowledge of the challenges and discrimination they encountered. While living in New York has exposed me to the city’s vibrant diversity, my background has also put me at the receiving end of stigmatization and stereotyping of Chinese culture.

Moreover, growing up near Flushing, the frequent visits to the neighborhood have given me a familiarity with the area and has allowed me to witness its transformation over the years. This prior knowledge inherently influences the way I perceive and interpret the observations made during my fieldwork. I acknowledge that I already hold a sense of prejudice against the developed areas along Prince Street, knowing that their arrival in the neighborhood resulted in the displacement of older businesses.

Grace Park

As a Korean-American, my narrative is deeply rooted in being the daughter of Korean immigrants. My experiences have been impacted by the unique journey of my parents, who ventured to the United States seeking new opportunities. This journey led me to grow up in various different states around the nation, all of which were predominantly populated by white communities. Being surrounded by this demographic has provided me with a distinct lens through which I view the world. I had become dissociated from my own culture and internalized much of the racism I was experiencing in my childhood. However, these interactions have provided me with insights into cultural dynamics, identity, and the nuances of belonging.

Upon moving to New York for college, my parents also made the transition to relocate, introducing me to our research site — Flushing. In contrast to Angela, whose prior knowledge of Flushing enriches her perspective, my own understanding of the area is more limited. As I conduct this research, I recognize that my findings may be susceptible to certain factors stemming from my background.

As Researchers...

We bring together our unique experiences and perspectives to the study of culinary cultures in Flushing. Our positions as Asian-Americans allowed us to more seamlessly enter spaces and interact with other Asians. Our identities provided us with access to more opportunities than individuals from a different culture. Moreover, Flushing is a space in which we faced communication barriers. However, our fluency in speaking Korean and Chinese helped us conduct interviews with a demographic whose first language is not English.

However, we recognize that our status as college students conducting academic research could create imbalanced power dynamics. We approached every interaction with sensitivity and respect, prioritizing informed consent, and ensuring that our participants may opt out of the interview or decline to answer any questions that they found uncomfortable. We took measures to maintain a non-hierarchical and open atmosphere during interviews, valuing the lived experiences of our participants and their voices as equal contributors to our study. We would like to acknowledge the fact that this reflection upon our positionality informs the data we gather.

食谱 (*Shípǔ*) | 조리법 (*Joribeop*)

Recipe

Historical Context

Chinese Culture in the United States

The history of Chinese immigrants in the United States is marked by periods of acceptance, discrimination, and adaptation. The first wave of Chinese immigrants who arrived during the Gold Rush in the mid-19th century faced harsh conditions and racism. Fleeing the unrest brought about by the Taiping Rebellion in China, many sought opportunities abroad. They

were drawn by the economic prospects offered in America, including labor demands for railroad construction and the Gold Rush.

Chinese immigrants were initially welcomed and praised as "indispensable" contributors to the economic development of California, as well as the building of the nation's transportation infrastructure.¹ Yet, as economic depression hit in the 1870s, sentiments changed as it led to increased unemployment and competition for jobs. Chinese immigrants, willing to accept the low wages forced upon them, became targets of attacks by white workers. The cultural and physical differences further exacerbated these tensions and violent conflicts. The culmination of this hostility was the signing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. This act marked the beginning of a series of exclusion laws, effectively ending the free immigration of Chinese laborers.²

The repealment of the acts allowed for an annual quota of 105 immigrants to enter the country. This period saw a change in geographic distribution as anti-Chinese sentiment in the West pushed many immigrants either back to China or to central and eastern states. This also exacerbated stereotypes of them as "foreign," "exotic," and "inferior."³ The final repealment of the exclusionary laws began in 1965 once the quota system was overturned, marking the third wave of mass immigration.

However, the enduring stereotypes and stigmatization of Chinese culture affected how the cuisine was perceived. In order to survive, Chinese immigrants often assimilated and changed their dishes to fit American palettes, over time reducing Chinese takeout to a low-cost, fast-food option. Fuchsia Dunlop is an English writer who specializes in Chinese cuisine and has lived in the country for numerous years. She was featured in "Ugly Delicious" and spoke on the history of Chinese-American food, describing the phenomenon of this new cuisine that emerged.

¹ Chen, "Patterns of Chinese Settlement," 3

² Office of the Historian, "Chinese Immigration"

³ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 36.

“Because Chinese was one of the earliest immigrant cuisines, it adapted to American and British taste at a time when people were maybe less cosmopolitan. And they came out with a formula which kind of worked.” — Fuchsia Dunlop⁴

The bastardization of Chinese culture persisted and was further exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Misinformation and scapegoating fueled xenophobic attitudes, with some wrongly attributing the virus to Chinese people's dietary habits. The paranoia running rampant during the pandemic had a significant influence on consumer behavior, especially in relation to products associated with the virus and supposed country of origin.⁵ This deepened existing stereotypes about Chinese cuisine as “unhygienic” and having a connection to illness.

South Korean Culture in the United States

Korean immigration to America can be understood as an outcome of the involvement of the U.S. in Korea that encompassed political, economic, missionary, and military interactions since the late nineteenth century. The initial wave of Korean immigrants was facilitated by the Joseon–United States Treaty of 1882, which established a mutual friendship and assistance between the two countries.⁶ This treaty, notable for being Korea's first treaty with a Western nation, served as the gateway for the country to participate in global affairs. This era coincided with the U.S. enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act, leading to the Hawaii Sugar Planters Association to seek Korean labor to break strikes initiated by Japanese plantation workers. These Korean immigrants, often referred to as "strikebreakers," played a pivotal role in Hawaii's labor

⁴ Chang, *Ugly Delicious*, Season 1, Episode 7.

⁵ Na, “Food Consumption and Stigmatization,” 83.

⁶ Arndt-Johns, *Joseon-United States Treaty of 1882*.

landscape. However, in 1924, immigration was halted by the Asian Exclusion Act, and later revised in 1952.⁷

Subsequently, immigration resumed during and after the Korean War, as the U.S. maintained strong connections throughout this time.⁸ In 1965, the Immigration Act was passed, marking a pivotal shift and effectively dismantling previous quotas for various ethnic groups.⁹ This change facilitated the movement of Koreans to urban hubs such as Los Angeles and New York City. Following this period, a substantial financial allocation of approximately 2.3 billion dollars was extended by the U.S. to South Korea. Of this, \$60 million went toward educational programs, enabling around 15,000 Korean students to pursue studies abroad in the States.¹⁰ As a result, this also deepened the exchange of expertise and insights between the two nations, fostering a broader and more robust transnational exchange.

In the early 2000s, a cultural phenomenon known as *Hallyu*, or the Korean wave, emerged, encompassing a broad spectrum of Korean popular culture that captivated audiences not only within South Korea but also on a global scale. This wave swept across various domains, including music, television dramas, films, and even culinary traditions, leaving a mark on U.S. perceptions of Korea. The South Korean government recognized and leveraged the immense potential of this cultural momentum. By capitalizing on the enthusiasm that *Hallyu* fever generated, “actively [harnessing] America’s desire to consume Korean culture into a nation-branding project through various programs and policies, governmental restructuring, and cooperation with corporations and local Korean businesses on promotional events.”¹¹

⁷ Noland, “The Impact of Korean Immigration,” 62.

⁸ Min, “Korean Immigrants in Los Angeles I,” 1.

⁹ Hong, “Korean Fusion: Consuming a Globalized Korea,” 76.

¹⁰ Kaijo, “Contested spaces: capturing the cultural layers of Koreatown,” 5.

¹¹ Chung, “Consuming Gangnam Style.”

Today, iconic cultural works like "Squid Game" and the Academy Award-winning film, "Parasite," have garnered international acclaim, showcasing the depth and breadth of South Korea's creative endeavors. This has also seeped into the realm of Korean food, where cultural exports have not only entertained, but also contributed to an enhanced worldwide consciousness of Korean culture. Dishes like kimchi, bulgogi, and bibimbap have transcended borders, making their way onto international menus — a quintessential manifestation of what might be termed "soft power." As Kim articulates, this is not a form of "hard power" rooted in economic or military might, but rather a "soft power" that draws individuals in through feelings of fascination and delight.¹²

Chinese and Koreans in Flushing

The neighborhood of Flushing in New York City has undergone many transformations shaped by waves of immigration and socio-economic shifts. With the onset of the twentieth century, one of the most significant technological advancements was transportation infrastructure such as the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) and New York Subway Line 7. These two means of public transportation facilitated Flushing's connection to Manhattan, not only allowing for easier commutes, but also drawing people to the neighborhood for shopping and recreational activities. In the 1970s, however, white residents departed to Long Island, seeking better educational opportunities and quality of life.¹³ Flushing's "white flight" resulted in low rental prices for housing and businesses, creating opportunities for Asian immigrants.

By 2000, Asian Americans made up 56% of the Flushing population.¹⁴ However, as the neighborhood expanded, "the building owners, who rented their spaces to Koreans, either sold

¹² Kim, "Past, Present and Future of Hallyu," 156.

¹³ Greenberg, "Letter from Flushing."

¹⁴ Min, *Asian Americans*, 2.

their properties to Chinese or rented spaces to them because Chinese offered better prices.”¹⁵ Due to this, Korean people moved east toward Bayside — from Main Street to Northern Boulevard.

Today, this demographic pattern is even more pronounced, as downtown Flushing has become predominantly Chinese. Spanning from Union Street and extending eastwards to encompass Linden Hill and Murray Hill, this larger segment of Flushing is occupied by Korean residents. However, the more easily accessible and urbanized areas of Flushing surrounding Main Street — where both the 7 train and LIRR stations are located — stand as the center point of the Chinese community.

请慢用! (*Qǐng màn yòng!*) | 맛있게 드세요! (*Masitge deuseyo!*)

Enjoy your meal!

Methods

The timeline of this research spanned from June to August 2023 in Flushing, NY. To conduct the research, we began by reading literature on our topic. We then utilized a combination of observations, participant observations, and open-ended interviews to supplement what we read. Within this framework, participant observations were conducted across a variety of both Chinese and Korean restaurants and cafes in Flushing¹⁶. Through observing and listening to conversations around us, we were able to gain insight into the consumer demographics and the ongoing discourse happening in these food places. Notably, we tried to keep the places varied by price range and location, making sure to not just stay in downtown Flushing (see fig.1).

Several of the restaurants we explored were suggested by our informants, who also played a role in selecting the interview locations. Due to the logistics around scheduling and time

¹⁵ Pae, “Negotiated or Negotiating Spaces,” 461.

¹⁶ <https://goo.gl/maps/WfDVq6H7HHDSAWcn7>

constraints, some of our conversations were conducted virtually. All the interviews were transcribed and read thoroughly so that repeated themes could be identified. Our conversations allowed us to intimately engage with individuals, capturing their stories, perceptions, and the complex ways in which food intertwines with their cultural narratives.

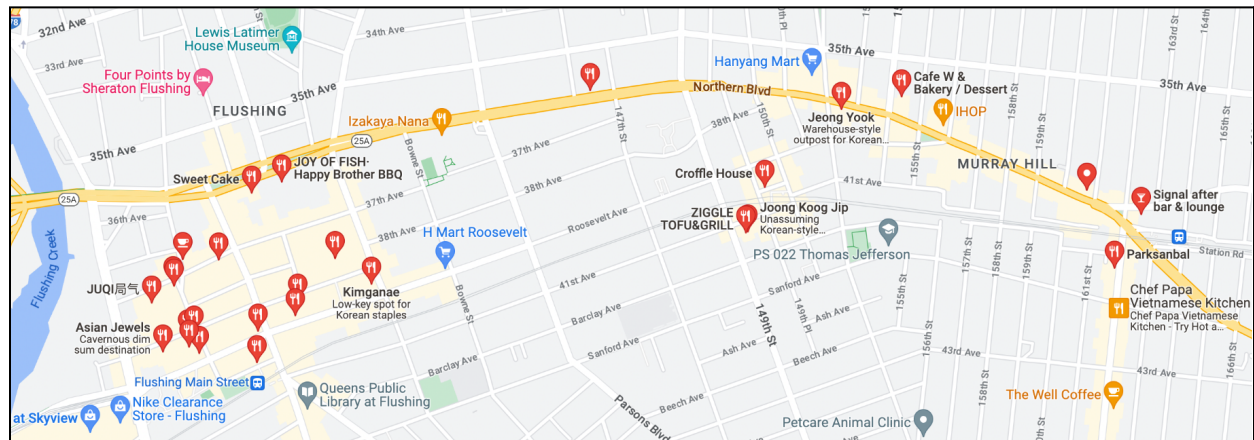


Figure 1. Screenshot from Google Maps representing the food places we visited.

“Ugly Delicious”

In addition to conducting participant observations on-site, we expanded our research into the realm of visual storytelling. We watched a Netflix original series called “Ugly Delicious” by a Korean-American restaurateur, David Chang. In each episode, Chang showcases different foods while accompanied by a diverse assembly of other chefs, journalists, historians, and critics, among others. Collectively, they work to shed light on cultural barriers and address widespread misconceptions.

Two episodes, in particular, provided valuable insight into consumer perceptions and cultural narratives surrounding authentic Chinese and Korean cuisine. “BBQ” and “Fried Rice” contributed another layer to our comparative ethnography. In “BBQ,” Chang explores the diverse ways in which the dish is eaten and celebrated around the world. In “Fried Rice,” Chang focuses

on this iconic comfort food. He delves into its global variations, highlighting the fluid nature of culinary traditions and how they adapt and evolve within different contexts.

These episodes, while encompassing a broader exploration of culinary diversity, intersect with our research. While the show does not focus exclusively on Chinese or Korean cuisine, the general ideas from Chang’s travelogue can be extrapolated to the larger theme of interconnectedness through food.

Museum of Chinese in America

Expanding on the discourse surrounding American Chinese cuisine, our fieldwork in Flushing led us to the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) (see fig. 2). Situated within the Tangram Mall, this institution hosts an exhibit titled, "Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America." This was followed by a virtual interview with one of the co-curators, Henry.



Figure 2. Image of the “Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy” exhibit in Tangram Mall. (Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America. 2023. Photograph. MOCA, March 17, 2023. <https://documentedny.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/MOCA.SourSweetBitterSpicyTangram1.2023-1536x864.jpg>).

The exhibit's title, "Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy," is a Chinese idiom that draws a metaphorical connection between the complex flavors in Chinese cuisine to the multifaceted experiences of life. This exhibit features 33 chefs and home cooks who moved to America. The purpose of this exhibit for the museum curators was to start a conversation “about the meaning of Chinese food as a platform for experimentation, a test of authenticity, a means of immigrant survival, and a microcosm of Chinese culture.”¹⁷ This aspect aligns intricately with our research objectives, as we delve into the nuanced role of food in facilitating both constructive and adverse dimensions of cultural exchange. Furthermore, it dovetails with our exploration of the complicated conceptual and experiential milieu of the contemporary U.S. for producing particular attitudes towards Asian-Americans.

However, we later discovered that MOCA itself has become embroiled in a contentious controversy on gentrification and inequality. In 2021, the museum was granted a substantial funding allocation of \$35 million by the city of New York. This was part of a larger distribution of \$50 million to local community projects in Manhattan's Chinatown in exchange for the expansion of a jail within the neighborhood. This decision has sparked intense opposition from local residents, demanding that MOCA return the funding and for it to be reallocated to small businesses and restaurants that suffered from the pandemic.¹⁸

The protests were further fueled by the existing tensions between established, affluent Chinese-Americans with generational ties and newer, working-class immigrants facing economic uncertainty. One example is the eviction of Jing Fong — the last unionized restaurant in Chinatown — whose closure laid off more than 100 employees. Jonathan Chu, a co-chair of the

¹⁷ Museum of Chinese in America, “Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy.”

¹⁸ Nehme, “Demonstrators Boycott Chinatown Museum.”

museum board, is also one of Chinatown’s biggest landlords and the one responsible for the eviction.¹⁹

While the mission and projects of this museum appear to be closely aligned with our research agenda, they are simultaneously implicated in initiatives that displace the very populations they claim to represent. This dichotomy between their aspirations and their involvement in projects that exacerbate displacement raised complex ethical considerations for us as we debated on engaging with them. Ultimately, we decided to reach out to the curators as it offered an opportunity to explore not only the positive dimensions of cultural representation through food but also the intricate challenges and dilemmas inherent in such endeavors. We believed their unique perspective could provide us with a better understanding of how institutions grapple with the realities of cultural preservation, economic pressures, and community dynamics.

Interviews

We conducted in-depth interviews with a total of thirteen people, all of whom have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. To facilitate the discussions, we prepared a set of questions but intentionally left them open-ended to allow the interviewees to take the conversation in the direction of their choice. With whom we chose to interview, we wanted to ensure that we included people from various ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds. Our informants included:

Name	Age	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Hometown	Occupation
Henry	49	Male	Chinese	San Francisco, CA → New York, NY	Museum Curator
Clyde	19	Male	Chinese	Jacksonville, FL	Student

¹⁹ De Freytas-Tamura, “Why Some in Chinatown Oppose a Museum”

Eleanor	41	Female	Chinese	Fujian, China	Business Owner
Ben	46	Male	Chinese	Fujian, China	Business Owner
Jaden	20	Male	Chinese	New York, NY	Student
Jimmy	21	Male	Korean	Long Island, NY	Student
Ruby	20	Female	Korean	Greenwood Village, CO	Student
Esther	54	Female	Korean	Gangwon-do, South Korea	Business Owner
Andrew	66	Male	Korean	Seoul, South Korea	Business Owner
Bella	20	Female	Korean and Black	Los Angeles, CA	Student
Kofi	20	Male	Black	Newark, NJ	Student
Lilac	20	Female	Black and Hispanic	New York, NY	Student
Alia	20	Female	Bengali	Hudson, NY	Student

前菜 (*Qiáncài*) | 반찬 (*Banchan*)

Appetizer

What Food was Meant For

Cultural Heritage

In a multitude of our interviews, a recurring theme centered around the pivotal role of food in shaping and preserving cultural identities. One of the questions we asked each of our interviewees was, “How do you think your personal background and/or experiences shape your food preferences?” Among our informants who were Chinese or Korean, they answered that food served as a way to bridge generational and geographical gaps.

For Bella, it was about using food as a means to “better understand [her] cultural identity.” Bella comes from a unique background in that she is half-Korean and half-Black. Her mother was adopted from Korea by a white family at a young age, introducing an interesting dimension to her identity. Despite her Korean roots, her mother did not have the same opportunity to establish a profound connection with Bella’s cultural origins.

In contrast, for Ruby, Esther, and Andrew, who are full Korean and have that pre-established connection, food is more about a sense of closeness to their cultural heritage. Korean dishes carry with them the essence of comfort, family, and memories.

“A lot of the time, I just feel closer to my parents, grandparents, and relatives who are overseas just knowing that we’re eating similar food.” — Ruby

This especially resonates with Esther and Andrew, a married couple who immigrated to the U.S. around the 2000s. For them, they left behind a familiar landscape, embracing uncertainty and change in pursuit of the so-called “American Dream.” They are able to find a piece of home among the numerous Korean restaurants serving 자장면 (*jajangmyeon*) and 탕수육 (*tangsuyuk*) (see fig. 3), dishes that can not be replicated in their apartment kitchen.



Figure 3. Photograph of 자장면 (jajangmyeon), 탕수육 (tangsuyuk) and 짬뽕 (jjamppong). (Photograph by author, July 7, 2023).

Familiarity and Nostalgia

One of our very first interviews was a joint conversation between two friends, Jimmy and Jaden, a Korean-American and Chinese-American, respectively. The interview was conducted at Guh Sung Restaurant, a Korean-Chinese fusion establishment in Bayside, chosen by Jimmy. As we walked in, we were immediately greeted in Korean by an 아주머니 (*ajumeoni*), and given menus featuring dishes listed in Korean, Chinese, and English (see fig. 4). Korean language and media were prominently featured on the walls of the restaurant and heard from the four other tables of Korean families with children. This, to Jaden, was reminiscent of a restaurant that he visited last summer in Korea, as the environment created was what he described as “homey.”



Figure 4. Photograph of Guh Sung Restaurant menu. (Photograph by author, July 7, 2023).

主食 (Zhǔshí) | 밥과 국 (Bapgwa guk)

Main Course

How Food Has Changed

Gentrification

How food changes is intricately tied to a neighborhood's socio-economic dynamics, and Flushing is no exception. While development revitalizes neighborhoods and enhances visibility, it can also pose threats to communities that have been in the area for years. Flushing's dining scene has become increasingly competitive with the real estate boom. This adds pressure to the long-standing family-owned businesses which are being replaced by trendy cafes and upscale restaurants. As Jaden recalled during our interview, he witnessed a local Fuzhounese place in Flushing that he grew up with being pushed out and replaced by a Chinese bubble tea chain.

Illustrating another impact of gentrification is 南翔小籠包 (*Nan Xiang Xiao Long Bao*), a popular soup dumpling place in Flushing that closed in 2019 due to rising rents. John Choe, the Flushing Chamber Executive Director stated, "Nan Xiang is the tip of the iceberg and the most

shocking example of small businesses not being able to do business in Flushing anymore.”²⁰ This sentiment depicts the broader struggles faced by local businesses in the changing landscape of Flushing, where the challenges brought by gentrification are felt by establishments like 南翔小籠包.

Gentrification also leads to the disappearance of traditional, local food establishments, sometimes replaced by more modern or commercialized options. Around 2010, Angela watched Assi Plaza, a Korean grocery store, and Flushing Mall shut down and sold to make way for a mixed-use project, including luxury apartments. Tangram Mall, which replaced Flushing Mall, opened in 2021, coincidentally also being the location for the “Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy” exhibit. On MOCA’s website is this description of Tangram:

“Tangram is elevating Flushing through its groundbreaking vision of immersive retail, residential, office and hotel space, featuring 275,000 square feet of high-end curated retail in a multi-level space alongside a sweeping, sky-lit atrium.” — Museum of Chinese in America²¹

The language in this description, such as “elevating Flushing” and “high-end curated retail” suggests the beginning of a neighborhood transformation, affecting working-class and immigrant livelihoods. Local restaurants have to modernize to be able to align with shifting consumer preferences but are oftentimes financially unable to and face displacement as a result. The emergence of more modern and “elevated” restaurants is seen as a response to changing demographics, encompassing high-end dining and contemporary interpretations of traditional dishes that appeal to the upper class.

²⁰ Vianna and Dai, “Nan Xiang Xiao Long Bao in Flushing.”

²¹ Museum of Chinese in America, “Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy.”

Adaptation



Figure 5. Screenshot of a quote by Jennifer 8. Lee. (Morgan Neville, “Ugly Delicious,” 2018).

“It’s served on all seven continents, even Antarctica, ‘cause Monday night is Chinese food night at McMurdo Station. There’s Chinese food in space. NASA serves sweet and sour pork to astronauts... There are more Chinese restaurants in America than McDonald’s, Burger King, Wendy’s and Kentucky Fried Chickens combined.” — Jennifer 8. Lee²²

In the eye-opening Episode 7 of “Ugly Delicious,” Lee puts into perspective the pervasiveness of Chinese takeout around the world (see fig. 5). Especially so in the U.S., where it outshines even the popularity of globally recognized American fast food staples. Through this lens, we gained an understanding of how deeply entrenched Chinese takeout has become in the routines of Americans. We also heard the same sentiment from our interviewees, who shared their personal experiences and perspectives regarding their relationship with Chinese cuisine.

²² Chang, *Ugly Delicious*. Season 1, Episode 7

Alia and Kofi, are two of our interviewees who come from backgrounds outside of Chinese and Korean cultures. Alia vividly recalls her childhood experiences with Chinese food, reminiscing about a local restaurant where she would enjoy dishes like sesame chicken, orange chicken, and General Tso's chicken. Despite not having Chinese backgrounds themselves, both Alia and Kofi unexpectedly share a sense of familiarity with the cuisine that we assumed would only be present in our Chinese informants, who have a direct heritage and cultural connection with the food.

“Chinese restaurants have been a familiar place for me to eat at... Imagine a typical suburban family having “Taco Tuesday.” For my family, our “Taco Tuesday” was going to the Chinese buffet after church on Sunday.” — Kofi

On the other hand, when we asked about their understanding of Korean cuisine, their responses were more limited. They both mentioned that they did not see any Korean restaurants growing up. Particularly for Alia, who grew up in upstate New York, Korean food was unavailable to her, which resulted in her lack of knowledge about the overall culture. It was not until she came to college that her friendships introduced her to food beyond the Korean barbecue that she had only heard about. Even Kofi, who had grown up in urban New Jersey, had a similar experience in which he had not tried Korean food until recently. However, he mentioned in our interview that he has noticed the rapid rise in popularity of Korean culture in the U.S. over the last decade, which he primarily attributes to the international appeal and widespread recognition of K-Pop.

Amidst this rising trend with Korean culture, particularly in relation to its cuisine, we had the opportunity to explore numerous dining establishments in Flushing that either hailed from Korea or drew inspiration from it. One place we visited was Signal, a Korean-owned restaurant

that identifies itself as “Korean fusion.” One of their dishes is called “Tteok N’ Cheese,” which combines the American comfort food, macaroni and cheese, with Korean rice cakes, known as *tteok*. Korean food has transformed to suit diverse tastes without compromising its inherent essence. Rather than inventing entirely new dishes and labeling them as “Korean,” a new approach has emerged — dubbing fusion as “Korean-inspired.”

In comparison, historical relations between Chinese immigrants and Americans since the nineteenth century have led to the creation of Westernized dishes, resulting in a departure from the original cultural roots of the cuisine. This is different from how America has marked Korean food through the concept of fusion or cultural blending. For example, the numerous sweet and sour dishes in Chinese takeout cater to Americans' preferences for these flavors. Ben and Eleanor, both Chinese immigrants, noted how these takeouts tended to exhibit a heightened sweetness and sourness compared to any authentic dishes they ate back home. When we asked our other informants what kind of food they thought about as Chinese, we heard:

“I really don’t wanna seem offensive at all. When I think of Chinese food, the first thing I think of is... sesame chicken and rice or orange chicken or General Tso’s. I don’t know if it’s stereotypical but like... I guess I think of the American Chinese.” — Alia

While Alia hinted at what is the popularized perception of Chinese food, we came to find that there was only one Chinese takeout restaurant on the outskirts of downtown Flushing. Instead, all the restaurants we visited during our fieldwork were seemingly authentic, untouched by Western influence. This scarcity stemmed from Chinese restaurants in Flushing catering primarily to their local community, eliminating the need for adaptations that were historically necessary for Chinese immigrants to survive. When there is no longer a need to appeal to a white clientele, restaurant owners are able to maintain the authenticity of the culture.

Imagined Authenticity

Interestingly, this narrative raises a pertinent point. Just as we singled out the one Chinese takeout restaurant as “inauthentic,” there is a connotation that such types of restaurants are inferior. However, in our interview with Henry, he spoke about his switched perspective after curating the “Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy” show. Previously, he shared our similar implicit bias, in that he was judging places that were not “authentic.” After going through the curation process and hearing stories from chefs, he acknowledged that:

“Authenticity is not a helpful term, because there’s no absolutes with what’s authentic. So I think I’ve become much more respectful of the way that restaurants and cooks experimented and adapted the cuisine to something of their own, where they try to meet the taste of their customers... I realized this is something that’s always happened. It’s not a new thing. Adaptation is always part of cooking and I think that’s an important lesson of the show.”— Henry

Coming to a similar realization, we have grown more attuned to the ongoing conversation around maintaining the authenticity of the culture and being authentic to the circumstance. Yet, in a nation as culturally diverse as ours, is there truly something “authentic” anymore? Ben underscored the insignificance of authenticity, attributing it to New York being an immigrant city — “everything is mixed, nothing is ‘authentic.’”

点心 (*Diǎnxīn*) | 후식 (*Husik*)

Dessert

How Food is Now Perceived

The Hierarchy of Taste and Perception

New York City stands as a global epicenter of diverse culinary offerings. As one of the top five Michelin-starred cities in the world, the Michelin Guide plays a pivotal role in shaping culinary recognition and prestige. Although the absence of a star does not imply subpar quality, the prestige linked to achieving such recognition still remains a greatly coveted distinction.

Clyde, a Chinese-American student, suggested conducting our interview at 江南 (*Jiang Nan*), a Chinese restaurant in Flushing recommended by the Michelin Guide. Michael Ellis, International Director of the Michelin Guide books, differentiates between receiving a star and being recommended by meaning “that the inspectors have found the food to be above average, but not quite at star.”²³ However, the restaurant has expressed its gratitude and honor “to be recognized as one of the only Chinese Fusion restaurants on the 2022 Michelin Recommended List.”²⁴

As we opened the door to the restaurant, we were greeted by Chinese instrumental music and over-the-top oriental decor. The paper screens, bamboo blinds, lanterns, and dragon statue above a koi pond (see fig. 6), while aesthetically pleasing, seemed to amplify the exoticism of Chinese cultural elements. This raised our concerns about how cultural symbols are utilized for their aesthetic appeal, oversimplifying and reducing a rich culture into a marketable product. The

²³ Koh, “What It Means To Be A Michelin-Recommended Restaurant.”

²⁴ “Jiang Nan 江南 • Chinese Fusion.”

intentional orchestration of these design choices mirrors a broader trend where culture is often fetishized and presented in curated snapshots, catering to consumer expectations.



Figure 6. Photograph of the interior of Jiang Nan, showcasing a dragon statue above a koi pond. (Jiang Nan, December 19, 2019, <https://www.opentable.com/r/jiang-nan-flushing>).

When we began our interview, Clyde brought up an interesting point that although we are at a place featured on the Michelin guide, there are currently no Chinese restaurants in New York City that have a Michelin star. This was to our surprise as we knew of many other Asian restaurants in New York that have a star, from the Korean-inspired, Jeju Noodle Bar, to the Japanese counter dining experience at Tsukimi. Here, he jokingly mentioned, “It’s not difficult to get a Michelin star, all you need is a white guy on your marketing team.”

This thought was shared even by a Michelin-starred chef, David Chang, in *Ugly Delicious*. Given that Chinese takeout food has been part of the mainstream American culinary imagination — and confirmed by many of our interviewees — the idea of Chinese food as a fine

cuisine or anything other than takeout food does not seem to resonate. He expressed the challenges faced by Chinese restaurants in attaining the highest ratings by saying:

“This could be the best Chinese restaurant in New York City, and it will never get four stars in The New York Times. It’ll always get two stars. Because of the decor, because of the service, because it’s always gonna be viewed by essentially a white prism...” — David Chang²⁵

Chang's remark about a hypothetical "best Chinese restaurant" in New York City reinforced the notion that certain biases, stemming from preconceived notions and limited viewpoints, could influence the Michelin evaluation process. Factors such as ingredients, service, ambiance, and even the “personality of the chef in cuisine” matter when gaining recognition from inspectors.²⁶ Our informant, Ben, argues that a system with such criteria is not fair and does not apply to all those that have received Michelin stars. Many hawker stalls in Singapore have received stars in recognition of their dishes, but there is no service or ambiance created, revealing the inconsistency of this system.

Social Media

Aside from the Michelin Guide, restaurants find themselves subject to another ranking avenue — social media. While this is not an official ranking institution, social media coverage plays a pivotal role in popularizing the next trend for consumers. In all of our interviews, it was notable that every individual, in some capacity, highlighted the impact of social media on Chinese and Korean food. For some, Instagram, 小红书 (*xiǎo hóng shū*)²⁷, and TikTok are the default apps when looking for new places to eat.

²⁵ Chang, *Ugly Delicious*. Season 1, Episode 7.

²⁶ Goh, “What It Takes to Earn a Michelin Star.”

²⁷ 小红书 is a social media and e-commerce platform often described as “Chinese Instagram.”

In recent years, the appeal of Korean food has been catalyzed by the rise in popularity of Korean entertainment. As Korean dramas, music, beauty, and style gain global attention, a halo effect extends to Korean cuisine, making it more enticing to international audiences. Lilac, a Black and Hispanic student, mentioned that her first exposure to Korean culture was through her active consumption of K-pop and K-dramas in her leisure time. The only food she mentioned having was spicy rice cakes, also known as 떡볶이 (*tteokbokki*), as it was frequently featured in the K-dramas she watched.

We also had this dish during our fieldwork at a restaurant called Witch Topokki (마녀 떡볶이), an All-You-Can-Eat spicy rice cake parlor in Flushing, after coming across this place on our Instagram Reels and TikTok. We decided to visit after seeing its popularity as a new concept. While we're both very familiar with Korean cuisine and have visited Korea, this AYCE concept of 떡볶이 was one that we had never seen before. In an article in the *Eater*, the chef-owner of Witch Topokki said:

“K-food, K-music, K-shows have become so popular... I thought about, when it comes to K-food, what would appeal to people who aren't Korean? There's already galbi, bibimbap. But what's new is tteokbokki.”²⁸ — Sang-jin Park

Park's perspective reflects a thoughtful approach to not only embrace the global popularity of Korean culture, but to introduce a fresh concept that resonates with diverse palates. However, our interviewee, Ruby, voiced her opinions on how she saw her culture being perceived as a trend. To her, Witch Topokki and Korean cafes like Gonggan and Cafe W, are capitalizing on the popularity of Korean entertainment and romanticizing the culture.

²⁸ Shin, “Restaurant Witch Topokki Opens.”

We recognize that these viewpoints come from different positions — Park as a Korean entrepreneur owner, and Ruby as a Korean college student. One is more business-minded, while the other does not necessarily have to consider the economic struggles of flourishing in a foreign country. Social media as a form of ranking is what we consider to be a “double-edged sword.”

This intertwining of cultural trends and food preferences highlights the commodification of culture, akin to the way in which Chinese aesthetics have been exploited for economic interests. This glamorization, however, raises questions about cultural representation and the nuances that may be lost in the process. Bella highlighted the stigmatization of Chinese cuisine and Sinophobia in America, linked to historical and geopolitical factors, in contrast to the romanticization of Korean cuisine. In our interview, she showed us a Tweet (see fig. 7) and explained:



Figure 7. Tweet image of “thing [the user] keeps seeing.” (@Wirelessly__, February 25, 2023, [https://twitter.com/Wirelessly__ /status/1629636070639026176](https://twitter.com/Wirelessly__/status/1629636070639026176)).

“What further exacerbates the stigmatization of Chinese food and culture is South Korea and Japan's regional soft power, which non-coercively alters the preferences of foreign countries through appeal and attraction. Globally enjoyed by many, things like K-pop and anime are attractive and enjoyable products of South Korea and Japan. Through association, the influence of these items make people more likely to romanticize and consume Korean food as opposed to Chinese.” — Bella

If there is media coverage of Chinese restaurants, the dialogue is centered around the idea of “cheap eats” and “hidden gems” establishments. Bella described another social media content from TikTok, where the influencer recommended some of the best-tasting Chinese restaurants in New York. Bella explained that she wanted to try the fried pork and chive dumplings at a particular eatery for its cheap prices, high praise, and family-owned status which made it more appealing than Din Tai Fung, a Michelin-starred dumpling chain.

Based on our interviews, we discovered how social media has also become a tool for subverting prestigious ranking institutions like the Michelin Guide. Smaller Chinese businesses are gaining traction as unique "hole-in-the-wall" establishments, challenging the notion that only Michelin-starred restaurants represent culinary excellence.

谢谢你做饭! (*Xièxiè nǐ zuò fàn!*) | 잘 먹었습니다! (*Jal meogeosseumnida!*)

Thank you for the meal!

Conclusion

After conducting observations at restaurants and interviewing our informants over meals, we came to understand the power of food in fostering human connection. Even though three different languages — Chinese, Korean, and English — all have distinct histories and

backgrounds, a common thread of shared experiences emerged. Our dining tables became more than just a physical space; they became gateways into the narratives, traditions, and emotions of our interviewees. Through this, we were able to answer our research question of how consumers' knowledge of historical trajectories, cultural narratives, and societal attitudes towards particular cuisines may influence their decisions to eat. Food's role as a bridge between generations and distant motherlands emerged as a powerful theme. For many immigrants and their children, dishes from their home country served as a vessel to connect with their roots after leaving them behind.

Yet, with the changing landscapes of gentrification in the neighborhood and globalization, we came to apprehend how the meaning of authenticity can shift. Through our interview with Henry, he helped us to rethink our preconceived notions of people who assimilate into American culture. It became evident that adaptation is not negative; rather, it is a pragmatic response to survival in a nation that is working on greater tolerance for foreign cultures.

Nonetheless, this realization has yet to be met when it comes to the hierarchy of taste and perception. The absence of Michelin stars for Chinese restaurants within the city serves as a stark reminder of the prevailing biases that continue to exert their influence over culinary assessments. Moreover, the dichotomy existing between social media and established traditional ranking systems introduces an added layer of intricacy to the ongoing discourse surrounding Chinese and Korean food. While Michelin stars have historically denoted excellence according to specific criteria, the emergence of social media as a platform that not only popularizes new trends and supports small businesses, but also amplifies the voices of a diverse spectrum of food enthusiasts, from consumers to producers.

“That’s the joy of food, that’s where all of the partisan bickering falls apart.” — David Chang²⁹

²⁹ Chang, *Ugly Delicious*. Season 1, Episode 5

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