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The Transformation of Chinese Food in the United States and Its Societal Impacts

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Abstract: Following the pervasive trend of globalization, cultural interaction between different nations becomes possible. This article aims to distinguish between the Chinese cuisines in U.S. society that have diverged origins: the modified Chinese food which was brought by massive immigration from the southeast coastal provinces in China in the late 19th century, and the franchised cuisine from China that recently settled in the market. The historical background relating to the on-time social movements and different motivations of these two cuisines will be delineated in this article to help explain the mechanism behind Chinese culinary industries' adaptation in the United States. It is argued that the Chinese cuisine brought by Cantonese immigrants undergoes cultural integration which drives spontaneous adaption of the cuisine to blend into the U.S. culture. On the contrary, the prevalence of industrialized Chinese cuisine is rather the result of a profit-driven mechanism.

Keywords: Chinese food, cultural interaction, migration, globalization, the United States

1. Introduction

With the trend of globalization, the interconnect between states is becoming closer through a wide range of cultural communication and frequent trading. Transnational cooperation is setting up its appendages around the world with headquarters usually located in the global north seizing their profits greater than the domestic exchange by cutting down product costs and taking advantage of cheap labor from mass-populated states with lenient regulations. Such scales of economic transformation allow accessibility to commodities anywhere on this planet. An additional effect of ongoing globalization is the interaction between cultures by the cyber community, such as social media and physical firms that sell products with certain cultural symbolism. Culinary items, such as food and drinks, might be the most ubiquitous method bolstering the exchange and fusion between cultures. The thriving cuisine industry worldwide has become a profitable platform for conveying the message of unique cultural characters. One example of this world-famous culinary system is Chinese food.

In recent years, Chinese restaurants have vigorously sought opportunities by exploring the foreign market as the result of both the economic boom and the rising national identity of China. The unique cultural element behind the nation obtained by the public is no longer constrained by traditional media and propaganda. People can experience the culture by tasting its food which is freshly brought by the Chinese industry or business operation. However, the existence of another Chinese cuisine that is widely distributed in the United States indicates that the introduction of foreign food to the locality

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can be far more intricate than the food itself. Chinese food was originally brought by the immigrants during the Gold Rush Era and later adapted and merged into U.S. society. Albeit both Chinese food brands have an exotic feature that differs from the mainstream, traditional American cuisine, and the consequential outcome of globalization, they fundamentally diverge from each other in the process of landing in the market. This article will provide a vision that specifically illustrates the impact of the adapted version of Chinese cuisine and traditional Chinese cuisine which is directly linked with "authenticity" in the cultural and societal paradigm in the United States.

2. The Impact of Immigrants and the Debut of Chinese Cuisine

2.1. Massive Immigration from Southeast Provinces in China

The earliest contact with Chinese cuisine in U.S. society can be traced back to the late 19th century when a large scale of immigrants from Guangdong and Fujian provinces. They started their journey at the southeast coastline of the Qing Empire and traveled across the Pacific and reached San Francisco, California, which they called "the golden mountain" to seek fortunes via gold mining. Nevertheless, it is not the first time that Chinese immigrants have waived their culture to other societies. Before discussing the Chinese culinary impact applied to the outside world, it is necessary to realize that categorizing Chinese cuisine as a single entity is an arbitrary idea. There are various styles within Chinese cuisine based on the ingredients and taste due to the political and social stratifications across different regions in China [1]. Taking advantage of geographical features that provide access to the ocean, the population settled in the near-sea provinces managed to bring the regional culinary philosophy to Indonesia which was called the Southern Sea area back to the Song Dynasty. The delicacies that are highly complimented by Cantonese cuisines such as abalone, birds' nest, and shark fins were integrated into the local culinary culture. Meanwhile, the spices that were commonly used in Indonesian dishes were also familiarized, which was also adopted by Chinese immigrants. Eventually, the usage of spice turned to be pervasive as the result of reciprocal cultural interaction [2].

Following the same pattern as the influential Cantonese cuisine in the Southern Sea, Cantonese cuisine became one of the pressing "oriental" cultures brought by the immigrants who strived to work in the mine on the West Coast of the United States in the late 19th century. Anne Mendelson, the author of *Chow Chop Suey: Food and the Chinese American Journey*, claims that there was contingency behind the spread of chop suey, one typical Americanized-Chinese dish. In her words, "The cookery now scornfully summed up by some in the mere phrase 'chop suey' spoke to non-Chinese patrons across racial boundaries. It was the first purposefully synthesized cooking style ever presented to American eaters – a deliberate, audience-targeted construct whose general outlines took shape between the mid-1890s and about 1910" [3].

2.2. Cultural Interaction Through Innovative Cuisine

Theoretically, these Hakka immigrants from Guangdong and Fujian provinces did not showcase the "authentic" Cantonese cuisine to the interracial communities. On the contrary, these immigrants are inclined to share the recipe with anyone else who had the same cultural background: they might come from the same village or adjacent county before they moved to the United States as delineated by Mendelson [1]. Chop suey, as the starting point of the franchising of American Chinese food, was being scrutinized and manipulated from both sides, away from the original form of Cantonese cuisine. The curiosity-driven interracial groups worked in the gold mine seeking to experience the taste of foreign cuisine, and the Chinese immigrants responded to their request by creating a dish that assembles different ingredients [4]. The cultural essence reflected by chop suey (lit. "Stirfry chopped leftovers") is, however, far more complex than the dish itself even though it never existed in any

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Chinese cuisine style at the time and was made of unwanted parts being discarded during the process of cooking. To make a typical chop suey, the Chinese chief minced ingredients to dice before the actual cooking process and prepared dice in the wok with an open flame. Chop suey is not a replication of any traditional Chinese plate per se, but it indicates one adaptation made by the immigrants, which made the Chinese manage to break into American society. Cantonese cuisine, being a branch of Chinese culinary culture was integrated as part of American society.

After several decades of flourishing development of Chinese cuisine in the United States, Chinese food had declared its character in the culinary society, even though it did not become a part of the upper-class regime in America. The pioneers of the micro firms such as those who operate the Chinese restaurant were former laborers in mines or railway construction back in the Gold Rush Era [5]. The myth of the gold mountain in San Francisco was exaggerated and there was not enough gold to be sorted out from the river. The Chinese immigrants switched their attention to other fields that could sustain themselves in this foreign land. With the expansion of Chinese restaurants from remote towns near mines to urban areas to the east such as New York and New Orleans, the cuisine became recognizable among interracial communities. As claimed by Chueng and Wu, African Americans were loyal customers of local Chinese restaurants, and there are two explanations linked to cultural or economic perspectives behind Chinese food: First, African Americans found out that the Chinese food which was served on time resembled parts of African cuisines. Ingredients such as pork, pig feet, and beans were used to cook traditional African plates, making Chinese food more acceptable to the African American community due to the overlaid part shared by both culinary cultures. Secondly, these Chinese restaurants provided large portions of food at a relatively low cost, satisfying the need of individuals who worked in heavy labor jobs with limited payment [2].

The Jewish community was another group that are fond of Chinese cuisine, although they shared minimum cultural characteristics with immigrant Chinese. For example, some ingredients that were used to prepare the meal in the Chinese restaurant were marked as uncleaned according to the Hebrew creed, the Jewish community enclosed Chinese food as part of their ritual. The ingredient would be minced finely when it was prepared by cookery; the pork was forbidden by the Jewish relics, but finely chopped pork which is unrecognizable by eyes would be accepted [6]. Because Chinese cuisine was flexible and nearly no dietary restrictions appeared to Jewish people, not only was Chinese food a wise choice to have for less expense, but people also could have more options on their menu [6].

The reason directly linked to the widespread Chinese restaurant around the United States is the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigrants from entering the states and obtaining citizenship. This law systematically restricted any more Chinese immigrants, as well as Japanese and Koreans who were viewed as having an eccentric “oriental” look. Making the connection between Orientalism and racism at the time, immigrants from East Asia were viewed as exotic visitors who had been both despised and discriminated against by U.S. society. Systemic discrimination toward the Chinese not only disabled the immigrants’ legal residences but also prohibited them from accessing jobs like blue-collared workers that paid decent wages [3]. Operating micro firms like laundry or restaurants that fulfilled the demand of the lower class in the United States became one viable scenario for these Chinese without legitimate official paperwork. The result of social pressure on Chinese immigrants reveals a unique perspective to explain the ravaging Chinese restaurants after the date passing exclusion act: instead of being driven by demand and profit on Chinese cuisine as the initiative factor, the entrepreneurship of Chinese restaurants was a basic survival strategy compromised by racial discrimination at the time.

The identity of early Chinese cuisine in the United States was shaped by both cultural prosperities which mixed Western and Chinese elements together. The prevalent Chinese dish invented in the U.S., Chop suey, for example, is nevertheless a unique existence that was never known by the people who lived in China at the time. Using Chinese cookery whereas choosing the most convenient

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ingredients with a brand-new recipe, Americanized-Chinese cuisine can be concluded as the result of immigrant compromise, as well as the example of successful cultural fusion in a white-dominated society. Chinese cuisine in America nonetheless found its position as a survival tactic for not only the desperate immigrants but also those who were regarded as minorities. Besides the cultural integration, Chinese cuisine at the time gradually became recognized as a nationally entitled product in the market. Written in Sinclair Lewis' novel *Main Street*, Chinese food had already been accepted by middle-class Americans in the 1940s, and it was often featured in advertisements for provisions and necessities [7]. Chinese food started as a culture trying to merge into society and finally became available to American entrepreneurs, especially in Asian communities [3]. The next section of this paper, however, will focus on the recent settlement of Chinese cuisine which directly comes from China and is labeled with authenticity compared to the Chinese food being adopted in the States.

3. Behind Prevalence of Authentic Chinese Food: Transnational Capitals and Modern Consumerism

3.1. Consumerism in a Global Society

This part of the article will concentrate on the time when the most recent immigration accompanied by globalization took place in the United States. Unlike the desperate situation faced by the immigrants in the 1880s, Chinese immigrants after the 1970s experienced the social transition in the United States from conservative to open-minded due to the closer relationship between nations in a globalized trading system, which led to frequent opportunities for cultural fusion. The approaching globalization indicates a greater interconnectedness of the world through the rapid growth of information, communication, and trade route. This flexible new world order enables industries to set up their sub-divisions beyond their home nations and spread their products around the world. Culinary culture, during rapid globalization, has been packaged as a commodity with its unique franchise.

David B. Clarke's book *Consumer Society and the Post-Modern City* mainly concentrates on demonstrating consumer society. He takes the instance of drinks served in different locations but undergoing the same purchasing method to uncover one trait in a consumer society: "They (payments) reveal distinctive geography of consumption, a set of situated cultural differences that persist despite the oft-repeated claims that the world is becoming ever more homogenous as a result of the standardization of consumption" [8]. Besides the distinction of payment culture within British pub, Clarke links "culture" and "consumption" together, with the former being performed by a certain group, and the latter being counted as a part of the market system. Then Clarke uses another example, the casinos in Las Vegas, to delineate how the meaning of drinks can vary, with intensified competition in the market, more products must be consumed as a survival strategy for the capital. A consumer society is described as the consequence of uncontrolled consumption. Normalizing one product for the need of consumption into a social ritual is a strong booster to promote further consumption, and sometimes such a survival strategy of the commodity spontaneously or purposely intersects with the culture relating to the nation, social status, and class. For example, during the rapid urbanization in the United States back in the 1950s, the lifestyle of "dining out" was prevalent among the middle class. This culture of the middle-class family encouraged the consumption of commodified cuisine. By obeying this class-stratified enculturation, consumption is validated as part of daily life.

Although the method of commodification can be diverse, the product can also be an influential symbol. Coke-Cola is one of the most distinguishable cases of a brand that successfully cultivates its culture. As a type of mass-produced soft drink, Coke-Cola not only achieved great economic success but also earned an incomparable reputation as a pop-culture icon to any other drink. Coke-cola vigorously participates in society through localization. One straightforward example of cultural diversification of the franchise is to blend its product into the local culture through festivals. However,

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unlike Coca-Cola's strategy to localize its franchise, the latest Chinese food cuisine directly from mainland China receives attention in the United States by keeping its authenticity as a result of China's soaring influence on the world economic market as a symbol of soft power. Chinese brands and its product have become familiarized and achieved considerable economic profit in the United States.

3.2. Sichuan Hotpot as a Franchised Cuisine

Sichuan Hotpot was one example of franchised cuisine that stays in its original form as it is introduced into the U.S. Unlike the Chinese food that was brought by Cantonese immigrants in the late 19th century and had changed drastically to seek acceptance of the mainstream American culture, the franchised Chinese cuisines experienced minor even no transition to settle into the U.S. market. Liuyishou, a hotpot franchise originally from Chongqing, China, has more than 1200 restaurants in major cities around the world and seven of them are located in major urban areas in the United States. Have not been massively introduced until the recent decade in the United States, Sichuan hotpot shall be counted as a signature plate within Sichuan cuisine. The procedure to enjoy an authentic Sichuan hotpot involves two steps: the preparation of the broth containing oils and dried chili pepper, and the preparation of the ingredients that will be put into the pot including fresh and processed meat products, and dried and fresh vegetables [9]. The procedure of hotpot preparation in Boston's Liuyishou is nonetheless no different from Chongqing's. Thus, the authenticity of the cuisine, according to the need of the consumer's society like the U.S., can be sold as part of the cultural experience. The setup of the Sichuan hotpot is very accessible in any circumstance, and it usually needs two or more participants for the meal: from a guest's perspective, boiling food in a pot is not strange to most people around the world, which makes hotpot a more accepted form of cuisine without complex preparation. The symbolic meaning behind hotpot also encourages consumption. In the old time, hotpot was regarded as an underclass dish serving for the workers near the harbor in Chongqing, where it is still seen as an important trading post in the Yangtze River. The workers gathered and contributed whatever they could get such as unwanted animal intestines, over-grown vegetables, and fish as the ingredients, thus sharing the meal has become an unspoken rule for hotpot and it has been inherited today with diminishing class status behind the cuisine. Socialization, which involves people getting together to celebrate while eating and drinking and is shared by nearly all human societies, becomes another reason why customers in the U.S. embrace this foreign cuisine [10]. Hotpot takes advantage of its convenient characteristics that fit into the modern industrial system: the broth can be pre-cooked through standardization, which enables massive production in a relatively short given time; there is no overt restriction on choosing the ingredients, making hotpot highly adaptable to foreign markets. The basic hotpot products are not confined to restaurants and can be purchased from Asian supermarkets. Customers can make hotpots individually in their own homes, using fresh ingredients from local groceries as part of the recipe.

4. Conclusion

By scrutinizing both cases of Chinese cuisine integrating into American society, it is fair to say Chinese cuisine has an outstanding ability to adapt to a foreign environment. However, the two integrations are fundamentally different from each other. The cultural assimilation of Cantonese cuisine, which was brought by immigrants from Canton and Fujian provinces in the late 1800s, represented a spontaneous action from immigrants who wanted to be a part of American society, regardless of the fact that the food itself was purposely presented to Americans with a Chinese image. On the contrary, the thriving Chinese food industry claims to be a profit-driven mechanism. Culture has been transformed into a commodity or vice versa, ultimately leading to the commodification of

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culture which stirs up attention under the surveillance of consumer society. The widespread influence of Liuyishou hotpot is not a mere example. The delineation of the Chinese food industry in the United States can be applied to cultural interactions in recent years with the background of globalization. The promotion of cultural elements within the market can be seen as a tempting feature to stimulate consumption. The most noticeable point in this article is that the most recent cultural transmission of foreign cuisine is very different from the past, where the introduction of culture was driven by massive immigration and had to adapt to the local society. The arrival of foreign cuisine is more likely to be a commodity-driven result that regards culture as one attraction to stimulate consumers.

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