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## Memories and New Beginnings: Chinese American Restaurants and Food as a Contact Zone in Early-Twentieth Century California

Nicholas Kim

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# **Memories and New Beginnings**

Chinese American Restaurants and Food as a Contact Zone in Early-Twentieth  
Century California

Nicholas Kim

History

Colby College

May 2022

Inga Diederich

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## City Glossary

City	Size	Region
Coalinga	Rural	Central Valley
Hanford	Rural	Central Valley
Stockton	Rural	Central Valley
Madera	Rural	Central Valley
Colusa	Rural	Central Valley
Merced	Rural	Central Valley
Colusa	Rural	Central Valley
Coalinga	Rural	Central Valley
Oroville	Rural	Central Valley
Sacramento	Mid-sized	Central Valley
Grass Valley	Rural	Sierra Nevada
Newcastle	Rural	Sierra Nevada
Mariposa	Rural	Sierra Nevada
Inyo County	Rural	Sierra Nevada
Truckee	Rural	Sierra Nevada
Humboldt County	Rural	North
Amador County	Rural	North
Jackson City	Rural	North
Blue Lake	Rural	North
Red Bluffs	Rural	South
Lompoc	Rural	South
Calexico	Rural	South
Redlands	Rural	South
San Pedro	Mid-sized	South
San Bernardino	Mid-sized	South
Santa Barbara	Mid-sized	South
San Luis Obispo	Mid-sized	South

Los Angeles	Urban	South
Monterey	Rural	Bay Area
Salinas	Rural	Bay Area
Santa Cruz	Rural	Bay Area
Palo Alto	Mid-sized	Bay Area
Oakland	Mid-sized	Bay Area
Santa Rosa	Mid-sized	Bay Area
Livermore	Mid-sized	Bay Area
San Francisco	Urban	Bay Area



Figure 1. A map of California color coded by which region its counties fall under.

Key	
Region	Color
Central Valley	Red
Sierra Nevadas	Orange
North	Teal
South	Blue
Bay Area	Green

## Preface

“Among the remarkable things invented by American genius are Indian songs, Hawaiian music and Chinese food.”<sup>1</sup>

“Order off of the Secret Menu” a friend told me. Although I had already eaten there a few times before, a friend told me to ask for their off the menu specials. Apparently, Jin Yuan, the local Chinese American restaurant in rural Waterville Maine, had off the menu dishes that students could order. According to my friend, the owners of Jin Yuan would make different kinds of special dishes for those in the know, usually international Chinese students, compared to what they served the general public.

Although I proceeded to order and eat my Broccoli and Beef, I wondered why the pantheon of classic Chinese American dishes differed from those commonly served in China. Furthermore, coming from the Bay Area, I found myself naively surprised to find that any Chinese food existed in rural Maine. After four years at Colby I have come to appreciate Chinese American food. Although I earlier considered it inferior to the “real” Chinese food that I could find back home, Chinese immigrants have created a cuisine unto itself. Chinese American cuisine, with its classic dishes like Orange Chicken and General Tso Chicken, has permeated throughout America.

When it came time to choose a topic for my thesis, I knew that I wanted to further explore the history of the oft-maligned cuisine. Furthermore, I knew that Chinese Americans had a much richer connection to rural America that I had previously realized. I have chosen to focus my thesis on the history of Chinese American restaurants and food in rural early-twentieth century California, my home state. I aim to explore the ways in which they acted as a “contact

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<sup>1</sup> “American Genius,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, August 3, 1937.



zone”: allowing Chinese and non-Chinese Americans to interact in the remote farming and mining towns of California.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout my thesis, my guiding research question has been “did Chinese American restaurants in early-twentieth century rural California act as a contact zone between Chinese and non-Chinese Americans, and if so how?” Through researching my topic, I aim to contribute to a more holistic understanding of early-twentieth century Chinese-Americans by focusing on rural communities, in contrast to the largely urban focus of previous scholarship. Furthermore, I hope that my thesis will better our understanding of the relationship between the perceived foreignness of Chinese Americans and the widespread acceptance of their food.

I explored a range of themes in my thesis, most prominently the connection between food and culture. In doing so, I also address the role of Chinese Americans as American national subjects, rather than perpetual foreigners. I additionally look at how gender relations, claims of authenticity, and methods of agency were navigated through food.

I argue that Chinese American restaurants acted as a contact zone between Chinese and non-Chinese Americans in early-twentieth century rural California by lowering racialized and gendered boundaries to facilitate and purposely encourage greater Chinese and non-Chinese Americans acceptance of one another. In conjunction with Chinese American food, which existed as a non-physical contact zone, Chinese American restaurants played an integral role in creating the Chinese American identity, providing Chinese American restaurateurs with a method of establishing themselves as American rather than just Chinese.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Louise Pratt first defined a “contact zone” as “a social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with one another, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Professions*, n.d., 33–40.

## Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese immigrants began to leave by the tens of thousands to Gam Saan (golden mountain), otherwise known as California. This first wave of trans-Pacific immigration has been well-documented and researched by previous Asian American studies scholars. Works such as *Margins and Mainstream: Asians in American History and Culture* by Gary Okihiro and *Strangers from a Different Shore: a History of Asian Americans* by Ronald Takaki have explored Chinese immigration to America within the broader history of Asian Americans, tracing the history of Chinese immigrants from their initial nineteenth century arrival in California to their emergence as prolific restaurant owners and workers by the turn of the century.

Specifically, Takaki argues that Asian Americans are exactly that: Asian and American. Takaki notes how despite Asian Americans being stereotyped as the “other” relative to European immigrants, they sought to create a space for themselves in America by embodying many of America’s founding values, such as equality and representation. Takaki focuses on how Asian American immigrants’ outsider status and the racism that they faced because of it drove the Asian American narrative.

In contrast, Okihiro argues that Asian immigrant advocacy and activism played a large role in advancing American ideals to accurately reflect and apply to all Americans, writing that “racial minorities, in their struggles for inclusion and equality, helped to preserve and advance the very privileges that were denied to them, and thereby democratized the nation for the benefit of all Americans.”<sup>3</sup> Okihiro compellingly argues that American ideals come from the “margins” of American society, asserting that the struggles of Asian Americans, alongside other

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 151.

marginalized American groups, have carried out and developed America's initially Eurocentric ideals of democracy.

To ground these claims, Takaki paints a detailed picture of mid- to late-nineteenth century Chinese immigration, highlighting the shifting yet ultimately racist attitudes immigrants faced as they moved to America. Notably, the first wave of gold-seeking Chinese immigrants were relatively welcomed. Takaki notes that "[i]n his January 1852 address to the California legislature, Governor John McDougal declared that more Chinese migrants would be needed to help drain the state's swamplands, praising them as 'one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens.'"<sup>4</sup> Early on, Californians recognized the utility of Chinese labor and consequently valued Chinese immigration.

However, as many authors have detailed, positive attitudes towards Chinese immigrants did not last. As large numbers of Chinese immigrants came to Gam Saan looking for work, white workers pushed back in an effort to protect their jobs. Subsequently, the government passed discriminatory legislation, including most notably the Chinese-Exclusion Act in 1882. Banning Chinese immigrants for the next ten years, Congress extended the Exclusion Act and severely restricted and banned Chinese immigration until the Immigration Act of 1965.<sup>5</sup>

With newspaper articles asking "[h]ow we can get rid of [the Chinese]" and the 1889 Supreme Court case *Chan Chae Ping v. United States* describing them as a "different race... dangerous to [America's] peace and security," the Chinese-Exclusion Act reflected the commonness of anti-Chinese sentiments at the time.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald T. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little Brown, 1998) 81.

<sup>5</sup> "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)." National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>6</sup> Erika Lee, "The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882-1924," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21, no. 3 (n.d.): 36-62, 37, 39.

Nevertheless, even at this juncture, historians have noted the concurrent rise of Chinese American restaurants. In *“I’ll Take Chop Suey”: Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Change*, Samatha Barbas writes that “Chinese restaurants drew a thriving business from non-Chinese customers.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, Barbas describes non-Chinese-Americans’ interest in Chinese-American food during the early-twentieth century as the “chop suey craze.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, Chinese-American restaurants played an important role in allowing Chinese-Americans to interact with a general public that otherwise largely wanted to get rid of them.

Takaki attributes the popularity of running restaurants within the Chinese American community as a practical response to the racism they faced in other labor sectors. He writes that “‘Ethnic antagonism’ in the mines, factories, and fields reinforced the movement of Chinese into self-employment — stores, restaurants, and especially laundries.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, “[a]ware Chinese merchants were permitted to bring their families here, Chinese laundrymen, restaurant owners, and even common laborers sometimes tried to pose as ‘paper merchants.’”<sup>10</sup> Partly pushed out of other jobs and partly motivated by practical legal loopholes, restaurants quickly became one of the dominant forms of employment for Chinese Americans. In fact, fifty-eight percent of Chinese living in the United States worked in the service industry by 1920.<sup>11</sup>

As Chinese residents in Californian moved into the service industry they also moved into the cities. Although the initial wave of migration in the mid-nineteenth century had largely concentrated in rural areas, Takaki claims that “increasingly the Chinese became an urban

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<sup>7</sup> Samantha Barbas, “‘I’ll Take Chop Suey’: Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Change,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 36, no. 4 (2003): 666.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 675.

<sup>9</sup> Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 92.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

population” by the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> While recognizing the significance of Takaki’s observations regarding this shift in Chinese demographics in California, I aim to give greater focus to the significant portions of the community that remained in rural areas.

Works by authors such as Okihiro and Takaki detail the unique struggles that Chinese immigrants faced as they transitioned from newly arrived immigrants to established restaurant owners and workers. Highly relevant to my own research, Takaki in particular notes the importance of the restaurant industry to Chinese Californians alongside their concurrent transition to urban areas. However, I aim to reposition rural areas in California as a persistent center of interactions between Chinese and non-Chinese Californians. Rather than viewing the early-twentieth century as solely the era of cosmopolitan Chinatowns, I argue that their rural counterparts and inhabitants held similarly important roles.

Given the growing popularity of Chinese restaurants during the time period, Chinese, as a label, took on a greater meaning in regards to both food and social status. In his book *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, Krishnendu Ray writes that “[a]n ethnic is a proximate but subordinate other, too close to be foreign, too different to be the self.”<sup>13</sup> Being ethnic, Chinese, and a restaurateur all intertwined in early-twentieth century California. An ethnic American, such as Chinese Americans, stands in stark contrast with the presumed whiteness of a normative American identity. Looking, sounding, and eating differently than their non-Chinese counterparts, Chinese American restaurateurs offered Chinese food to non-Chinese customers. Cognizant of the apparent differences, and perhaps hyperfocused on them, non-Chinese consumers of Chinese food expected authenticity from their local Chinese restaurants. The perception of Chinese food in early-twentieth century California mirrored the perception of Chinese Americans. Previous

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>13</sup> Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 1.

authors have largely conceptualized authenticity as either a burden placed on ethnic restaurateurs by the dominant culture or as a pragmatic tool used by the same restaurateurs.

Advertising their “real Chinese food, prepared by a real Chinese chef,” Chinese restaurants in early-twentieth century California used authenticity as a business strategy.<sup>14</sup> In her essay, *Chow Chop Suey: Food and the Chinese American Journey*, Anne Mendleson claims that “American-targeted Chinese restaurants extolling their authentic chop suey proliferated in all regions of the country between the eve of World War I and the approach of the next war.”<sup>15</sup> However, Chinese American efforts to market themselves using the label of authenticity spanned a greater time period than Mendleson addresses. Recognizing and utilizing the allure of authenticity, Chinese American restaurateurs marketed themselves as such as early as the turn of the century.

Alongside the demand for authentic otherness, the rise of so-called authentic Chinese food also highlighted the assimilative demands imposed on Chinese cuisine’s taste profile, menu composition, and settings by non-Chinese customers. In *The Globalization of Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Culinary Contact Zones*, James Farrer claims that globalization, or “what can be called the deterritorialization of culinary fields, or the delinking of cuisine from place,” figures prominently in this process.<sup>16</sup> In Farrer’s view, as food traditions go further afield from their home countries, they become less connected to their place of origin. In contrast, I argue that rather than Chinese food in America being completely “delinked” from China, it instead developed novel meanings and ties to its creators’ new home.

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<sup>14</sup> “New Chinese Restaurant,” *Los Angeles Herald*, November 8, 1921.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey: Food and the Chinese American Journey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Duruz, David L Wank, and James C Farrer. *The Globalization of Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Culinary Contact Zones*. Edited by James C Farrer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7.

The paradoxical expectation of exotic authenticity and expected assimilation combined to create another potential barrier to Chinese restaurateurs who relied on business from Chinese and non-Chinese customers: that is, the adoption of Chinese cuisine in American homes. Writing about the inverse phenomenon, Western restaurants in China, Jean Duruz in *The Globalization of Asian Cuisines* states that instances of restaurants selling ethnic food “raise questions about ‘authenticity’ and the ways that memory, nostalgia, place meanings, and tastes work together to establish credibility.”<sup>17</sup> While advertising oneself as authentic can potentially attract customers, personal and familial history also dictates what can be considered authentic. In my thesis, I argue for an expansion of Duruz’s idea through a close study of the turn-of-the-century history of Chinese food in American businesses and homes. Intimately connected to Chinese American restaurants in early-twentieth century California, as well as to the Chinese American restaurateurs who served it, Chinese American—rather than “Chinese-Chinese”—cooking became a new form of authenticity. Although different in many aspects to the foods served in China, early-twentieth century Chinese American restaurateurs served food authentic to their specific circumstances.

Given the importance of both real and perceived authenticity to the relationship between non-white producers and white consumers, previous authors have critiqued the label of authenticity. For instance, Wenying Xu writes in *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* that “[t]he other face of ethnic authenticity is exoticism, and in the global capitalist circulation of commodities, ethnic exoticism generates profit and degrades the ethnic laborer.”<sup>18</sup> Authenticity, as a label, can box Chinese restaurateurs into a narrow view of how Chinese food should be. Furthermore, given consumers use the label of authenticity in

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<sup>17</sup> Duruz, Wank, and Farrer. *The Globalization of Asian Cuisines*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 84.

conjunction with ethnic products, authenticity becomes synonymous with foreign. As such, calling food authentic runs the risk of labeling it exotic: ethnic food necessitates not being part of the dominant culture, which in turn implies its abnormality and exoticness.

A fascination with authenticity and exoticism, in part, drove consumers to try ethnic food. Lisa Maree Heldke, in *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer*, critiques such interest as a form of “culinary colonialism.” According to Heldke, “the adventurer’s intense desire for authentic experiences of authentic cultures” drives white American interest in ethnic food.<sup>19</sup> Authors such as Heldke view authenticity as an artificial construction, created by Euro-Americans to explain their own fascination with their non-white counterparts’ food.

Ghassan Hage has expanded upon Heldke’s idea by coining the term cosmo-multiculturalism in his essay *At Home in the Entrails of the West: Multiculturalism, ‘ethnic food’ and migrant home-building*. Tracing what he views as the relationship between ethnic restaurants and non-ethnic consumers, Hage claims that “multiculturalism increasingly denotes a primarily city-based, touristically oriented and consumer-centred world of ethnic restaurants and ethnic eating, what I have called cosmo-multiculturalism.”<sup>20</sup> Authenticity and tourism intertwine, as ethnic restaurateurs, according to Hage, cater to the consumer.

While authors such as Heldke and Hage view authenticity as a limiting construct analogous to colonialism and inherently connected to the dominant culture’s viewpoint, a prominent strand of scholarship has pushed back and instead argues for a greater emphasis on minority narratives. For instance, in *Eating cultures: Incorporation, identity and Indian food*, Uma Narayan aims to “complicate this discussion of ‘food colonialism’ by thinking about ethnic

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<sup>19</sup> Lisa Maree Heldke, *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (Routledge, 2003), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ghassan Hage and Ghassan Hage. “At Home in the Entrails of the West: Multiculturalism Ethnic Food and Migrant Home-Building.” Essay. In *Home/World: Communitarity, Identity and Marginality in Sydney’s West* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1997), 14.



foods from the point of view of immigrants to Western contexts.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, I aim to prominently include the narratives of Chinese cooks and restaurant owners in addition to those of white consumers in my thesis.

My paper differs from authors such as Hage and Heldke on two accounts in relation to authenticity. First, I emphasize that Chinese American cooks played a large role in shaping their customers’ tastes. Early-twentieth century Chinese Californian restaurateurs did not merely cater to white tastes, instead they actively used their restaurants and food as a method of interacting with the broader public. Second, I show that significant culinary and cultural exchange happened outside of cosmopolitan areas. Towns and communities well outside of the metropolises of San Francisco and Los Angeles had Chinese restaurants and access to and interest in Chinese food. I will argue that culinary and cultural exchange extended to rural areas, with a diverse range of Californians coming in contact with Chinese food.

While all scholarship on the intersection of food and ethnicity acknowledges the importance of authenticity as an idea, scholars differ in regards to its actual effects. While authors such as Narayan argue for a recentralization of ethnic restaurateur voices in telling food stories and defining authenticity, others such as Hage emphasize the constrictive nature of the ideal of authenticity imposed by consumers. In my thesis, I largely agree with and argue for Narayan’s position. Additionally, I disagree with labeling Chinese food in the early-twentieth century as abnormal and therefore in need of being labeled authentic. While it certainly did happen, and consumers undoubtedly exoticized Chinese food, I will argue that many, including those in rural areas, viewed Chinese food as a relatively normal, tasty, and viable cuisine to eat casually and at home. Furthermore, I argue that Chinese American restaurateurs effectively utilized the term authentic, reclaiming and redefining it to refer to the dishes that they created in

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<sup>21</sup> Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, 6.

America, such as the popular staple of chop suey. As such, using the term authentic allowed them to serve authentic Chinese food specific to the Chinese American experience.

In my thesis I will cover Chinese American restaurants and food, and the ways in which they existed as a contact zone in rural early-twentieth century California. I will do so through four general categories with multiple subsections: the emergence of chop suey as a representative ‘Chinese American’ dish, racism faced by Chinese American restaurateurs and food, white imitation of, interest in, and acceptance of Chinese food, and finally the ways in which Chinese restaurateurs integrated themselves into their communities.

My first category argues that chop suey acted as a medium which Chinese Americans and non-Chinese Americans used to understand and exemplify the place of Chinese Americans in California. By being an immensely popular dish, chop suey introduced many non-Chinese Americans to Chinese food. Although having no direct equivalent in China, and despite arguments from early-twentieth century sources against its authenticity, I argue that chop suey’s legacy of Chinese immigrant cooking using Chinese techniques makes it uniquely Chinese American.

In my next category I focus on a case study from Palo Alto and argue that despite facing significant racist opposition from white Californians in some towns, Chinese American restaurateurs used legal and extra-legal means to assert their right to open up businesses. Notably, residents of Palo Alto at the time intensely opposed Chinese American restaurants while students at nearby Stanford frequently visited them. As such, I argue that racism and acceptance, or at least interest, existed side-by-side with each other. Chinese American restaurants survived racist backlash during the early-twentieth century in part due to the concurrent interest in their food.

Next, I examine racist tropes about Chinese food during the early-twentieth century, and argue that they existed to due a homogenization about Chinese people. Said homogenization allowed for a similar grouping together of all Chinese food. Despite pushback from Chinese American and non-Chinese Americans of the time, many people viewed Chinese food as exotic, foreign, and strange. Such stereotypes mirrored those of Chinese-Americans.

As my final subsection on racism and Chinese food, I argue that Chinese American restaurants reduced gendered and racialized barriers, allowing white women and Chinese American men to interact with one another. Despite white Californians fear mongering about the dangers of Chinese American men, white women and Chinese American men continued to interact and even have relationships with each other. Furthermore, I argue that a socioeconomically diverse range of white women met Chinese American men through Chinese American restaurants, making it a contact zone for a wide breadth of Californians.

I next examine ways in which white Americans mimicked and accepted Chinese food and culture by first arguing that Chinatown tourism existed due to the commodification of what it meant to be Chinese. Rural and urban white Californians visited Chinatowns to eat at their restaurants as tourists. Although most famous in major cities, notably San Francisco, I argue that rural Chinatowns acted as oxymoronic local foreign places to rural white Californians. Viewing them as both exotic destinations, while also being very accessible, white Californians visited Chinatowns to participate in a commodified version of Chinese culture. Although not always accurate, Chinatown tourism gave white Californians a gateway into experiencing Chinese culture.

In my next subsection I argue that through adapting their menus for their local clientele, Chinese American restaurateurs made a truly Chinese and American identity for their

restaurants. Not only did they bring Chinese food to the communities in which they opened up restaurants, they also brought their neighbors' food into their own kitchens. As such, they both integrated themselves into their local communities and vice versa.

Next, I cover Chinese themed parties in early-twentieth century California, and argue that they demonstrated non-Chinese Americans' interest in and exposure to Chinese culture and food. Prevalent in both rural and urban California, white Americans threw parties with Chinese food, decorations, or both. To them, Chinese food and culture existed as a fashionable trend. The varying degrees of exoticism demonstrated at the parties highlighted the varying degrees of acceptance and normalization that Chinese food and culture had.

I finish my section on the acceptance of and interest in Chinese culture and food by arguing that white Californians assimilated Chinese food into their homes and daily lives by cooking it. Furthermore, given the innate connection between food and culture, by bringing Chinese food into their homes, white Californians subsequently brought Chinese culture in as well. Notably spearheaded by white women, rural Californians cooked Chinese food in the early-twentieth century and eroded the barriers between the dominant and non-dominant group.

Finally, I cover the ways in which Chinese American restaurateurs integrated themselves into their broader communities, and argue that they were not silent minorities and instead leveraged their businesses to play an active role in their town's politics and social scene. They used their restaurants to gain greater exposure and prominence in the eyes of their non-Chinese neighbors. Rural Chinese Americans demonstrated their agency and desire to be an integral part of their communities.

# CHAPTER 1

## The Birth of Chop Suey

In my following chapter I explore how chop suey came into existence as the iconic Chinese American dish around the turn of the 20th century. Featured prominently on Chinese restaurant menus in early-twentieth century rural California, chop suey came to be representative of Chinese American cuisine as a whole. Chinese and non-Chinese American views on chop suey reflected their opinions of Chinese American food and the relationship between what is considered foreign and American.

### 1.1 The Birth of Chop Suey

Before iconic Chinese American foods such as General Tso's chicken and crab rangoons, came chop suey. In fact, driven by the turn of the century's mass communication, chop suey became immensely popular by 1900 amongst fashionable American diners as what Mendelson describes as the "first 'crossover' dish to leapfrog from any foreign cuisine to American tables throughout the land."<sup>22</sup> However, despite its popularity, the origins and exact meaning of chop suey are murky. Between roughly 1890 and 1910, a genre known as chop suey cooking developed which encompassed a synthesized style of Chinese cooking intended to be served to white customers.<sup>23</sup> Deliberately developed and created for non-Chinese palates, chop suey cooking introduced waves of non-Chinese Americans to Chinese food for the very first time.<sup>24</sup> As such, chop suey became representative of the time period's Chinese food. By the early-twentieth century, chop suey had evolved into an effective medium through which Chinese

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<sup>22</sup> Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

and non-Chinese Californians began to understand the place of Chinese immigrants in California.

Chop suey's origins can partly be traced to an error in translation. Stemming from a difficulty in translating both words and techniques, by the early-twentieth century non-Chinese Americans believed the chop suey method of cooking to be a dish in and of itself. Writing for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1884, Wong Chin Foo, an American citizen and outspoken defender of Chinese food and culture, claimed that "chop suly is a ragout and may be justly termed the national dish of China."<sup>25</sup> Otherwise romanticized as chop suey, the term roughly translates to assorted or mixed (chop) pieces of food (suey). In general, Foo intended chop suey to describe the broad class of stir fry dishes in Chinese cuisine.

Not understanding the concept of stir frying and having no analogous techniques in Western repertoires, non-Chinese customers misunderstood the dishes they ate. Slightly later in 1888, Foo used the term "chow chop suey".<sup>26</sup> According to Mendelson, non-Chinese diners very likely associated the term 'chop suey' rather than 'chow' with the dishes they ate and believed it to be an all encompassing sub-category of Chinese cuisine. Mendelson writes that "American eaters thus came to believe in the existence of 'shrimp chop suey,' 'vegetable chop suey,' 'chicken chop suey,' and others."<sup>27</sup> Chop suey emerged as a standalone dish largely as a matter of accident. Not understanding that the term referred to a method of cooking rather than a discrete dish, non-Chinese customers relabeled the Chinese food they ate as chop suey.

Chop suey came into being from a combination of non-Chinese Americans' inability to understand Chinese cooking terminology and their genuine interest in the dish. The

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>26</sup> Wong Chin Foo, "The Chinese in New York," *Cosmopolitan* 5, no. 4 (June 1888), 304.

<sup>27</sup> Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey*, 107.

misinterpretation of chop suey gave it a new identity, created by both Chinese and non-Chinese Americans. Non-Chinese American motivation to eat and order the dish, while not fully understanding it, allowed and encouraged them to interact with Chinese Americans, despite cultural barriers.

Chinese origins notwithstanding, chop suey as early-twentieth century Americans came to know it had a distinctly American background. Jointly invented by Chinese American chefs and their non-Chinese customers, the confluence of immigrant culture, language barriers, and shifting culinary tastes birthed chop suey. Uniquely Chinese American, chop suey became symbolic of the growing social interactions between Chinese and non-Chinese Americans.

Given the ubiquitousness of the term, chop suey quickly became representative of early-twentieth century Chinese food as a whole. In 1922, a new Chinese restaurant in Sacramento opened by advertising itself as “A Real Chop Suey House”, while claiming to serve “every kind of Chinese dish on our menu.”<sup>28</sup> Such foregrounding of claims to authenticity and a hybrid staple demonstrate how chop suey and Chinese food went hand in hand during the early-twentieth century. As the best known Chinese dish, Chinese restaurateurs capitalized on its popularity to advertise their restaurants. Some restaurants, like one Merced establishment that opened in 1908, emphasized specialization by advertising that they served chop suey prepared by a “Chinese cook especially trained on this dish.”<sup>29</sup> Effectively synonymous with each other, chop suey came to be China’s best known culinary import in America. The history of chop suey thus mirrors the history of Chinese food in America.

Despite its popularity, some non-Chinese Californians did recognize chop suey’s non-Chinese history. For instance, Dr. Frank McCoy of Oakland told his readers that:

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<sup>28</sup> “A Real Chop Suey House,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, October 1, 1922.

<sup>29</sup> “Will Serve Chop Suey,” *Merced County Sun*, January 3, 1908.

Although chop suey is closely associated in our minds with the Chinese, as a matter of fact, it is not supposed to have had its beginning in China, but to have first seen the light of day in San Francisco... Gossip has it that some clever Chinese there made a fortune serving this dish, which is so easily digested and relished by almost everyone.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly acknowledging that most people during the time believed chop suey to have come directly from China, McCoy asserted that instead an unknown Chinese immigrant created the dish in California. Furthermore, McCoy noted its widespread popularity, suggesting that its agreeableness contributed to the dish's success. McCoy recognized the association between the foreign origins of Chinese immigrants in America and the supposition of equally far-off origins of their food. However, just as being ethnically Chinese does not necessarily mean someone was born in China, being classed as "Chinese food" does not necessarily mean a food originated in China. Instead, given chop suey's immigrant history, it can and should be best-viewed as Chinese American.

Urban and rural Californians alike understood that some degree of difference existed between the Chinese food that they ate in their local communities and the Chinese food eaten in China. The pronounced popularity of chop suey in the American market stood in particularly stark contrast to its illegibility in its supposed place of origin. For instance, a 1922 joke published in the southern California *San Pedro News Pilot* noted "An American newspaper man says he has tried in vain to find chop suey in China. Travelers have had similar difficulty in finding Bologna sausage in Bologna and Hamburg steak in Hamburg and Vienna rolls in Vienna."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Frank McCoy, "Here's to Your Health," *Oakland Tribune*, October 15, 1929.

<sup>31</sup> "Starboard Lights," *San Pedro News Pilot*, October 28, 1922.



Non-Chinese Americans prized authenticity, yet had a hazy concept of authenticity to begin with. In 1923, the Lion's Club in rural Merced heard a talk from Mr. Thebo, a local engineer, who had traveled to China several times. According to Mr. Thebo, "[t]here is no genuine Chinese food served in the Chinese restaurants in this country, '...Chop suey is an American Chinese dish. Bird's nest soup, shark fin soup and very old eggs are among the principal articles of diet in China.'"<sup>32</sup> Thebo spoke disparagingly about chop suey, labeling it not "genuine" Chinese food and an "American Chinese dish." However, despite Thebo's implication, genuineness and being American Chinese are not necessarily antonyms of one another. Although Thebo did recognize differences between Chinese food in China and America, chop suey, being created in part by Chinese immigrants, is more accurately described as a genuine Chinese American dish.

Nonetheless, despite efforts to discount chop suey from the canon of Chinese food in America, it remained an American symbol of Chinese food. In 1905, the rural *Mariposa Gazette*, located outside of Yosemite, ran a story about a Chinese American chef in San Francisco who asked for royalties on chop suey, claiming that he invented the dish. The *Gazette* later stated that "chop suey is not a Chinese dish. This is no news even to amateur Orientalists, but probably it is to the average American citizen. It is a San Francisco invention, or rather adaptation; it is an Irish stew translated into Chinese for purely occidental degustation."<sup>33</sup> Given that stories about chop suey's origins were still newsworthy by the time speakers such as McCoy and Thebo talked about it, the average American likely still did not know the true origin of chop suey in the years following the *Gazette's* story. Ironically though, neither did the *Gazette*. Labeling it an adaptation of an Irish stew, a story repeated by virtually no one else (contemporary or otherwise), calls the

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<sup>32</sup> "Lions Club Hears Progress of Exchequer," *Merced Sun Star*, August 22, 1923.

<sup>33</sup> "Chop Suey Copyright," *Mariposa Gazette*, January 14, 1905.

*Gazette's* claim that those who study China knew the true origin of chop suey into doubt. As such, although some non-Chinese knew that chop suey may not have come in its then current form directly from China, few seemed to know where it actually came from.

Although Chinese and non-Chinese American accounts on the origins of chop suey differed from one another, they all centered the actions of entrepreneurial Chinese immigrant chefs cooking Chinese food in America. For instance, Churchill Chiu, Chinese Commissioner for the Education of Railway Workers and editor of the *Chinese Times*, attributed the creation of chop suey to the efforts of a Chinese American chef in Philadelphia who created the dish for Chinese Viceroy Li Hung Chang during his 1896 visit.<sup>34</sup> Based on his own research, Chiu wrote in 1935 that “many American people went to Chinese restaurants and demanded CHOP SUEY to satisfy their curiosities [after reading about the dish while reading about Chang]. They founded that it was truly delicious and enjoyed themselves as the Viceroy did.”<sup>35</sup> The strength of chop suey relied on the simple fact that it tasted good. Chop suey's popularity united its disparate origin stories. Whether it be doubtfully derived from an Irish stew, invented for a visiting Chinese dignitary, or simply a misunderstanding about a class of Chinese dishes, non-Chinese Americans wanted to eat chop suey. It became a well-ingrained part of non-Chinese Americans' diets and discourse alike.

Non-Chinese Californian's interest in the true origin of chop suey mirrored and further facilitated their growing engagement with Chinese culture. Ignorance of the 'true' history behind chop suey did not negate early-twentieth century Californians' appetite for it. Instead, chop suey meant what its creators and consumers ascribed to it. Its non-factual history, as understood at the

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from Churchill T.M. Chiu to Lee Sing Foo, 23 October 1935, BANC.MSS.2004.288c, container 1, Churchill T.M. Chiu Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Churchill T.M. Chiu to Lee Sing Foo, Churchill T.M. Chiu Papers.

time, allowed it to be a true immigrant dish. Making a new name for itself in some quarters while being inextricably linked to its supposed past in others.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **The Fear of Everything Chinese**

In my next chapter I look at the pervasive stereotype of Chinese American foreignness. I explore backlash against Chinese American restaurant openings, food, and interracial relationships. Cumulatively, I aim to explain how Chinese American restaurants and food both facilitated and challenged non-Chinese Americans' perception of Chinese American foreignness and inferiority.

#### **2.1 Fong and Wu vs. Palo Alto**

With the expansion of Chinese American restaurants across the state during the turn of the century, more and more non-Chinese Californians came into contact with Chinese businesses and Chinese American people. As Chinese American restaurants and people began to establish themselves outside of the metropole non-Chinese Californians had decidedly mixed reactions. At times accepting the new businesses with little fanfare, some towns determinedly fought back against the inclusion of Chinese immigrants in their communities. Not necessarily born out of any clear cut set of principles yet still vocally rejecting Chinese businesses, hostile towns' racism derived solely from the innate connection between being a Chinese business and being Chinese. In response, Chinese American restaurateurs fought for their right to set up their own businesses. Despite facing overt racism in the early-twentieth century as they opened up restaurants outside of the metropole, Chinese Californians actively pushed back via institutionalized and extralegal means.

Towns hostile to Chinese Californians in the early-twentieth century systematically tried to oppose their openings and forcibly keep their communities free of Chinese Californians. For instance, in 1905 Chinese American restaurateurs Ah Fong and Mok Wu tried to open up a Chinese American restaurant in Palo Alto. Meeting them with open hostility, the citizens and city government tried to prevent them from doing so. Heavily reported on by the *San Francisco Call*, the paper noted that “the fact that two Chinese restaurants are about to be opened here is arousing much public indignation. The citizens have never permitted a Chinese business place of any sort to become established in Palo Alto.”<sup>36</sup> Palo Alto rooted its resistance to the possible opening up of Chinese American restaurants in the simple fact that they were Chinese businesses. To many Palo Alto residents, Ah Fong and Mok Wu represented interlopers into their community, the type of people they saw more frequently in the neighboring, and much larger, city of San Francisco.

Palo Alto residents not only objected to the news of Chinese restaurants opening up in their town, but also actively attempted to prevent it through a blend of institutionalized and overt racism. According to the *Call*, the proposed Chinese American restaurant’s location “in the very center of town” particularly “aggravated” the residents of Palo Alto.<sup>37</sup> Locating their business in a highly visible location, Fong and Wu pushed the town’s new Chinese American restaurant to the forefront of Palo Alto’s mind. Not relegated to the margins, their restaurant’s prominence attracted extreme ire. Previous Chinese American restaurants had unsuccessfully attempted to open in Palo Alto, but such efforts had sometimes met violent ends. According to the *Call*:

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<sup>36</sup> Despite saying “two Chinese restaurants,” Fong and Wu appeared to work together to open up one restaurant. “Palo Alto is Aroused,” *San Francisco Call*, July 6, 1906.

<sup>37</sup> “Do Not Relish Chop Suey,” *San Francisco Call*, July 29, 1905.

[Chinese businesses opening] has ordinarily been prevented by peaceful means, but on one occasion both the Chinaman and the landlord were given twenty-four hours to leave town — and they went. Threats are being made that if the Chinamen [Fong and Wu] persist in their purpose the contents of the places they are fitting up will be thrown into the street and the Mongols forced to decamp.<sup>38</sup>

Harboring strong anti-Chinese sentiments, the people of Palo Alto at times in the past resorted to forcing potential Chinese businesses out of town by threat of violence.<sup>39</sup> Similarly threatening Fong and Wu, the residents of Palo Alto demonstrated their willingness and ability to use extralegal means to enforce their no Chinese policy.

Reinforcing the sentiments and actions of its residents, the town also attempted to legally block Fong and Wu from opening their restaurant. According to the *Call*, “[t]he opposition to the opening of a Chinese restaurant on University avenue culminated today in the refusal by Town Clerk Boyd [of granting Fong and Wu a business license], acting under instructions of the Town Trustees.”<sup>40</sup> The city of Palo Alto employed institutional means to attempt to stop Fong and Wu, attempting to legitimize its actions and enshrine them with legal powers. Palo Alto attempted a two-pronged approach to blocking Fong and Wu from opening up their business: vocal and aggressive public dissent and formal legal action.

Despite opposition, Fong and Wu fought back. In so doing, they demonstrated the legal and non-legal methods employed by Chinese restaurateurs such as themselves in combating the racism that they faced. Initially denied a business license, Fong and Wu decided to open up their restaurant regardless of official city sanction. The *Call* reported that “[u]nder cover of a legal

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<sup>38</sup> “Palo Alto is Aroused,” *San Francisco Call*, July 6, 1906.

<sup>39</sup> Largely due to discriminatory housing policies and redlining in the 1960’s, today the city of East Palo Alto remains predominantly Black and Latino in comparison to the neighboring and mainly white and Asian American Palo Alto. Camarillo, Albert M. “Cities of Color: The New Racial Frontier in California’s Minority-Majority Cities.” *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (2007): 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2007.76.1.1>, 10.

<sup>40</sup> “Do Not Relish Chop Suey,” *San Francisco Call*, July 29, 1905.

tangle and despite the protests of residents here, Mok Wu and Ah Fong have opened their Chinese restaurant on University avenue and declare they will proceed to serve meals even though a license has been refused them.”<sup>41</sup> As such, the partners demonstrated their willingness to brave a hostile environment before having any legal support.

In addition to resorting to forging ahead on their own, Fong and Wu won legal battles, protecting their right to open a restaurant and reaffirming the right of all Chinese Californians to do so as well. Fong and Wu sued the town for its discrimination and won. The *Call* reported that “Judge Welch held that the fact that the applicants [Fong and Wu] for the license were Chinese made no difference, particularly where the Chinese were natives of this State. The Superior Court declared on Friday that Ah Fong and Mok Wo [Wu] were illegally deprived of their license.”<sup>42</sup> In a remarkable legal victory, Fong and Wu pushed back against race based discrimination using the same system that the town had initially tried to stop them with. Furthermore, Judge Welch’s note in his ruling that Fong and Wu were from California reaffirmed their status as Chinese *Californians*, rather than foreign by dint of their ethnicity. As such, Fong and Wu’s legal victory protected the right of all Chinese Californians to open similar businesses, as Judge Welch forcefully rejected the race based logic applied against them.

Interestingly, despite Palo Alto’s widespread opposition to Chinese businesses, nearby areas had previously been home to popular Chinese restaurants. For instance, students at Stanford University ate at a Chinese restaurant of their own until it closed down in 1903. The *San Francisco Call* reported that:

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<sup>41</sup> “Palo Alto Chinese Defy Officials,” *San Francisco Call*, October 3, 1905.

<sup>42</sup> “Chinese Defeat Town Trustees,” *San Francisco Call*, September 23, 1905.

The Chinese restaurant which has been patronized for so many years by many of the students of the university [Stanford] has at last passed out of existence. This restaurant has provided for several hundred students this semester and was the only general eating house on the campus. It was ordered to close so that it would not afford opposition to the Stanford Inn.

Despite their opposition, the people of Palo Alto had undoubtedly previously encountered Chinese businesses in their area. Furthermore, Chinese food proved to be extremely popular with nearby students. The restaurant only closed down so that it would not compete with the Stanford Inn. As such, two spheres of people existed within the same geographical area: people who frequented Chinese restaurants and those who outright opposed them.

Furthermore, the Stanford Inn served as an eating establishment and meeting place for the area's elite white residents during the early-twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> The threat posed to it by the Chinese restaurant notably exemplified the competition that “lower-class” ethnic restaurants, such as Chinese American ones, posed to their upper class white counterparts. The Chinese restaurant competed for much of the same upper class white business that the Stanford Inn relied on. Thus, it demonstrated the ability of Chinese restaurants to attract a wide array of customers, ranging in race and socioeconomic class.

Chinese Californians used systemic and extralegal means to push back against the racism that they faced in the early-twentieth century. When trying to open up businesses, restaurateurs such as Fong and Wu faced a range of racist opposition. Although Fong and Wu’s specific experience may have been relatively unique, given that other Chinese American restaurants opened up in a wide array of California communities during the time period with little to no fanfare, other forms of racism undoubtedly existed. Within the microcosm of the Palo Alto area,

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<sup>43</sup> “MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY OF THE PACIFIC, Held on Saturday, November 25, 1916, at 5: 45 P.m. at Stanford University, California,” *Publications of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific* 28 (December 1916): 291–92, 291.

some residents vehemently opposed Chinese businesses opening while others already frequented them. As such, Chinese restaurants proved their value as a meeting place for Chinese and non-Chinese Californians even in outwardly racist communities. The popularity of Chinese food, as evidenced by the Stanford students' earlier patronage, suggests that it can act as a means to establish a greater physical and cultural Chinese presence in hostile towns. While not necessarily single handedly changing racists minds, Chinese food's commercial success provided motivation for Chinese restaurateurs to brave hostile environments.

## **2.2 Dogs, Beetles, and Other Odd Animals**

The connection between viewing Chinese Americans, and therefore their food, as foreign and strange followed them beyond the metropole. By the early-twentieth century, common urban myths that the Chinese ate dogs and bears had spread beyond cities like San Francisco to rural areas of California as well.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, rural Californians did not uniformly believe such stereotypes. The association between Chinese people and strange and distasteful foods was in flux during the early-twentieth century, with both Chinese and non-Chinese Americans pushing back against food-related racism. The perceived homogeneity of Chinese American people as foreign, allowed for non-Chinese Americans to paint them with a broad brush. Thus, some blanketly labeled Chinese food as dangerous and disgusting while others proclaimed its universal culinary and health benefits.

Partly in response to the infusion of "foreign" cuisines into the American foodscape, Euro-Americans sought to codify a whitewashed version of the American culinary canon. Largely championed by white women, around the early-twentieth century Americans began to formalize New England food culture as the standard for "American" cuisine. According to

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<sup>44</sup> "A Chinese Delicacy," *San Francisco Call*, October 12, 1883.



Donna Gabaccia in her book *We are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, these women, in conjunction with the growing ranks of food scientists, sought to teach new immigrants the allegedly proper American way to eat and cook.<sup>45</sup> Experts in food science and the domestic arts championed the mild foods of New England as the most nutritious, and consequently proclaimed the deviations in the flavor profiles enjoyed by immigrants (e.g. spicy Mexican food or sour Eastern European pickled food) as unhealthy. By merging ethnocentric cultural conventions with scientific expertise, white America sought to create a unified national identity through food, prioritizing New England cuisine above all others.

White America categorized ingredients into normal and other. Normal largely corresponded with the ingredients that white New Englanders commonly used in their own homes, thus creating distinctly racialized in- and out- groups. For instance, white Americans considered meats such as chicken, beef, and pork as normal, but viewed other meats, such as dog, as synonymous with savagery and a lack of civilization.<sup>46</sup> In this way, food standards intersected with and mirrored racial hierarchies.

Proponents and detractors of Chinese food alike relied on the idea of Chinese people as a unified concept. Both existed at the same time, and occasionally both viewpoints even came from the same institutions. Stereotypes about Chinese people eating dogs or rats stemmed from an uniform othering of Chinese people and Chinese culture as a whole. Despite the best efforts of some newspapers, Chinese Americans, and general opinion articles, attempting to educate people about non-stereotypical Chinese foods relied on the same underlying framework as ethnic stereotypes. By talking about Chinese food as a whole, writers assumed a level of similarity between all Chinese people. As such, many articles, supportive and not, talked about ‘what the

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<sup>45</sup> Gabaccia, Donna. *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000, 1554-1557.

<sup>46</sup> “Indian Love of Dog Meat,” *Pacific Rural Press*. January 18, 1908.

Chinese do'. Nonetheless, non-Chinese Americans still demonstrated a willingness to try Chinese food, gradually allowing them to gain greater exposure to the culture and people associated with it.

Stereotypes about Chinese people eating odd animals, particularly dogs, were common not only in urban areas but in rural communities as well. Small town newspapers published jokes about eating dogs and explained "strange" Chinese eating habits to their readers. A story published by the *Truckee Republican*, published out of a small town near Lake Tahoe, told one such story about an Englishman inquiring about how to make chop suey in 1909:

'First,' they informed him, 'the Chinese restaurant man catches a very young chicken.'... [which then escapes because of a dog] the Chinaman appears, sees what has happened, flies into a terrific rage, grabs the dog, makes mincemeat out of him and serves it to his customers as chop suey, and starts all over again with another very young chicken.<sup>47</sup>

Such jokes hinge on having enough cultural relevance so that their audience understands them. In addition to casually publishing a racist joke, the *Truckee Republican* knew that their audience would understand and know the stereotype about Chinese people eating dogs and other uncommon animals. The *Republican* assumed that its readership would be willing to, or had already, othered Chinese Americans.

Similarly, other rural newspapers claimed that not only did Chinese serve dogs to unsuspecting customers, they even viewed it as delicious. Small newspapers in rural areas like Amador county in the Sierra Nevada foothills and Blue Lake in Northern California wrote articles in 1903 about how Chinese people "eat the flesh of the dog and esteem it a great delicacy."<sup>48</sup> Not necessarily making a joke about or even overtly criticizing supposed Chinese

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<sup>47</sup> "How Chop Suey Is Prepared," *Truckee Republican*, February 6, 1906.

<sup>48</sup> "Chinese Festivals," *Amador Ledger-Dispatch*. April 10, 1903;

eating habits, claiming that Chinese people view dogs as a delicacy inherently othered them. In comparison, white Americans during the time generally only ate dogs under distress or when tricked into doing so.<sup>49</sup> By marking it as a notable feature of Chinese diets, newspapers created distinct racial categories setting Chinese people aside as different from Americans.

‘Othering’ went beyond just claiming that Chinese people ate dogs, and extended to arguing that Chinese people did not even eat the animals that white Americans did eat. According to the *Mariposa Gazette* and Sierra Nevada’s *Inyo Independent*, “the Chinese are fond of stewed dog but consider beef to be unhealthy.”<sup>50</sup> According to these papers, not only did Chinese people eat a wider variety of animals than the average American, they did not even eat the animals that Americans already did eat. As such, the two papers painted Chinese dietary practices as even stranger than previously reported. Ironically, just seven years prior to telling its readers that Chinese people eat dogs but not beef, the *Inyo Independent* ran an article on “Epicurean Chinamen,” declaring that “their tables have the best American markets can afford.”<sup>51</sup> According to the *Independent*, “Chinamen, being quite as fond of meat as Americans, buy pork, beef, and chickens.”<sup>52</sup> In direct contrast with their later article, the *Independent* claimed that Chinese people eat high quality ingredients including beef. Both racist and non-racist views of Chinese eating habits existed in rural early-twentieth century California. Nonetheless, articles investigating the eating practices of Chinese Americans relied on a sense of homogeneity amongst their subjects.

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“Chinese Festivals,” *Blue Lake Advocate*, April 4, 1903.

<sup>49</sup> “An Alaska Tragedy,” *Los Angeles Herald*, May 23, 1902.

<sup>50</sup> “What They Eat,” *Mariposa Gazette*, January 23, 1909;  
“What They Eat,” *Inyo Independent*, March 5, 1909.

<sup>51</sup> “Epicurean Chinamen,” *Inyo Independent*, June 12, 1902.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

Not non-Chinese Americans push back against negative stereotypes surrounding Chinese food, but the same authorities that promoted said stereotypes ironically did the same. Just as the *Independent* contradicted itself, stories directly pushing back on the stereotype that Chinese people ate odd animals existed as well. Rural and mid-sized Californian papers in Mariposa, Callexico, Inyo county, and San Luis Obispo all ran the same story in 1917-18. The newspapers, some of which had earlier claimed that Chinese people ate dogs, told their readers that reports about Filipino people eating dogs “has done as much to prejudice us against the Filipinos as has the story that the Chinese eat rats to turn us against the well bred Chinese, who not only do not eat rats, but even have a distaste for caviar and limburger.” Claiming nearly the polar opposite of their earlier articles, the *Inyo Independent* and *Mariposa Gazette*, in addition to other local papers, openly recognized the bias and harm in associating Chinese food with weird food. Perhaps lacking awareness of their previous complicity, papers such as the *Independent* and *Gazette* called on others to examine their stereotypes and prejudices.

Furthermore, some non-Chinese Americans Chinese food proponents argued for the accessibility and health benefits of Chinese food. According to its defenders, once Americans tasted this new cuisine, they would like it. The rural northern California *Humboldt Times* noted that “the food the Chinese eat is relished by many Americans. It is generally cooked in a cleanly manner and only choice meats, cut in small pieces are used in it- pork, beef, and the breast of chicken and duck.”<sup>53</sup> Not only did the *Times* recognize its popularity with early-twentieth century non-Chinese Americans, but it also vouched for the cleanliness of Chinese food. Notably, all of the meats listed existed in the stereotypical Western diet, countering stereotypes of Chinese people eating odd creatures.

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<sup>53</sup> “The Food of Chinese,” *Humboldt Times*, August 26, 1903.

Chinese American accounts of their own food provide greater insight into what they believed to be the benefits of eating Chinese food. According to Fan Wang, writing for the Bay Area's *Livermore Journal*, "[m]ost Americans, if once invited to a Chinese banquet, are very anxious to go to another and then to keep on going. The reason is that about 90% of the food served at a Chinese banquet is either boiled or steamed, and is therefore both wholesome and digestible."<sup>54</sup> Although Wang identifies Chinese cooking techniques such as boiling and steaming, according to Anne Mendleson they, alongside stir frying, were "perfectly unknown in Western kitchens."<sup>55</sup> Despite their unfamiliarity, according to Wang, Americans would enjoy Chinese food once they tried it. The lack of Chinese cooking techniques in the West did not discredit their merit. Rather, their introduction to the Western palate promised to broaden and even improve it, offering the ability to similarly cook healthy and tasty dishes.

Nonetheless, despite writers such as Wang countering negative stereotypes, early-twentieth century Californian newspapers still openly equated Chinese food with disease. For instance, in 1908 the Central Valley's rural *Hanford Journal* reported that a Mexican man named Travino had recently died: "Travino had gone to Chinatown on the evening before his death and had eaten noodles in a restaurant there. Travino was put on the stand and he stated that Fernandez had not eaten very heartily of the noodles, but had complained of a sick stomach."<sup>56</sup> Although an investigation later determined that he "came to his death through causes unknown to the jury", the *Journal* heavily implied that Chinese noodles may have been the cause of his

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<sup>54</sup> Fan Wang, "The Five Tastes Represent the Five Elements in Nature," *Livermore Journal*, July 6, 1927.

<sup>55</sup> Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey*, 32.

<sup>56</sup> Fernandez's death also demonstrated how rural Chinese American restaurants served a diverse range of people. Chinese, white, and Mexican Californians all dined at them.

"Inquest over Mexican's Remains," *Hanford Journal (Daily)*, July 20, 1908.

death.<sup>57</sup> Hanford readers assumed that one could feasibly get sick from eating Chinese food.

Furthermore, early-twentieth century rural Californians also commonly equated the foreignness they saw in Chinese food with literal danger. In addition to speculating that Chinese food might be responsible for adverse health events, many openly blamed Chinese food for poisoning people. In 1906, multiple towns in California's rural Central Valley reported that "Willie Ripley, a boy about 15 or 16 years of age, was made very ill last evening from eating noodles in a Chinese resort in [Marysville] Chinatown."<sup>58</sup> Ripley's illness became a region-wide story with newspapers in Sacramento, Marysville, and Colusa all reporting about his illness with headlines such as "Boy Poisoned by Noodles."<sup>59</sup> Drawing no firm consensus on how exactly eating Chinese food poisoned Willie, newspapers offered different explanations such as the sauce being "manufactured from... black beetles" or that "stale meat was used in making the noodles."<sup>60</sup> Consequently, the *Sacramento Daily Union* predicted that although many people patronized Chinese American restaurants, "this experience will probably deter many from patronizing the place."<sup>61</sup> Equating beetles and stale meat, as well as viewing both as probable, reflected the persistent stereotypes and fear of odd Chinese ingredients.

Blaming Willie's illness on Chinese food poisoning highlighted how Chinese food struggled to overcome its heavily negative stereotypes. Suggesting that one person getting sick might result in an entire community of people ceasing to go to Chinese American restaurants stemmed from Chinese food's inherent racialization at the time. Rather than being the fault of

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<sup>57</sup> "Ate China Noodles- Died," *Hanford Sentinel*, July 23, 1908.

<sup>58</sup> "Noodles Made Boy Very Ill," *Marysville Daily Appeal*, May 13, 1906.

<sup>59</sup> "Boy Poisoned by Noodles," *Sacramento Daily Union*, May 14, 1906;  
"Boy Made Ill By Eating Noodles," *Colusa Daily Sun*, May 14, 1906.

<sup>60</sup> "Boy Poisoned by Noodles," *Sacramento Daily Union*;  
"Noodles Made Boy Very Ill," *Marysville Daily Appeal*.

<sup>61</sup> "Noodles Made Boy Very Ill," *Marysville Daily Appeal*.

one restaurant, or even just a coincidence, Willie getting sick reflected poorly on the Chinese American restaurants of the Central Valley as a whole. Instead of one Chinese American restaurant serving bad food, all Chinese American restaurants faced the collective blame due to their perceived similarities and danger. Nevertheless, Marysville's Chinatown continued to thrive and coexist with its surrounding community after the noodle incident, suggesting that previous intercommunity ties and the strength of Chinese businesses helped counterbalance the threat of being uniformly punished for Willie getting sick.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the continued draw of Chinese food, due to its general tastiness and the subsequent strength of Chinese American restaurants, allowed Chinese American restaurateurs to continue to operate and expand across the state despite persistent negative stereotypes.

### **2.3 Relationships in Rural California**

Chinatowns across California had porous borders, allowing Chinese and non-Chinese Americans to interact with one another. Restrictive immigration laws resulted in ninety-five percent of Chinese on the mainland being male by 1900.<sup>63</sup> As a result of this gender imbalance, white women who frequented Chinatowns as missionaries, workers, tourists, and diners became of growing concern to white Americans who worried about threats to the institution of white womanhood. The growing numbers of interracial marriages and relationships between Chinese American men and white women particularly concerned white Americans. Much to the dismay of white America, Chinese American restaurant owners and workers often met, interacted with, and occasionally had relationships with white women. Fear mongering in early-twentieth century rural California resulted from the very real fact that Chinese American restaurants existed as sites

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<sup>62</sup> "Preservation of Chinese Quarter Urges Gorwood," *Marysville Daily Appeal*, February 19, 1921.

<sup>63</sup> Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 37.

of lowered racialized and gendered boundaries.

Not limited to just major cities, Californians across the state paid attention to and worried about the perceived trend of Chinese-white relationships. Viewed as both a national and regional problem, rural California towns discussed and reported the ways in which Chinese American men allegedly seduced and tricked white women. For instance, in 1906 the *Humboldt Times* reported that “Many White Girls in Chicago Show Marked Degeneracy [by being in relationships with Chinese men].”<sup>64</sup> Rather than blaming the white women involved in these relationships, the *Times* painted them as victims by reporting that Chinese American men tricked them into marriage. “He spends money, he banquets her in private rooms of chop suey restaurants, and— it is alleged— if then she does not agree to marry him, he does not surrender and mourn the loss, but he invites her into smoking opium.”<sup>65</sup> Presenting Chinese American men as determined sexual aggressors, the *Times* warned that consorting with Chinese men and eating at Chinese American restaurants acted as a gateway to smoking opium and lowered inhibitions. Home to their own Chinese American restaurants, rural areas such as Humboldt reevaluated the possible dangers posed by the Chinese men present in their own communities.

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<sup>64</sup> “Wedded to Chinamen,” *Humboldt Times*, December 14, 1904.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*





Figure 2. A female wax figurine ‘white slave’ from San Francisco.<sup>66</sup> White Californians, in urban and rural areas, worried about the existence of white women being held as slaves by Chinese captors.<sup>67</sup>

Unsurprisingly, many white Californians vehemently opposed interracial marriage. For instance, the *San Francisco Call* reported that in rural Jackson City “William Lee, a Chinese born in America and very much Americanized, applied for a license today to marry Miss Sadie Leon, a white girl. The request was refused, as the law makes no distinction between Chinese who are or are not citizens.”<sup>68</sup> Not only did personal reservations against interracial marriages exist, but the state legislation expressly forbade it. With an amendment to California Civil Code section 69 in 1880 banning white marriage to “Mongolians”, the California legislature

<sup>66</sup> *Scene I, 'The White Slave', Wax Figure of a Woman. San Francisco Historical Photograph Collection. San Francisco Public Library, n.d.*

<sup>67</sup> “Comb Chinatown for White Slave,” *Los Angeles Herald*, May 11, 1911;  
 “Chinese Smuggling Ring Is Uncovered,” *Morning Union*, September 22, 1922;  
 “Chinese Youth Is White Slaver,” *Humboldt Times*, May 17, 1920.

<sup>68</sup> “Chinese Seeks to Wed White Girl,” *San Francisco Call*, November 9, 1909.

embedded anti-Chinese racism into the state's legal framework of marriage. However, despite opposition, Chinese American men and white women continued to see each other, marry, and meet each other through Chinese American restaurants.

Given the diversity of customers and workers at Chinese American restaurants, a wide range of white women interacted with and had relationships with Chinese men. Supposed defenders of white womanhood stereotyped such women as exploited, impoverished, addicted to drugs, or otherwise disillusioned and disadvantaged. Meanwhile, interracial couples went to great lengths to remain with their partners. For example, after being run out of Hanford in 1909 due to being in an interracial relationship, "sporty Chinaman" Harry Joe and his partner Jessie Carr crisscrossed the Central Valley after meeting one another in a Chinese American restaurant.<sup>69</sup> Unlikely to be able to marry in California, Carr declared that "she was not ashamed of her love and that she'd marry him if she had to go to Arizona to do so."<sup>70</sup> Despite intense legal barriers and social pressures, Carr fought for her relationship, staying with Joe despite being forced out of town and even declaring herself willing to cross state lines to marry him. However, the local press called Carr's story into doubt, revealing that she had already been married and had a reputation for delinquency.<sup>71</sup>

While women such as Carr were accused of having a checkered past, Chinese American restaurants also provided an avenue for relationships between Chinese proprietors and their more respectable middle class guests. For instance, Mr. and Mrs. Tong eloped to Albuquerque to be married in 1907. The *Napa Weekly Journal* reported their story by printing:

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<sup>69</sup> "Joe and His 'Affinity' Parted," *Hanford Journal (Daily)*, August 18, 1909; "Past Record of Affinity Is Bared," *Hanford Journal (Daily)*, August 20, 1909.

<sup>70</sup> "Joe and His 'Affinity' Parted," *Hanford Journal (Daily)*.

<sup>71</sup> "Past Record of Affinity Is Bared," *Hanford Journal (Daily)*.

If I had to choose a thousand times over I would marry a Chinese rather than an American today [said]... Mrs. Tong Wing Wong, until yesterday Miss Callie Felber Stocks... Because the people of California look askance upon marriage between Chinamen and American girls and because no minister or Justice of the Peace on the coast could be induced to perform such a ceremony [they].... were forced to come all the way to Albuquerque to become man and wife.<sup>72</sup>

With their story additionally picked up by newspapers in Humboldt county and Central Valley's Stockton, papers gave their professions as teacher or telephone operator for Mrs. Wong and restaurant owner for Mr. Wong.<sup>73</sup> Despite the best efforts of the authorities, and general society, Chinese men and white women still entered relationships with one another. Mr. and Mrs. Wong circumvented the legal obstacles to their marriage, and Mrs. Wong demonstrated her hard earned ability and desire to deviate from expectations.

Chinese American restaurants served as a meeting place for couples such as them, allowing them to interact and form relationships with one another outside of the usual barriers they might face. Carr and Mrs. Wong's respective occupations as delinquent and either telephone operator or teacher represents the wide breadth of women who visited Chinese American restaurants and met Chinese American men. Chinese American restaurants, and the proprietors who ran them, proved to hold a somewhat flexible social status: able to mix and form relationships with a wide swathe of rural California's socioeconomic groups. Ranging from respectably middle class to decidedly less, a diverse spread of women entered relationships with Chinese American men.

Perhaps the most emblematic of white America's disapproval and fear of interracial Chinese white relationships, newspapers across the nation reported the murder of Elsie Siegel a

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<sup>72</sup> "Puts Her Faith in Chinese Husband," *Stockton Independent*, April 17, 1907.

<sup>73</sup> "Wed Chinees and Be Happy?" *Humboldt Times*, April 18, 1907.

young missionary in New York. Killed in 1909 by Leon Ling, a Chinese American restaurant worker she was in a relationship with, Elsie's story captivated and horrified the nation.<sup>74</sup> Within California, areas as rural as Marysville and Humboldt county and cities as large as San Francisco all extensively covered her murder.<sup>75</sup> Castigating all Chinese people after her murder, the rural northern California *Chico Record* quoted her uncle as saying "[t]his should warn all women against association with Chinamen, either in the church or otherwise... the feeling of a Mongolian toward white women is an animal feeling."<sup>76</sup> However, although never fully solved, police later discovered that Elsie had a relationship with two different Chinese men at the same time, likely driving Ling to murder her out of jealousy.<sup>77</sup> Although tragic, Elsie's death exposed the depth of her interactions with the Chinese community. Rather than simply being a naive and innocent missionary, Elsie navigated her way through Chinatown, meeting and entering relationships with its inhabitants.

Nonetheless, the racist opinions that her uncle expressed persisted in California following her death. For instance, according to the *San Bernardino Sun* in 1913 "In Los Angeles they prevented women from working in Chop Suey houses conducted by Chinese."<sup>78</sup> Perceiving them to be a threat, a large segment of white America sought to reinstate racialized and gendered boundaries between white women, Chinatowns, Chinese American restaurants, and Chinese American men. As evidenced by the sometimes tragic and sometimes romantic relationships, white women met Chinese American men through Chinese American restaurants. Acting as a

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<sup>74</sup> Yi, Lui Mary Ting. *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>75</sup> "Murder Mystery Unsolved," *Humboldt Times*, June 24, 1909;  
"Sigel Murder Remains Deep Mystery," *San Francisco Call*, June 22, 1909;  
"Slayer of Elsie Sigel Hiding on Coast," *Marysville Daily Appeal*, June 24, 1909.

<sup>76</sup> "See Chinese Lover of Elsie Sigel as Murderer," *Chico Record*, June 20, 1909.

<sup>77</sup> "Seeks Chinese Lover of Elsie Sigel as Murderer," *Chico Record*, June 20, 1909.

<sup>78</sup> "Worse than Barbary Coast Is Redlight School for Girls," *San Bernardino Sun*, October 5, 1913.

shared contact space, the boundaries of race and class blurred in Chinese American restaurants as the women either initially came to be served as customers or to work as waitresses. Elsie's death featured prominently the minds of rural Californians in the years after her death, influencing the position of Chinese Americans living there and the way they interacted with society.

The years immediately following her death left no doubt that Elsie Siegel's association with Chinese men, and her killer's Chinese identity, fueled much of the continued interest surrounding her murder. Only two years after her death, *The Chinatown Trunk Murder Mystery*, a play, screened throughout rural California to much fanfare. *The Chinatown Trunk Murder Mystery* screened in small Californian towns such as Stockton, Santa Rosa in the Bay Area, and Chico.<sup>79</sup> Advertising the Chinese aspect of Siegel's murder, the *Chico Record* claimed that the play "display[ed] the oriental splendor" of Chinatown.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, the *Press Democrat*, of Santa Rosa, claimed that "the 'Silent Death,' an instrument [for assassination] used only by the Chinese, and known to few others, is introduced for the first time on the stage in 'The Chinatown Trunk Mystery.'"<sup>81</sup> Highlighting its Chinatown backdrop and its unique murder weapons 'used only by the Chinese', rural Californian newspapers left no doubt that the play's Chinese setting and murder suspect made it worth seeing.

However, Chinese Americans recognized the racial animosity that Elsie Siegel's murder inflamed, engaging in activism to counter racist reactions to the killing. Labeling *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery* as racist and inflammatory, Chinese Americans lobbied local authorities to stop its screening. Sometimes successful, and sometimes not, Chinese Americans fought inside and

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<sup>79</sup> "The Chinatown Trunk Mystery," *Chico Record*, January 26, 1911;  
"Today Extra Feature- Special Manitee," *Santa Barbara Weekly Press*, September 14, 1911;  
"Melodrama Coming," *Stockton Independent*, February 23, 1911;  
"The Chinatown Trunk Mystery," *Press Democrat*, January 29, 1911.

<sup>80</sup> "The Chinatown Trunk Mystery," *Chico Record*.

<sup>81</sup> "The Chinatown Trunk Mystery," *Press Democrat*.

outside of major cities to stop the play. Sharing a common goal, the collective activism of Chinese Americans across the country and state caused local theaters to reconsider screening the play. For instance, according to the *Hanford Journal*, the Hanford opera house canceled "[t]he Great Chinatown Trunk Mystery,"... [because] The Chinese of San Francisco entered a protest against the piece when it was first presented there a few weeks ago... Hanford will miss nothing by the cancellation of this show."<sup>82</sup> The efforts of Chinese activists had far ranging consequences, with lobbying in San Francisco causing Hanford, located hundreds of miles away, to cancel its showing of the play.

Directly utilizing the Chinese diaspora's resources in San Francisco, many Chinese Americans in more rural parts of the state attempted to create a unified front against the play. Reporting on the efforts of Chinese residents in its own city, the San Jose Mercury News wrote that "the [Chinese] Consul General has been informed by Chinese residents of Monterey, Salinas, and Santa Cruz [in the Bay Area], where the play has been presented, that the production tends to prejudice Americans against the Chinese."<sup>83</sup> Chinese Americans who lived in smaller Chinese communities strategically lobbied the consul general in San Francisco to amplify their voices. Rather than reactively taking guidance from those in San Francisco, rural Chinese Americans actively engaged with them.

Not bound simply to what Chinese Americans in large cities did for them, Chinese Americans in rural California also took matters into their own hands. Rural Chinese Americans exerted themselves as an independent activist body, acting in sync with, but not beholden to, the actions of other Chinese Americans. Reporting on rural Central Valley Oroville's upcoming showing, the *Sacramento Journal* reported that "demanding that 'The Chinatown Trunk

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<sup>82</sup> "The Chinatown Trunk Mystery Canceled," *Hanford Journal (Daily)*, February 27, 1911.

<sup>83</sup> "Chinese Will Attempt to Stop Victory Play," *San Jose Mercury-News*, February 9, 1911.

Mystery' be barred from this city Friday night, a delegation of Oroville Chinese called on District Attorney George F. Jones today... The Chinese claim the play has a tendency to arouse race hatred against the Chinese."<sup>84</sup> The actions of Oroville's Chinese community were noted across the region with the *Chico Record* also reporting on their protest.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, the Chinese community in San Bernardino lodged complaints against the play with city officials and the local opera house.<sup>86</sup> According to the local paper, following "the protest of leading Chinese of this city... Mrs. Kiplinger [the opera house manager] refuse[d] to allow the show to be staged at her opera house because of her consideration for the feeling of the Chinese."<sup>87</sup> Rural Chinese Americans in California proved themselves willing to, and able to, engage on activism on multiple levels: both by appealing to more centralized bodies of Chinese authority and by lobbying local groups themselves. As such, rural Chinese Americans played an important role in shaping the narrative around the play.

Ironically, after all of the controversy that the play inspired, it generated mixed reviews at best. Hailed by the *Napa Weekly Journal* as having a "Strong Company", the *Chico Record* conversely lambasted it as "a mediocre play, presented by a mediocre company."<sup>88</sup>

Not limited to following New York scandals, rural Californians worried over racial scandals closer to home as well. Flora Pratt and Jim Chain in southern San Bernardino perfectly represented their worry. Gripping towns across the state, ranging from ones as small as Grass

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<sup>84</sup> "Chinese Protest Play," *Sacramento Daily Union*, January 27, 1911.

<sup>85</sup> "Chinese Want Play Suppressed," *Chico Record*, January 26, 1911.

<sup>86</sup> "Our Universal Press Notices," *San Bernardino Sun*, March 14, 1911.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Similarly, the Santa Barbara mayor ended up revoking the theater's license to stop the play, calling it disgusting and immoral, after being pressured to do so by the local Chinese community.

"Local Chinese Thank the Mayor," *Morning Press*, March 7, 1911.

<sup>88</sup> "Trunk Mystery Very Mediocre," *Chico Record*, January 27, 1911;

"Trunk Mystery," *Napa Weekly Journal*, February 3, 1911.

Valley in the Sierra Nevadas to ones as large as San Francisco, the *San Bernardino Sun* in 1913 reported that “Jim Chain or Chang, Chinese restaurant keeper... was arrested... charged with contributing to the dependency of Flora Pratt, age 18 years. The knowledge that her daughter was connected with the charge against the Chinaman is believed to have hastened the death of the girl's mother.”<sup>89</sup> Another local paper scandalously reported that after seeing Pratt enter Chain's restaurant, police raided the establishment. According to the *Evening Index and San Bernardino News* “[t]here, in a darkened room, was found the girl and the Chinaman. Two empty glasses, an empty beer bottle and a bottle half full of beer were on a table. And nearby was a loaded revolver, the property of the Chinaman, ready for use.”<sup>90</sup>

Relationships between Chinese American men and white women, facilitated through restaurants, worried rural Californians. Stories such as Pratt and Chain's made the front page news in their town, and were reported on across the state. For instance, the *Evening Index* reported that “The police say that the girl was formerly employed by the Chinaman in the restaurant as a cashier... [although the mother objected] the Chinese prevailed upon the girl to... return to his restaurant.”<sup>91</sup> Papers portrayed Chinese men as predatory, luring white girls and women who worked and went to their restaurants to their demise. As such, despite their simultaneous popularity, reactionaries to stories such as Siegel and Pratt sought to portray Chinese American restaurants as a place of danger for white women.

The image of the predatory Chinese restaurateur featured prominently in white fears about miscegenation. Rather than viewing white women as willingly entering relationships with Chinese men, white Californians preferred to view Chinese American restaurateurs as somehow

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<sup>89</sup> “Daughter's Act Contributes to Death,” *San Bernardino Sun*, July 24, 1913;

“Mother Killed by Daughter's Disgrace,” *Morning Union*, July 24, 1913;

“Mother Killed by Shock,” *San Francisco Call*, July 24, 1913.

<sup>90</sup> “Girl Is Lured to Room of Oriental,” *Evening Index and San Bernardino News*, July 23, 1913.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*



coercing or tricking them into doing so. Adding to, and seemingly confirming their worry, Chain had previously been known to have relationships with white women. Ironically, Chain had also previously been arrested on a variety of relatively minor charges.<sup>92</sup> Despite his criminal history, local newspapers focused on his apparent interest in white women when reporting on his involvement with Pratt. The *San Bernardino Sun* reported that “other white women have been infatuated with the Celestial [Chain] in the past according to the statements of the police” while the *Evening Index* claimed that “some time ago he was arrested in this city [San Bernardino] while alone with a white woman.”<sup>93</sup> Chain being Chinese caused greater alarm in the city of San Bernardino than him having previously been arrested. To the columnist writing about him, his alleged history suggested a systematic targeting of white women, confirming their fears about premeditated nefariousness. Rural California specifically conceptualized the threat posed by Jim as a Chinese one, not a criminal one.

Much of rural California viewed Chinese American restaurateurs as posing a racialized and gendered threat. The ability of white women to blur racial boundaries, whether it be by working in Chinese American restaurants or eating at them, placed them in close proximity to their Chinese proprietors. As such, rural California’s desire to eat at Chinese American restaurants and interest in Chinese food had a tenuous relationship with its desire to police the activities of Chinese American restaurateurs and white women. Representatively, Chain and Pratt’s story ended with Chain being freed due to a lack of evidence and Pratt’s father taking “her from the city and away from the influence of the oriental.”<sup>94</sup> By literally taking her away from

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<sup>92</sup> “Dr. Ham Is Again After Offenders,” *San Bernardino Sun*, January 22, 1911;

“Chinaman Arrested- Jim Chain,” *San Bernardino Sun*, November 4, 1908;

“In Police Court,” *San Bernardino Sun*, November 10, 1908.

<sup>93</sup> “Statement Is Implicating Chinaman,” *Evening Index and San Bernardino News*, July 24, 1913;

“Daughter’s Act Contributes to Death,” *San Bernardino Sun*.

<sup>94</sup> “Chinaman Is Given His Freedom,” *San Bernardino Sun*, July 31, 1913.

the city, her father restricted and cut off her interactions with Chain.

Nonetheless, despite the fear surrounding Chinese American restaurants and Chinese American men, both continued to serve important roles in their communities, with Chinese American restaurants allowing a wide variety of Californians to meet and interact with one another. While, white women faced outside pressure to avoid Chinese American men, women such as Mrs. Wong managed to overcome anti-miscegenation laws and social stigmas to marry who they wanted to. Furthermore, the continued existence of Chinese American restaurants and interest in Chinese food secured a place for Chinese Americans in early-twentieth century rural Californians. Chinese Americans continued to run restaurants, and their non-Chinese American rural counterparts continued to eat their food and visit their establishments.

## CHAPTER 3

### Trendy Chinese

In my next chapter I explore how Chinese American food gained popularity in the homes and diets of rural non-Chinese Americans. I argue that the growing acceptability and popularity of Chinese food innately reflected Chinese immigrants' growing identity as Chinese Americans rather than solely Chinese. Furthermore, I argue that as Chinese American food became more common in the diets of non-Chinese Americans, Chinese Americans gained a similar greater acceptance in California.

#### 3.1 Doing Chinatown

Chinatowns across the state existed to non-Chinese Americans as both a mysterious exotic place and as a neighborhood conveniently located right in their cities. For instance, Lui Mary Ting Yi, author of *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, cites the then editor of *Cosmopolitan* as saying “there are settlements of Orientals who are with us but not of us, who administer their own affairs according to their own conception of what is right and wrong, who never subscribe to or heed either our laws or our customs” just after the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>95</sup> The combination of mysterious and convenient made “doing Chinatown” both feasible and desirable to non-Chinese Americans.<sup>96</sup> As such, Chinatown tourism became an integral part of the identity of local Chinatowns, which in turn existed as places of both foreign mystery and local accessibility. The tourists visiting them did so due to the commodification of what it meant to be Chinese, allowing them to see it as a product (e.g. a plate of food) that they could interact with at their leisure.

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<sup>95</sup> Yi, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, 17.

<sup>96</sup> “Many Visit Chinatown,” *Press Democrat*, February 9, 1905.

Perhaps the most visible of all Chinatown tourism, visitors flocked to the Chinatowns of major California cities to explore and eat food. Recognizing the potential marketability of culinary tourism, Chinese American restaurant owners capitalized on the burgeoning industry to attract a wider array of customers. For instance, the *Los Angeles Herald* reported in 1907 on a new Chinese American restaurant opening up, “[t]he patronage will be principally Chinese and Japanese with some tourist trade. There will also be a percentage of those white and colored persons who are addicted to the chop suey habit.”<sup>97</sup> Evocatively describing a portion of non-Chinese people as having an addiction to Chinese food, the *Herald* indirectly argues for the narcotic-like effects of chop suey. Although seemingly positive in the specific context, white publications concurrently worried about addictions to another so-called Chinese product, opium. Chinese food proved to be a powerful, and possibly addictive, lure for business, attracting Chinese and non-Chinese customers alike.

Chinese American restaurateurs specifically targeted non-Chinese customers with advertisements. For instance, in San Francisco the New China Cafe advertised to the public that “Tourists and Travelers [are] Always Welcome.”<sup>98</sup> By marketing themselves to non-Chinese customers, Chinese American Restaurateurs opened up a new potential revenue stream, increasing their profits. The fame of Chinatowns in large cities such as San Francisco, attracted tourists from beyond its borders. Coming from across the country, non-Chinese customers were intrigued and fascinated by Chinese American restaurants.

Chinese American restaurateurs and residents actively participated in Chinatown tourism, purposely marketing themselves to the broader public. In anticipation for a gathering of Shriners, a masonic group, from across the country, Los Angeles prepared itself for a week-long

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<sup>97</sup> “King of Chinatown Gets His Restaurant License,” *Los Angeles Herald*, July 31, 1907.

<sup>98</sup> “Visit the New China Cafe,” *San Francisco Call*, July 6, 1913.

celebration. According to the *Los Angeles Herald*, the Los Angeles Chinatown also took part. The *Herald* reported that “[t]he yellow men are getting out their decorations and bunting and fixing up for the days when the ‘Melican’ men and women will sweep down on their settlement and look at them and their property to see what a real Chinatown looks like.”<sup>99</sup> Depicting Chinese Americans as having broken and accented English, the *Herald* drew a clear distinction between Los Angeles’ Chinese population and the rest of its inhabitants. Although Chinatowns such as Los Angeles’ attracted and advertised themselves to non-Chinese Americans, part of their appeal stemmed from their apparent foreignness.

Visitors to Chinatowns often viewed them as a novelty. Attracted to their food and sights, but also intrigued by their perceived foreignness. For instance, the *San Francisco Call* reported that “Chinese restaurant keepers in [Oakland] have complained to the police that ‘souvenir hunters’ are so thick in their quarters that they are running out of dishes.”<sup>100</sup> Drawn to Chinatowns for its novelty and differentness, souvenir hunters viewed it as an exotic destination somewhat akin to a theme park.

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<sup>99</sup> “Chinese Prepare for Fiesta Week,” *Los Angeles Herald*, April 21, 1907.

<sup>100</sup> “Chinese Complain of Souvenir Hunters,” *San Francisco Call*, December 26, 1907.



Figure 3. Ms. Maude Edwards, leader of a 1915 trip to Los Angeles' Chinatown, wearing "Oriental" clothing.

As such, Chinatown became a place to explore a different culture to many non-Chinese Californians. For example, in 1915 the *Los Angeles Herald* reported that "ten pretty Los Angeles girls, all dressed in Oriental costume, will participate in a unique party Tuesday... [which will include] a Chinese cafe for dinner."<sup>101</sup> Tourists drew a direct association between Chinese American restaurants, Chinatowns, and a sense of "Chineseness". Doing Chinese therefore became possible. By commodifying what it meant to be Chinese, tourists could easily don "Oriental costumes" or steal Chinese silverware and temporarily participate in their perception of what it meant to be Chinese. The apparent ease of donning Chinese clothing to pretend to be Chinese, demonstrated a decoupling of Chinese culture and people. Given that one could outwardly dress as Chinese, without actually being Chinese, non-Chinese Americans dehumanized Chinese Americans by viewing Chinatowns as a tourist destination.

<sup>101</sup> "10 Pretty Girls to Inspect Chinatown on Oriental Party," *Los Angeles Herald*, November 26, 1915.

Moreover, limited not only to major cities, interest in Chinatowns spread to California's rural areas even before the turn of the century. Painting a vivid picture, rural publications reported on ongoing tourism in their urban counterpart's Chinatowns. Reporting on one group's recent trip to Chicago's Chinatown, the *Humboldt Times* in 1887 described them eating "[b]ird's nest soup, for which the price followed is \$2 per plate. This was followed by shark's fin at \$1 per plate... The greatest luxury of all and the one most enjoyed was the tea, which was known as emperor's tea."<sup>102</sup> Through describing to its readers the foreign delicacies which could be found in Chinatown, the *Times* portrayed Chinatown as a place of exotic food, where one could indulge in the apparently strange and mysterious dishes of Asia.

The existence of relatively expensive food gave Chinatowns an air of potential opulence and intrigue, while it simultaneously and contradictorily maintained its reputation as dirty and dangerous. The *Times*' in depth description of what sorts of luxury foods could be found in Chinatown also positioned it as both realistically visitable and aspirational. Despite its apparent foreignness, readers of the *Herald* could easily visit their very own Chinatown. Thus, the *Herald* demonstrated the appeal of Chinatown: accessible foreignness. Close to home without being too close.

Rural Californian interest in big city Chinatown tourism continued into the early-twentieth century. The 1901 *Californian Amador-Ledger*, based in rural Jackson city, included an article from the *New York Tribune* declaring that "CHOPSTICK DINNERS [are] A FAD WITH WOULD BE BOHEMIANS IN NEW YORK." According to the *Tribune*, "The Chinese is a master of the art of making palatable dishes out of next to nothing or rather a little of everything... [and that] There is also a free and easy atmosphere about the Chinese eating

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<sup>102</sup> "Mrs. Shepard's Chinese Lunch," *Humboldt Times*, December 3, 1887.

house.”<sup>103</sup> Despite being nearly three thousand miles apart, the *Ledger* devoted an entire column to recounting the rise in popularity of Chinese food in New York City. Proclaiming to its audience that Chinese American restaurants serve delicious food in an enjoyable atmosphere, the *Ledger* effectively ran a great advertising campaign for Chinese food in Amador County.

Of course, San Francisco, with its famous Chinatown, also featured prominently in rural papers discussing tourism. In California’s rural agricultural communities, papers described it as “the most interesting section of the City of the Golden Gate.”<sup>104</sup> For instance, in 1915 the *Chico Record* noted the apparent foreign oddities one could find there. “The drug stores are sure to attract attention, for they display such articles as shark’s eggs, dried toads, sliced deer horns and other uncanny remedies... more, perhaps, for the benefit of the tourist than for medicinal purposes.” In contrast, it described Chinatown’s tea houses in more appealing terms. “The tea houses however are delightful.”<sup>105</sup> Describing the seemingly odd and unique items for sale in San Francisco’s Chinatown, the *Record* notes the district’s self conscious acknowledgement of and interest in the tourists that visit. As such, rural papers drove up interest in urban Chinatowns, conscious of the tourism industry while simultaneously promoting it.

However, rural Californian’s did not just passively read about the Chinatown tourism their more urban counterparts did. Instead, they actively engaged in similar tourism: both traveling to famous urban Chinatowns and visiting ones closer to home. For instance, in 1913, San Pedro sent multiple delegations of citizens to San Francisco. Included amongst the highlighted of their trip to San Francisco was a “trip through Chinatown and souvenir visit to

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<sup>103</sup> “Chopstick Dinners a Fad with Would Be Bohemians,” *Amador Ledger-Dispatch*, April 5, 1901.

<sup>104</sup> “Frisco's New Chinatown,” *Chico Record*, November 18, 1915.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*



Sing Fat Co.'s celebrated Chinese bazaar."<sup>106</sup> In fact, so many people from San Pedro wanted to go on the San Francisco trip that they could not all fit on the steamer leaving for the city and had to take a train instead.<sup>107</sup> While the excursion to Chinatown may not have been the main draw, it certainly ranked high among them.

For rural Californians, rural Chinatowns became an oxymoronic local foreign place. Rural non-Chinese Californians viewed Chinatowns as seemingly exotic in its offerings yet close enough to frequently visit. Whether it be for casual weekly trips, such as trips to eat chop suey in Marysville, or during festivities, many rural Californians visited their local Chinatowns.<sup>108</sup> According to the *Press Democrat*, "every night scores of people invade the streets [during the Lunar New Year Season in Santa Rosa]... On Wednesday night a party of twenty young people spent some time 'doing Chinatown'."<sup>109</sup> Rural non-Chinese Californians held deep interest in their local Chinatowns as a viable place for special occasion trips and more casual outings.

Non-Chinese interactions with Chinatowns had strong similarities between urban and rural areas. Both urban and rural non-Chinese Americans viewed Chinatowns as selling "Chineseness". Similar to the souvenir thieves in Oakland, the *Sacramento Daily Union* ran an article titled "Noodle Dish Base of Wild Excitement" in 1919. According to the *Union*, "while disposing of noodles [chop suey] in the restaurant, the fair [non-Chinese] visitor noticed the odd dish in which it was served and decided to add it to her collection."<sup>110</sup> Subsequently chased in the street by the restaurant owner much to the interest of the gathered crowd, the dish thief's associated the Chinese identity of her meal with its superficial and physical appearance. Thus

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<sup>106</sup> "Big Crowd Goes to Portola Festival," *San Pedro News Pilot*, October 22, 1913.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> "Noodles Made Boy Very Ill," *Marysville Daily Appeal*.

<sup>109</sup> "Many Visit Chinatown," *Press Democrat*.

<sup>110</sup> "Noodle Dish Base of Wild Excitement," *Sacramento Daily Union*, June 24, 1919.

reflecting her objectification and commodification of being Chinese. As such, “Chineseness” could be physically manifested (i.e. in a dish) and be taken with oneself as a souvenir.

Chinatown tourism, in rural and urban areas, existed due to the commodification of what it meant to be Chinese. Non-Chinese Californians used trips to Chinatown and its restaurants, whether it be a special or regular occasion, to engage with a commodified version of being Chinese that they could literally wear (e.g. by wearing “Oriental” clothing) or pick up and put in their bag (e.g. the many souvenir thieves). Despite their superficial interactions with Chinese culture, non-Chinese tourists, interested initially in Chinatowns and chop suey, began to engage with Chinese culture outside of Chinatown. Representing a highly visible and prominent example of “Chineseness”, Chinatowns became a gateway to greater interactions with rural Chinese Americans and Chinese culture during the early-twentieth century.

### **3.2 Chop Suey and American Food**

Chinese immigrant chefs adapted their menus to cater to the broader non-Chinese communities. Chinese American restaurants did not only serve Chinese American customers. Although many rural and mid-sized Californian cities had Chinatowns and Chinese communities of their own, they lacked the large Chinese populations of urban metropolises such as San Francisco. Even more than their urban counterparts, rural and mid-sized Chinese chefs needed to attract the business of non-Chinese clients to keep their businesses financially viable. As such, they combined the tastes of the communities they lived in with more standard Chinese American fare to attract customers. Chinese American restaurateurs used staple Chinese American dishes, such as chop suey, in conjunction with the food of their surrounding communities as a strategy to better attract non-Chinese customers through increasing their relatability and appealing to market

demands. In doing so, they created an avenue through which both they and their non-Chinese neighbors could mutually assimilate with each other.

Rural Californians recognized the significance of food in representing cultural integration as adapting to one's new culinary surroundings necessitates and causes one to similarly integrate into one's new home. For instance, in 1900 newspapers across rural and agricultural California, from Newcastle in the Sierra Nevadas to Chico to Merced in the Central Valley, all ran a story about how Chinese people in New York no longer ate Chinese food. “‘Me no likee chop suey. Me eat spareribs and sauerkraut.’ ... this Chinaman, like many of his fellow countrymen... hardly tasted traditional Chinese dishes. One of the first directions In which a Chinaman becomes Americanized is in his liking for American food, cooked In the American way.”<sup>111</sup> While reports of masses of Chinese immigrants disavowing Chinese food in favor of ‘spareribs and sauerkraut’ were dubious at best, eating another group's food actively introduces and integrates one into said group. As such, by eating at Chinese American restaurants, non-Chinese Americans interacted with their Chinese proprietors and by extension Chinese culture.

As a result, many Chinese American restaurants incorporated non-Chinese dishes into their menus, and specifically courted non-Chinese customers. For instance, Lompoc Restaurant, located in its agricultural and mining namesake in southern California, advertised “Li Hung Chang Chop Suey [and] Italian Meals” in 1916.<sup>112</sup> Run by the Chinese Lee Mee, the Lompoc Restaurant clearly served a wide variety of dishes. Having previously ran another local restaurant, Lee Mee’s specialties included “Chinese noodles, and American and Italian dishes.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> “Chinese Fond of Sauerkraut,” *Newcastle News*, April 4, 1900;  
“Chinese Fond of Sauerkraut,” *Chico Record*, April 10, 1900;  
“Chinese Fond of Sauerkraut,” *Merced County Sun*, April 20, 1900.

<sup>112</sup> “Lompoc Restaurant,” *Lompoc Journal*, November 3, 1916.

<sup>113</sup> “Town News Notes,” *Lompoc Journal*, November 3, 1916.

In addition to its Chinese population, in the early-twentieth century, Lompoc had a sizable Italian immigrant population who worked in local dairy farms.<sup>114</sup> Lee Mee's decision to sell and advertise Italian, American, and Chinese food allowed him to reach a broader audience and connect with Lompoc's other immigrant communities. Rather than completely abandoning Chinese food, Lee Mee, and other Chinese restaurateurs, adapted their menus to fit the tastes of the communities they lived in.

Recognizing the demographics and tastes of said demographics played a central role in their advertising strategy. As a result, in places close to the Mexican border recognizing and catering to the larger Mexican populations made financial sense. As such San Bernardino, located in southern California, had a restaurant in the 1910's that advertised having "Homemade Mexican Tamales, Spanish Dishes and Chili, Chop Suey and Noodles."<sup>115</sup> Similar to the Lompoc Restaurant, the restaurant in San Bernardino adapted its menu to the local clientele. Although tamales and chop suey have little to nothing in common, the restaurant recognized that by selling Mexican food they could reasonably increase business. Notably, neither they, nor any of the other restaurants advertising non-Chinese food, sold only non-Chinese food. Instead, Chinese restaurateurs kept Chinese food as a hallmark of their menus, adding not subtracting to attract additional customers.

Not only did Chinese American restaurants tailor their menus to their customer base, but they also made efforts to do so culturally as well. During the early-twentieth century, the Paris Cafe existed in the Calexico Mexicali region on the California Mexico border. Eventually bought by Jim Peters, a local Chinese businessman, it served much of the region's prominent residents. Before Jim Peters took over the Paris Cafe, it advertised itself as simply having "Real Chinese

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<sup>114</sup> H. F. Raup, "The Italian-Swiss in California," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1951): 305–14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25156322>, 311.

<sup>115</sup> "Homemade Mexican Tamales," *San Bernardino Sun*, January 6, 1916.

Dinners.”<sup>116</sup> Solely relying on the draw of Chinese food, the original Paris Cafe used perceived authenticity as its main selling point. However, when Peters took over the restaurant he reportedly wanted to “cater to the better class of American trade.”<sup>117</sup> Accordingly, the new Paris Cafe advertised itself as having “Chinese and American dishes.”<sup>118</sup> While still prominently selling Chinese food, with its Grand Opening party promising the “finest Oriental meal ever served [in the area]”, Peters took a new marketing tact. In advertising the Paris Cafe’s American dishes, Jim made the same calculations as many of his fellow Chinese restaurateurs and tried to explicitly appeal to a broader audience. In fact, just a year after opening his new restaurant, Jim threw a Christmas party replete with no Chinese food.

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<sup>116</sup> “Real Chinese Dinners,” *Calexico Chronicles*, June 5, 1917.

<sup>117</sup> “Jim Peters Host To Two Hundred Calexico Guests,” *Calexico Chronicle*, November 5, 1923.

<sup>118</sup> “Grand Opening of the New Paris Cafe,” *Calexico Chronicle*, November 3, 1923.



Figure 4. The New Paris Cafe's 1924 Christmas Dinner Menu.<sup>119</sup>

The complete lack of Chinese food for the new Paris Cafe's Christmas dinner demonstrated its breadth of cooking, its ability to do classic Western dishes, and Jim's efforts to attract non-Chinese customers. Going beyond just offering non-Chinese food, the Paris Cafe fully participated in a Christian holiday that held high cultural significance amongst the dominant group. While the cafe continued to serve Chinese food on normal days, Jim Peters had integrated it into the local non-Chinese community both financially and culturally.

Through attracting non-Chinese customers, Chinese American restaurateurs indirectly sought to better integrate them into Chinese American culture. Although appealing to

<sup>119</sup> "Christmas Dinner at the New Paris Cafe," *Calexico Chronicle*, December 24, 1924.

non-Chinese customers carried significant financial value in areas with lower Chinese concentrations, the non-Chinese customers who did eat Chinese food indirectly went through the same process of assimilation that Chinese chefs did by serving non-Chinese dishes. Cities as diverse in location and size as San Francisco, Stockton, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, San Luis Obispo, Marysville and more all advertised their Chinese *and* American dishes.<sup>120</sup> Serving ‘American’, Italian, and Mexican cuisine alongside Chinese food required Chinese chefs to learn new cuisines and integrate into the communities who ordered them. Similarly, by going to Chinese American restaurants and eating Chinese food, after perhaps being drawn in by their diverse menus, Chinese culinary traditions became part of non-Chinese American lives. As such, Chinese and non-Chinese cultures existed on a two way street in the early-twentieth century facilitated by the interest in one another’s food. Coming together, the two formed more representative cultures for the towns which hosted Chinese American restaurants.

While some Chinese American restaurants made strong overtures to their non-Chinese customers, others did not. Apart from the ubiquitous chop suey, many Chinese American restaurants made little efforts to ‘Americanize’ their menus, even in the same areas where their competitors did. For instance, the San Bernardino “Noodle Cafe” ran an ad in the local newspaper advertising “NOODLES AND CHOP SUEY A SPECIALTY” in 1913.<sup>121</sup> Literally in their name, the Noodle Cafe’s selling point was their noodles and chop suey. Rather than attempting to sell non-Chinese food to cater to their non-Chinese customers, the Noodle Cafe focused on its strength, noodles.

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<sup>120</sup> “American and Chinese Restaurant,” *Marysville Daily Appeal*, December 16, 1919;  
 “Hong Kong Cafe,” *Morning Press*, November 22, 1910;  
 “Miscellaneous,” *Stockton Independent*, March 10, 1914;  
 “News Notes for Busy Readers,” *Chico Weekly Enterprise*, August 2, 1907;  
 “The Campus Cafe,” *San Francisco Call*, June 28, 1913;  
 “Young China Cafe,” *Los Angeles Herald*, December 31, 1913;  
 “Yuen Kee Restaurant,” *San Luis Obispo Daily Telegram*, May 4, 1912.

<sup>121</sup> “Noodle Cafe and Lunch Counter,” *San Bernardino Sun*, February 13, 1913.

In fact, noodles and chop suey acted as the tagline for many of San Bernardino's Chinese American restaurants. Noodle Cafe contemporaries such as Canton Restaurant and Yee's Cafe in San Bernardino all used the same catch phrase.<sup>122</sup> Even restaurants beyond San Bernardino, in rural areas such as Chico and Hanford as well as mid-sized towns such as Santa Rosa prided themselves on their "noodles and chop suey."<sup>123</sup> Despite the prevalence of Chinese American restaurants touting their non-Chinese food, a significant number of Chinese American restaurants advertised themselves solely off of their Chinese food. The existence of Chinese American restaurants using two significantly different advertising strategies, highlighting their "Chineseness" and highlighting their 'Americanness', in the very same towns as each other, such as San Bernardino, reflects the tightrope that they walked with advertising themselves. When appealing to non-Chinese customers, both were valid strategies.

Chinese American restaurants in the early-twentieth century marketed themselves as both Chinese and American, bridging the gap between foreign and domestic, integrating themselves into their local communities as well as vice versa. Chinese American restaurants could not, and largely did not try to escape being Chinese. By definition they sold Chinese food, and many restaurants did exactly, and only, that to non-Chinese customers. However, many of their counterparts expanded their culinary repertoire to cater to said customers. Rather than blending together Chinese and non-Chinese dishes into one mishmash designed at attracting both groups, many Chinese American restaurants offered them side by side: giving everybody something to enjoy at their restaurants and increasing their potential number of customers. As such they made

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<sup>122</sup> "Where to Eat? Many People Are Finding That at Yee's Cafe," *San Bernardino Sun*, February 16, 1919; "Canton Restaurant," *San Bernardino Sun*, November 16, 1910.

<sup>123</sup> "Chinese Noodles and Chop Suey," *Hanford Journal (Daily)*, July 28, 1909; "News Notes for Busy Readers," *Chico Weekly Enterprise*; "Under New Management," *Press Democrat*, July 31, 1908.



practical overtures to the broader communities while still maintaining their Chinese core. Chinese Americans brought Chinese cuisine and culture into the communities they established themselves in, while also bringing their non-Chinese neighbors' food into their own kitchen. Thus, Chinese American restaurants served to create a new and more representative American identity for both their proprietors and customers.

### **3.3 Chinese Themed Parties**

In addition to frequenting local Chinese American restaurants for both formal and informal dining, early-twentieth century rural Californians threw Chinese and Chinese food themed parties in their homes. Unsurprisingly, the two themes heavily overlapped as said Californians viewed Chinese food as denoting Chinese culture. Popular with socialites and groups with some connection to China (i.e. recently visiting it) as well as those with no apparent ties, Chinese aesthetics and food commonly served as an exotic novelty. Notably, they also, although admittedly less commonly, gave non-Chinese Californians an insight into Chinese culture. These “themed” parties can be divided into three categories: those that served Chinese food, those that used “Chinese” decorations, and those that did both. To a large extent, all three types of themed parties played a similar role in connecting their attendees with a heavily stylized version of Chinese culture. Chinese themed parties demonstrated the prevalence of and interest in Chinese food and culture, or at least an impression of them, in the communities that held them.

The prevalence of Chinese food in parties with no other apparent ties to China or Chinese culture indicates its widespread acceptance into the casual diet of Californians. For instance, the *San Bernardino Sun* included a story about how a party hosted by Mrs. Williams in rural Redlands in southern California concluded with “an automobile ride to San Bernardino where a

feast of Chinese noodles and chop suey was enjoyed.”<sup>124</sup> Mrs. Williams’ party had no explicit connection to China other than the food that the partygoers eventually ate. Instead, the paper reported her party as a “swimming party.”<sup>125</sup> In contrast, contemporary non-Chinese visitors toured Chinatowns in large and small cities as a form of exotic tourism.<sup>126</sup> Explicitly drawn in by Chinatown’s exotic appeal, these tourists viewed Chinese food as interesting due to its novelty and foreignness. However, Mrs. William’s ‘swimming’ party ran concurrently with such tourism. Chop suey’s understated role in Mrs. William’s event highlighted how common and pedestrian it had started to become.

Rather than demonstrating a lack of interest in Chinese culture, Mrs. William’s eschewal of Chinese themed decorations suggests how common and unremarkable Chinese food had become to her. Mrs. William’s party simply centered around swimming. As expected, San Bernardino had a number of Chinese American restaurants that explicitly advertised specializing in chop suey in the early-twentieth century.<sup>127</sup> Despite not being known for its Chinese population in the same way that San Francisco or New York was, the people of San Bernardino county interacted with and visited Chinese establishments enough for them to not be a novelty. By the early-twentieth century Chinese food had ingrained itself into the lives of some of the residents of San Bernardino.

Parties with Chinese food existed on a wide spectrum of novelty, with other contemporary parties placing more emphasis on their Chinese inspiration. For instance, in 1920 the *San Pedro News Pilot* reported that “[t]he home of Mr. and Mrs. Dan Gridley of 362 Tenth

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<sup>124</sup> “Motor to San Bernardino,” *San Bernardino Sun*, April 20, 1911.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> “10 Pretty Girls to Inspect Chinatown on Oriental Party,” *Los Angeles Herald*.

<sup>127</sup> “Noodle Cafe and Lunch Counter,” *San Bernardino Sun*;  
“Our Chop Suey,” *San Bernardino Sun*, September 8, 1907;  
“Canton Restaurant,” *San Bernardino Sun*.

street was the scene of a delightful chop suey party with Mr. Teschnor, of the U. S. S. Vestal as host.”<sup>128</sup> Although labeled a “chop suey party”, the party did not include any other overt Chinese or orientalist themes. While serving chop suey may have still been relatively notable at the time, it did not necessarily always necessitate additional stereotypical Chinese motifs. Nonetheless, the description of Mrs. William’s party, the *Pilot* specifically called the Gridley’s event a *chop suey* party. Thus, while not featuring additional Chinese decorations or thematic overtures, the Gridley’s party centered around Chinese food. San Pedro threw other similar chop suey parties throughout the following decade highlighting their popularity.<sup>129</sup> Taken in conjunction with Mrs. Williams’ party, the chop suey served at parties inhabited a spectrum of acceptance ranging from enjoyable yet notable to commonplace and dinner party appropriate.

Dan Gridley was one of San Pedro’s most famous residents, performing as a singer all over the country.<sup>130</sup> As such, the people of San Pedro paid close attention to his whereabouts and doings.<sup>131</sup> Given him and his wife’s history of throwing miscellaneous gatherings, their inclusion of chop suey in their social life highlighted its permeation into the San Pedro diet.<sup>132</sup>

While parties featuring Chinese food and no other Chinese elements certainly existed, the opposite did as well. Chinese themed parties, replete with stereotypical Chinese decorations, drew heavily on an exoticized conceptualization of what it meant to be Chinese. Unlike parties which served Chinese food with no additional Chinese elements, Chinese themed parties always

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<sup>128</sup> “Chop Suey Party at Dan Gridley Home,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, September 8, 1920.

<sup>129</sup> “Chop Suey Luncheon,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, February 11, 1921;  
“Jack Elliot Surprised with Chop Suey Dinner,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, September 8, 1928;  
“Lomita News,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, January 10, 1922.

<sup>130</sup> “City to Honor Tenor Tonight,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, February 28, 1930.

<sup>131</sup> “Dan Gridley to Sing at Church Sunday,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, August 23, 1935;  
“Dan Gridley Sings in Hollywood Bowl Tonight,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, August 19, 1932.

<sup>132</sup> “Tea Thursday at the Gridley Home,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, May 28, 1924.

innately rely on Chinese food's perceived exoticism and novelty.

For instance, in 1906 the Gray family of Humboldt county threw a Chinese themed party. According to the *Humboldt Times*, “[i]t was an oriental party, the decorations being beautiful draperies, tapestries and screens from the Orient, together with rare pictures and articles of bric-a-brac and odd souvenirs of travel.”<sup>133</sup> Intended to celebrate their recent travel to China and Japan, the Gray's party relied heavily on outward displays of “Asianness”. Deemed an Oriental party, their affair not only commemorated their travels, but did so in a manner that highlighted the perceived exoticness and foreignness of the places they had just returned from. However, their party included no Chinese or Japanese food. The local newspaper reported that “[r]efreshments consisted of chocolate, salads, olives, sandwiches and cakes.”<sup>134</sup> Thus, having an “Oriental” themed party did not necessarily necessitate the inclusion of Chinese food. By including Asian themed decor but no Asian food, one could argue that the Gray's dissociated Chinese food from Chinese culture. However, in doing so the family relied on the commodification and simplification of both. By being able to display overt Orientalism without Chinese food, the Gray's selectively chose individual elements that they believed represented East Asia.

The image of China conjured up by the Gray's and others often had little or only superficial roots in actual China. In a similar instance, Mrs. Victor Stumpf of southern California's Riverside hosted an “Oriental Party” in 1914.<sup>135</sup> As with the Gray's party, Mrs. Stumpf served no Chinese food. Instead, the local paper reported that her “home was cleverly decorated with Oriental objects, and the odor of burning joss-sticks added to the realism of the

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<sup>133</sup> “The Social Mirror,” *Humboldt Times*, January 14, 1906.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> “Oriental Party,” *Riverside Daily Press*, May 16, 1914.

picture.”<sup>136</sup> Mrs. Stumpf used Chinese themed decorations as a tool to convey authenticity. Their value lay in being able to conveniently recreate a Chinese space based off of the decorators' stereotypes and knowledge of Chinese culture. Often, said space resembled stereotypes more than reality, as evidenced by the fact that Mrs. Stumpf's decorations consisted almost entirely of placing “Oriental” objects around her house.

Given the heavy exoticization of Chinese culture, and the innate connection between food and culture, many Chinese themed parties featured both. Said parties highlighted how non-Chinese Americans viewed Chinese food, or at least stylized versions of it, as being near synonymous with Chinese culture. For example, Mrs. Cheney and Mrs. Logan of neighboring Coronado and San Diego hosted what the *San Bernardino Sun* described as an “original and strikingly attractive affair” in 1914.<sup>137</sup> Their party featured both Chinese food and decorations:

Colored candles, fans and umbrellas helped lend an Oriental aspect to the spacious dining room. The first course was of chop suey and rice, with individual teapots. The second was of Chinese ginger and rice cakes. The guests had to use real chop sticks, the forks having been hidden in napkins, and much amusement resulted from the introduction of a game in which each lady was given a slip of paper on which the names of the ingredients of the chop suey were written with the letters very much mixed up.

The description of the party as “original” as well as the guests' amusement in trying to guess the ingredients of chop suey demonstrated the party's novelty.

Despite similar parties being thrown around the same time in other parts of California, they were still fairly novel. Their existence demonstrated the increasing, but not uniform, familiarity and interest in Chinese food and culture amongst non-Chinese Americans, even if

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> “Social Happenings,” *San Bernardino Sun*, June 10, 1914.

said partygoers exoticized them. Similarly, although amusing, expecting the party goers to be able to decipher the coded chop suey ingredients, suggested that they already had familiarity with them. Such familiarity likely required more than just having eaten the dish once before and realistically required either often consuming it or cooking it oneself.

At times, the commitment to having Chinese themed decor at home even extended to dressing up in Chinese clothing. Not only did non-Chinese Americans decorate their houses, they also cosplayed as Chinese. For example, the Woman's club of San Bernardino threw a "Chinese luncheon" in a club member's house in 1916.<sup>138</sup> According to the *San Bernardino Sun*, "[t]he menu consisted of chop suey, rice cakes and a number of Chinese dainties. Even the incense for festive occasions was not forgotten and two Chinese tapers were kept glowing on the table. Mrs. Palmer Willets in Chinese costume assisted in serving and added to the quaintness of the luncheon."<sup>139</sup> The woman's club decorated the house with Chinese themes, ate Chinese food, and one of the members even put on a "Chinese costume". Non-Chinese Americans used outward markers of being Chinese, such as decorations or clothes, as costumes; easily put on and taken off, they allowed them to temporarily pretend that they were in China or even that they were Chinese themselves.

Parties with both Chinese themed decorations and Chinese food even existed in the same towns, demonstrating the concurrent prevalence of both approaches to Chinese parties. For instance, after the Gridley's party, the people of San Pedro hosted a number of similar parties which served Chinese food in a themed setting. The *Pilot* reported that one so-called chop suey party included "[a] pretty employment of wisteria about the rooms [which] added to the Chinese atmosphere. At a late hour chop suey was served to the guests, who, seated on the floor, wielded

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<sup>138</sup> "Bible Literature Is Topic at Club," *San Bernardino Sun*, January 26, 1916.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

chopsticks in masterly Oriental fashion.”<sup>140</sup> Chinese parties ranged from simply serving Chinese food to a full out orientalist affair, sometimes even in the same towns. Both concepts were possible because of Chinese food’s growing popularity and dynamic place in California. People outside of the metropole did not view Chinese food as purely exotic or completely devoid of its Chinese origin. Rather, they bounced back and forth between the two concepts in the early-twentieth century.

Chinese themed parties demonstrated non-Chinese Americans’ interest and exposure to Chinese culture and food. The varying degrees of exoticization associated with them, ranging from simply eating Chinese food to dressing up in Chinese costumes, highlighted the range of acceptance that Chinese food and culture had in California. As a whole, Chinese food, in particular chop suey, proved itself to be a popular and common enough dish to serve at home parties. However, as evidenced by the prevalence of parties incorporating both Chinese food and Chinese decorations, partygoers often innately tied Chinese food to their conception of China and being Chinese. Just as one can put on Chinese clothing to temporarily pretend to be Chinese or partake in Chinese culture, one can also eat Chinese food for a similar effect. Nonetheless, despite the difficulty in doing so for many non-Chinese Americans of the time, the existence of non-Chinese themed parties which served Chinese food demonstrates how some people ate Chinese food simply because it tasted good.

### **3.4 Chinese Food and Home Cooking**

Without a doubt, Chinese food exploded in popularity in the early-twentieth century. However, according to Mendleson, “despite this new fame, almost no concrete knowledge about

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<sup>140</sup> “Younger Set Guest at Merry Chop Suey Party,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, March 20, 1928.

how Chinese cooking worked ever reached magazines and newspapers for lay readers.”<sup>141</sup> In direct contrast to Mendleson’s claim, urban and rural Californians successfully sought out how to cook Chinese food at home. The rise of Chinese food in the early-twentieth century saw a concurrent rise of newspaper articles and cookbooks detailing how to make Chinese dishes such as chop suey.

Home cooking “ethnic” food such as Chinese eroded the barriers between the dominant and non-dominant group through necessitating that cooks familiarize themselves with a new culture, its flavor profiles, and specific sets of ingredients and tools. As such, cooking Chinese for oneself became a method through which one can demonstrate one’s current knowledge and exposure of Chinese cooking, as well as a tool to learn more about Chinese culture.

Cookbooks and written recipes can therefore act as the synthesization of an ethnic minority’s culinary knowledge, translating and passing it on to the dominant culture.<sup>142</sup> Chinese recipes aimed at non-Chinese Americans encompassed a wide range of dishes including soups, noodles, fish dishes, meat dishes, and of course chop suey, and concentrated on common dishes served at Chinese American restaurants.<sup>143</sup> While many rural and urban non-Chinese Californians viewed Chinese cuisine as mysterious and strange, many of the same people, in particular women, wanted to bring it into their homes and cooked it for themselves and their families.

Normalizing the non-dominant group’s culinary culture innately reflects and influences the same group’s acceptance and integration into the broader community. According to Gabbacia, food “entwines intimately with much that makes a culture unique, binding taste and

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<sup>141</sup> Mendelson, *Chow Chop Suey*, 101.

<sup>142</sup> Liora Gvion “What’s Cooking in America?” *Food, Culture & Society* 12, no. 1 (2009): 53–76, <https://doi.org/10.2752/155280109x368660>, 54.

<sup>143</sup> Sara Bosse, and Watanna Onoto. *Chinese-Japanese Cookbook*. (The Rand-McNally Press 1914), 8.



satiety to group loyalties. Eating habits both symbolize and mark the boundaries of cultures.”<sup>144</sup> Food denotes culture: the way one eats and cooks is a byproduct of one’s culture. Thus, a greater acceptance of different culinary cultures necessitates a greater understanding and acceptance of the cultures and people who produced them. As such, as Chinese food gained greater acceptance in the homes of rural Californian communities through the use of home recipes, so did the immigrants who initially created said food.

By cooking Chinese food at home, non-Chinese people effectively, and perhaps unknowingly, assimilated Chinese cuisine into the broader American repertoire. Rather than Chinese Americans actively forcing Chinese food into the diet of non-Chinese Americans, or Chinese Americans only consuming the food of the dominant culture, the opposite happened. The dominant culture familiarized itself with Chinese food on a personal level as they ate it with their family and friends in their homes, and resultantly familiarized themselves with Chinese culture.

Some early-twentieth century authors recognized the familiarizing power of sharing recipes. Primarily white, these authors translated the so-called mysteries of Chinese cooking and offered their audiences instruction for how they too could cook Chinese food at home. In 1908, for instance, newspapers stretched from rural farming communities such as Madera in California’s Central Valley to Santa Barbara on the coast carried a recipe for chop suey written by Fannie Merritt Farmer, a well-known writer for the *Woman’s Home Companion* who was heralded as “America’s greatest cook.”<sup>145</sup> Alongside a more familiar repertoire of dishes

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<sup>144</sup> Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 113.

<sup>145</sup> “Creamed Sweet Potatoes,” *Truckee Republican*, April 10, 1909; “How to Make Chop Suey,” *Madera Mercury*, September 5, 1905; “How to Make Chop Suey,” *Morning Press*, August 30, 1908.

associated with white America, such as caramels and mashed potatoes, Farmer promised her readers that “Chop suey is really a wholesome, not a mysterious dish.”<sup>146</sup>

Contrary to Chinese food’s conflicting reputation as exotic and unhealthy, Farmer described chop suey as understandable and healthy to her sizable fan base. Her recipe called for a simple saute of chicken and vegetables in butter, seasoned with only “one half teaspoonful of sugar, [and] two teaspoonfuls of Shoyu sauce.”<sup>147</sup> By demystifying chop suey, Farmer also implicitly placed it amongst dishes brought from Europe, arguing against its perceived foreignness and advocating a place for it in the canon of American food. In doing so, Farmer critiqued the preexisting idea of American equalling white while arguing for a greater acceptance of Chinese food into American culinary culture, and by extension Chinese Americans into American civic culture. As such, her actions pushed back against the strict racialized categorization of food, instead placing dishes into the more neutral categories of wholesome or not wholesome.

Formal cookbooks also attempted to destigmatize Chinese food for their readers, and explain how to cook different Chinese dishes. For instance, The *Chinese-Japanese Cookbook* by Sara Bosse and Onoto Watanna said “[w]hen it is known how simple and clean the ingredients used to make up these Oriental dishes, the Westerner will cease to feel that natural repugnance which assails one when it is about to taste a strange dish of a strange and new land.”<sup>148</sup> Similar to Farmer, Bosse and Watanna attempted to demystify Chinese food. By informing their readers of what goes on in the backrooms of Chinese American restaurants and kitchens, they reduced

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<sup>146</sup> “How to Make Chop Suey,” *Madera Mercury*;  
“Creamed Sweet Potatoes,” *Truckee Republican*;  
“Nut Chocolate Caramels,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, December 11, 1908.

<sup>147</sup> “How to Make Chop Suey,” *Madera Mercury*, September 5, 1905.

<sup>148</sup> Bosse And Onoto, *Chinese-Japanese Cookbook*, 1.

confusion and misunderstandings about what goes into Chinese food, and therefore demystified it. By normalizing the recipes behind Chinese dishes, Bosse and Watanna similarly normalized and destigmatized the people who initially cooked them. The two authors explicitly stated that learning how to make Asian food will make it more relatable and palatable to Westerners. Food writers such as Bosse, Watanna, and Farmer translated what readers ate in their local Chinese American restaurants into recipes that they could make at home, making it, and by extension Chinese culture, more relatable.

Notably, members of both the dominant and non-dominant group played a role in demystifying Chinese food. For example Bosse and Farmer were both white. They bridged the culinary divide between the dominant and non-dominant groups as members of the former group themselves. Conversely, Watanna was Japanese American. Although not Chinese, he fell under the broad early-twentieth century umbrella of “Oriental”. By working in conjunction with a member of the dominant group, he presented a unified effort to destigmatize and demystify Chinese food and people. Giving voice to Asian Americans as a broader group, Watanna represented the range of people, from white female cookbook authors to Japanese American men, who displayed interest in Chinese cuisine.

Recipe authors not only provided instructional recipes, but also attempted to make Chinese food more accessible to their readers by noting its similarities with Western food. Drawing parallels between Chinese and Western ingredients made it easier to cook Chinese food with mainstream American grocery staples, while also giving the reader an easy reference point for understanding Chinese food. Most of the early-twentieth century chop suey recipes published for non-Chinese American audiences primarily featured ingredients common in Western food with one notable exception: soy sauce. As such, early-twentieth century recipe authors suggested

Worcestershire sauce as a comparable product. Writing for a column entitled *A Few Words with the Lady of the House*, one author introduced their chop suey recipe by saying, “With all of these [Chinese dishes] is served the Chinese condiment, brown and piquant, known as see yu or gee yow. It corresponds to our Worcestershire sauce.”<sup>149</sup> By relating soy sauce to Worcestershire sauce, the author created an easily understood analogy.

Given its supposed similarities with soy sauce, some chop suey recipes even called directly for Worcestershire sauce, such as the *Amador Ledger-Dispatch*’s chop suey recipe that included “one teaspoonful of Worcestershire sauce.”<sup>150</sup> In the eyes of the *Dispatch*, one could literally create Chinese dishes using Western ingredients. For the *Dispatch*, there was no mystery; Chinese food and Western food shared much in common with one another. Given soy sauce’s status as the most inaccessible ingredient in chop suey, papers such as the *Dispatch* negated a key component of Chinese food’s foreignness by noting its synonymousness with a common Western ingredient. As such, drawing parallels between Worcestershire and soy sauce directly attacked the concept of mysterious Chinese food. Given the Chinese American image of being a perpetual foreigner innate ties to the preexisting perception of Chinese food being mysterious and foreign, by attacking said stereotypes about food one similarly attacks the related stereotypes about Chinese Americans as a whole. Thus, familiarizing Chinese food familiarizes Chinese Americans.

Food writers sometimes went beyond drawing similarities between Chinese food and Western food, instead claiming that the two shared a common origin. Thus, even if the reader did not realize it, Chinese food held familiarity to them. According to Bosse and Otanna, “Syou, sometimes called Soye, is similar to Worcestershire and similar European sauces. In fact, the

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<sup>149</sup> “A Few Words with the Lady of the House,” *San Francisco Call*, December 7, 1909.

<sup>150</sup> “How to Make Chop Suey,” *Amador Ledger-Dispatch*, January 31, 1902.

latter are all said to be adaptations of the original Chinese syou, and most of these European sauces contain syou in their makeup.”<sup>151</sup> *A Menu for a Chinese Dinner* given by the *San Jose Mercury News* in 1913 makes almost the exact same claim about soy sauce. The *Mercury News* reported that “Worcestershire and all similar European sauces are said to be adaptations of the original Chinese syou, and most of these European sauces contain syou in their makeup.”<sup>152</sup> The authors went beyond drawing similarities between soy sauce and worcestershire, and state that it, and other western sauces, have a common origin. Identifying the roots of common European condiments in a Chinese one, and arguing that many are still made with it, directly tied the two cuisines together.

The popularity of Chinese food with white Americans should come as no surprise. Common European condiments, such as Worcestershire sauce, originated from soy sauce. Before ever cooking a Chinese dish or eating at a Chinese American restaurant, white Americans likely consumed Chinese flavors. Therefore, rather than Chinese food being mysterious, white Americans unassumingly ate it all along. The European, and derived white American, culinary traditions that white Americans held in high regards were indebted to Chinese culinary innovations. Therefore, rather than Chinese food being mysterious, it holds deep connections and similarities to food that white Americans had already been exposed to.

While maybe not coming to said conclusions about the similarities between Chinese and Western food by themselves, white Americans did proactively engage with and seek out Chinese cooking knowledge. For instance, the *San Jose Mercury News* ran an article in 1912 where a reader called Mrs. A.D.B asked “[w]ould you kindly advise me how to make chop suey? I am fond of it and should like to know how to make it myself. Also could you tell me how the

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<sup>151</sup> Bosse and Onoto, *Chinese-Japanese Cookbook*, 2.

<sup>152</sup> “A Menu for a Chinese Dinner,” *San Jose Mercury-News*, January 26, 1913.

Chinese make their tea? It is better than tea at home. Is it the process or is a different tea used?”<sup>153</sup> Clearly, Mrs. A.D.B had previously had chop suey and Chinese tea and enjoyed it so much that they wished to make it at home for themselves. Mrs. A.D.B’s genuine interest in Chinese cooking reflected white America’s willingness and desire to learn more about it.

Through cooking Chinese food and expanding their culinary repertoire, non-Chinese American women became important relayers of Chinese cuisine and culture into non-Chinese American households. Cookbooks and newspaper recipes not only targeted white women, but white women themselves made up those who sought out how to make Chinese food at home for themselves and their families. Written under columns such as “Womanly Wisdom”, Chinese food recipe authors made no secret of their target audience.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, recipes praised themselves for their legibility while claiming that “any intelligent housewife can follow [them].”<sup>155</sup> Whether it be women such as Mrs. A.D.B or the hypothetical housewives that the recipe authors wrote for, women played a unique role in bringing Chinese food into the non-Chinese American home. Amateur women cooking Chinese food lived in places ranging from metropolitan areas such as San Jose to rural outposts such as Blue Lake and Amador county. Their interest in Chinese American dishes like chop suey combined with the practical needs of adapting them for their kitchens. Substitutes such as worcestershire for soy sauce made Chinese food even more practical for the average home cook. As such, the women who cooked said recipes sought out and adapted Chinese cooking for their own benefit and interests.

Despite the efforts of authors, and the interest of the general public, many still viewed Chinese food as mysterious. In contrast with its common comparison to worcestershire, the

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<sup>153</sup> “Chop Suey,” *San Jose Mercury-News*, April 12, 1912.

<sup>154</sup> “Womanly Wisdom,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, August 14, 1906.

<sup>155</sup> “How to Make Chop Suey,” *Amador Ledger-Dispatch*.

*Sacramento Daily Union* described soy sauce as “a brown looking liquid with a peculiar flavor” in 1915.<sup>156</sup> Describing a central component, and easily recognizable, element of Chinese food as peculiar labels the broader canon of Chinese food as odd. Although notable efforts to make Chinese food accessible existed, a significant portion of both rural and urban Californians continued to think of Chinese food as being completely foreign and indescribable. For instance, the rural *Blue Lake Advocate* published a joke featuring a girl asking her brother for a recipe for chop suey for her cooking school in 1910. Her brother’s answer: “Recipe For Chop Suey.- Take a bowl of nice, clean suey and then chop it.”<sup>157</sup> In contrast, the *Advocate* had run an actual “Recipe for making this Famous Chinese Dish [chop suey]” just four year prior to their joke.<sup>158</sup> While chop suey may have been popular enough that the girl could have been reasonably expected to learn how to make it, as evidenced by other home cooks seeking out recipes for it, the punchline still relied on chop suey’s foreignness. Chinese food in the early-twentieth century managed to be common and exotic at the same time. The very same audiences which viewed Chinese food as exotic and inscrutable, also wanted to genuinely know how to cook it.

Chinese food interested non-Chinese Californians, not only as a novel cuisine to eat on rare occasions, but also as a viable form of home cooking. Their genuine interest in Chinese cooking reflected its place as an appreciated cuisine in their communities. Notably, the authors of the recipes that transmitted Chinese food knowledge to home cooks across rural and urban California were nearly entirely white. As such the dominant culture played an outsized role in mediating ethnic food knowledge to itself. Nonetheless, the existence of Chinese food recipes targeting non-Chinese people presupposed a preexisting interest in Chinese food. In other words,

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<sup>156</sup> “Union’s Cooking Class,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, February 2, 1915.

<sup>157</sup> “How to Make Chop Suey,” *Blue Lake Advocate*, February 5, 1910.

<sup>158</sup> “Chop Suey,” *Blue Lake Advocate*, March 3, 1906.

the work of Chinese chefs in conjunction with their non-Chinese consumers, especially women, drove the adoption of Chinese cooking into the non-Chinese home. Rather than the dominant culture solely being the gatekeeper of Chinese food knowledge, Chinese chef's played a major role in simply getting others interested in their food by virtue of it tasting good.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Chinese Americans as Community Members**

In my final chapter I look at how rural Chinese restaurateurs leveraged their businesses to become valuable members of their communities. Furthermore, the towns they lived in often recognized their contributions. I argue that rural Chinese Americans became active participants in their communities' civic and political issues.

#### **4.1 Chinese Americans as Community Members**

Chinese immigrants did not just live in siloed ethnic enclaves. They engaged culturally, socially, and civically with their neighbors. As such, Chinese Americans in California during the early-twentieth century integrated with their surrounding communities, building ties with them on multiple levels. Chinese businesses, including restaurants, which catered to non-Chinese clients played an important role in fostering interactions with Chinese and non-Chinese Americans. Whether it be prominent Chinese American restaurateurs, such as Jim Peters, or other Chinese businessmen, Chinese Americans outside of the metropole leveraged their businesses to connect with their non-Chinese customers. Early-twentieth century rural Chinese Americans were not just silent parts of their communities. Similarly, the rural towns that they lived in at times recognized their cultural and civil importance to the area. Rural Chinese Americans participated and engaged in social, political, and civic activism and efforts, demonstrating their agency and willingness to be active members of their communities.

Chinese residents of rural towns ingrained themselves into the communities that they lived in, maintaining their cultural heritage while interacting with those outside of their ethnic enclaves. For instance, the rural mining town of Marysville made special provisions during the early-twentieth century to allow its local Chinese residents to celebrate the lunar new year by

setting off fireworks. Furthermore, the town declared that “all persons visiting Chinatown during Chinese New Year are hereby notified not to interfere in any manner with their celebration.”<sup>159</sup>

Marysville Chinese community celebrated aspects of their Chinese cultural heritage and had the protection of the town to do so. Not only did they run and operate businesses that catered to their non-Chinese neighbors, but in return said neighbors offered them a basic level of respect to conduct their holidays the way they saw fit.

Not only did Marysville allow its Chinese neighbors to celebrate their traditions in the early-twentieth century, but the town as a whole recognized its Chinese community as an integral part of its history. In 1921, Arthur Gorwood, president of the local Chamber of Commerce and prominent local car dealership owner, announced that he “will again make a plea to the city council to allow the Oriental residents of the quarter to erect suitably decorated porches in the quarter and has talked with several Chinese merchants who are willing to go to the expense.”<sup>160</sup> Gorwood later stated “that the local quarter should be preserved, not only for the unique features, but from an historical standpoint, as many of the buildings in the quarter are relics of pioneer times.”<sup>161</sup> Recognizing Marysville’s historic Chinatown as a valuable local site, and by extension recognizing the importance of the local Chinese community, Gorwood worked with Chinese merchants to preserve it. Both Chinese and non-Chinese Americans worked together to preserve their shared history.

Through their interactions with their neighbors as restaurant workers and owners, Chinese Americans participated in their communities’ politics and civic issues. In addition to

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<sup>159</sup> “Lots of Noise,” *Marysville Daily Appeal*, January 24, 1906.

<sup>160</sup> “Preservation of Chinese Quarter Urges Gorwood,” *Marysville Daily Appeal*; “Gorwood Now Has Maxwell Car Agency,” *Marysville Daily Appeal*, January 11, 1920; “Mayor Tom Mathews and Carol Frohman Are New C.C. Directors,” *Marysville Daily Appeal*, January 7, 1921.

<sup>161</sup> “Preservation of Chinese Quarter Urges Gorwood,” *Marysville Daily Appeal*.

being recognized as part of their local communities' cultural makeup and heritage, they actively shaped the pressing issues of their communities. For instance, during World War I San Bernardino county launched a war savings and thrift stamp campaign to help with the war efforts.<sup>162</sup> Returning from his tour across much of America's "desert country", county campaign chairman James Russell claimed that "at every hand were people anxious to do their bit to help the nation. Even Chinese American restaurant keepers joined in the campaign."<sup>163</sup> Russell quoted said restaurant keepers as saying "Help Uncle Sam, take 'em stamps!"<sup>164</sup> Rural Chinese American restaurateurs across San Bernardino county, and extending into the greater American southwest, actively participated in civic campaigns. Their level of participation in American war efforts, and their recognition for doing so, demonstrates their involvement in American society as a whole. In direct contrast with stereotypes of being the perpetual foreigner, Chinese Americans actively participated in patriotic war efforts and non-Chinese Americans applauded and recognized them for doing so.

In addition to participating in broad country spanning efforts, Chinese Americans also participated in local discourse. For instance, in 1908 the *San Bernardino Sun* reported that during a strike "Chinese restaurant proprietors... refused to serve [railroad strike breakers from Santa Fe]."<sup>165</sup> As such, Chinese restaurateurs participated in local activist movements. Standing in solidarity with their neighbors, they took meaningful action using the tools at their disposal. Their ownership of restaurants directly gave them the ability to demonstrate their support for the strike in an actionable and impactful manner.

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<sup>162</sup> "County Is Leader in the Sale War Savings and Thrift Stamps," *San Bernardino Sun*, February 5, 1918.

<sup>163</sup> "Russell Is Back from Stamp Journey," *San Bernardino Sun*, January 27, 1918;  
"Heads of Stamp Will Meet Today," *San Bernardino Sun*, January 3, 1918.

<sup>164</sup> "Russell Is Back from Stamp Journey," *San Bernardino Sun*.

<sup>165</sup> "Wreckers at Work," *San Bernardino Sun*, August 14, 1908.

Chinese Americans also participated in local civil and political issues on a more micro level during the early-twentieth century. In 1917, the *San Bernardino Sun* reported that “Wong Yee, well known Chinese restaurant man, was the first Chinaman, so far as can be ascertained, ever to sit on a jury in San Bernardino county.”<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, the paper reported that Yee “Understands Actions Court Perfectly.”<sup>167</sup> Although Chinese Americans may not have sat on court juries before Yee in San Bernardino county, Yee did so with relative distinction. Not only did Yee serve the court well, but he first gained recognition as a Chinese restaurateur. The ability of Chinese Americans, and in particular restaurateurs, to participate in their communities’ justice system reflected their high level of participation in said communities and willingness to interact beyond ethnic enclaves.

Whether it be through interacting with a large number of customers as proprietors and chefs, or due to the financial success that some restaurateurs had, restaurants became an avenue through which Chinese Americans could become prominent members of their communities. For instance, in 1923 the locally well known Chinese businessman Jim Peters bought and revamped the Paris Cafe. The *Calexico Chronicle* reported that “two hundred invited guests from Calexico enjoyed the hospitality of W. J. (Jim) Peters... [who] has provided the new cafe especially for local and visiting parties who desire real Chinese dishes, and the place is to cater to the better class of American trade.”<sup>168</sup> The very next day, Peters hosted “prominent members of the journalistic and cinema colonies in Los Angeles” whose numbers included a senator and multiple movie stars.<sup>169</sup> Targeting specifically at an American audience who wanted to taste “real”

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<sup>166</sup> “Wong Yee First Chinese to Be Juror,” *San Bernardino Sun*, December 15, 1917.

<sup>167</sup> “Wong Yee First Chinese to Be Juror,” *San Bernardino Sun*.

<sup>168</sup> “Jim Peters Host To Two Hundred Calexico Guests,” *Calexico Chronicle*, November 5, 1923.

<sup>169</sup> “Los Angeles Party To Help Celebrate Paris Cafe Opening,” *Calexico Chronicle*, November 1, 1923.

Chinese food, under Peter's management and even more so than ever, the Paris Cafe served as a mini contact zone along the American Mexican border.

Through his various business ventures, including the new Paris Cafe, Peters became a well known figure in his community. Despite not being an American citizen, and living on the Mexican side of the border, the local newspaper still held him up to be an exemplary American. For instance, when approached about buying war bonds for World War I the *Calexico Chronicle* wrote that "[h]e is barred from the U. S., but he acts like a good American citizen and when approached by the solicitor he never hesitated a minute, but bought \$5,000 worth."<sup>170</sup> The *Chronicle* also dedicated an article to him for the birth of two of his children, noting his importance to the area in both of them.<sup>171</sup> The prominence that Peters gained through his restaurant translated into respect. Despite relatively recent anti-Chinese and immigrant sentiments, and despite not even being an American citizen, the *Chronicle* consistently still held Peters up as an exemplary American.

Even less affluent Chinese Americans became well known through their work in restaurants. Although often overlooked, the cooks behind Chinese American restaurants became well known figures in their communities. For example, in Jackson City "Chinese Jim" became, according to the local paper, a "well known" cook at the Olympus Cafe.<sup>172</sup> He also worked at the Globe Hotel, a reputable hotel that primarily catered to Jackson City's white residents, where he became the "luckiest Mongolian whereabouts" after winning a Mexican lottery.<sup>173</sup> Although

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<sup>170</sup> "One Big Bond Sale Monday Helped Situation but Town Is Still Behind Needs," *Calexico Chronicle*, May 6, 1919.

<sup>171</sup> "Jim Peters Smiles When Stork Leaves Daughter," *Calexico Chronicle*, February 3, 1921;  
"New Chinees Boy Has Irish Name," *Calexico Chronicle*, September 26, 1922.

<sup>172</sup> "Chinese Cook Dies," *Amador Ledger-Dispatch*, July 8, 1910.

<sup>173</sup> "Lucky Chinaman," *Amador Ledger-Dispatch*, December 7, 1906;  
"Marriage," *Amador Ledger-Dispatch*, September 4, 1896.

undoubtedly racialized, being called “Chinese Jim” and a “lucky Mongol”, the broader Jackson City community nevertheless came to know him. Thus, through working in both primarily white institutions, such as the Globe Hotel, and Chinese American restaurants, such as Olympus Cafe, Jim gained personal exposure to the rest of Jackson City.

While Chinese Americans in rural California did often get along with their neighbors and engage in shared cultural, political, and civil efforts, their neighbors certainly did not completely understand or embrace them. For example, the *Calexico Chronicle* reported in 1914 that “Chinese Music is Not Appreciated in This Country.”<sup>174</sup> The Chronicle recounted that “[d]uring the early part of Wednesday evening, Calexico was accorded a good-sized portion of Chinese melody [coming from a Chinese restaurant]. It was music but unless one spoke Chinese the harmony was lost.”<sup>175</sup> In addition to general and pervasive racism, Chinese culture still existed outside of the mainstream. Nonetheless, non-Chinese Americans increasingly ate their food and engaged with their culture, and rural Chinese Americans actively participated in their communities.

Early-twentieth century rural Chinese Americans were not silent minorities. They were valuable and outspoken members of their communities, and their neighbors often recognized them for being so. While they undeniably continued to face alienation, said racism occurred concurrently with their efforts to be active participants in their towns. The towns they lived in simultaneously accepted and alienated them. As such, they occupied a tenuous position in rural California. Nonetheless, they actively engaged with and participated in local and national political, civic, and cultural issues and subsequently built bridges between themselves and their neighbors.

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<sup>174</sup> “Chinese Music Is Not Appreciated in This Country,” *Calexico Chronicle*, August 4, 1914.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

Through writing my thesis, I hope to have shined light on the stories of Chinese American restaurateurs, restaurants, and food in early-twentieth California. In particular, I aim to place greater emphasis on the state's rural Chinese American communities. Although not entirely accepted by their peers, Chinese American restaurants and food became valuable methods for Chinese immigrants to assert their Chinese and American identity.

There are several limitations in my thesis worth mentioning. First, given my use of archival newspapers as my primary sources, my source material biases towards white and non-Chinese voices. Additionally, I chose to organize my thesis around themes as opposed to geographic regions. As such, additional analysis of rural California Chinese restaurants focused on specific geographic regions may reveal novel conclusions. However, I believe that I have mitigated the above limitations.

In regards to the bias towards white voices in early-twentieth newspapers, I believe by recognizing their bias I enhanced my arguments surrounding the exoticization of and racism towards Chinese Americans. The stereotypes portrayed by many newspapers of the time exemplified the feelings of their predominantly white readership. Furthermore, my inclusion of Chinese voices who utilized white institutions, such as newspapers, to communicate with their neighbors demonstrated the willingness and ability of Chinese Americans to reach out beyond their ethnic communities. Thus, by reading between the lines, the limitations posed by focusing on mainstream newspapers reveal the contemporary challenges and considerations that Chinese Americans faced and made. Nonetheless, further research focused on Chinese American voices

from Chinese American sources would likely be beneficial in further centering Chinese American stories.

Furthermore, I believe that organizing my thesis around themes posed an effective alternative to organizing it around geographic regions. In my thesis I looked at rural and urban communities spread across California. Organizing my thesis by town location (e.g. Central Valley vs. Sierra Nevadas) might reveal differences in how Chinese American restaurants and food functioned in California's sub regions. However, doing so runs the risk of obscuring broader trends and themes true across all of California. Given the fairly even distribution of regions across my thematic subchapters, I believe that inter-regional differences were likely secondary to statewide complexities in the identity of Chinese Americans.

The results of my thesis have several implications for future research. I believe that further research into and analysis of three areas would be beneficial for the study of Chinese American food and immigration: rural Chinese American restaurants in the late 19th century, rural Chinese American restaurants in the post World War II era, and the relationship between Chinese Americans and other minority or recent immigrant American groups.

Chinese Americans began transitioning out of their initial gold mining and railroad construction jobs into other industries around the late nineteenth century. Given its role as a transition period between the initial wave of Chinese American immigration in the mid-eighteenth century and their place in early-twentieth century California which I examined in my thesis, studying said time period would add additional context to the history of rural Chinese Californians. Similar food study analyses which I used for my thesis would likely apply to a study of the mid-eighteenth century. Furthermore, archival newspapers would also similarly prove useful in researching the earlier time period.



As a second recommendation, studying rural Chinese American restaurants in the post World War II era would capture any shifts in opinions of Chinese Americans from the tens of thousands of soldiers returning from the Pacific Asian Theater. Given that traveling to China influenced non-Chinese American opinions on Chinese food, the mass movement of Americans around the Pacific Rim likely impacted the ways in which they viewed Asian Americans and Asian food. In addition to exploring the same themes that I did in my thesis, an additional framework concerning the reversal of who was considered a foreigner (given that American soldiers went to the Pacific Rim rather than the reverse) should be included.

Finally, I believe that further research into interactions between Chinese Americans and other minority and recent immigrants would add further nuance to understanding their place in America. In my thesis I largely juxtapose white Californians and Chinese Californians. Although I do include other minority and recent immigrant groups, future research could place a larger emphasis on them. Specifically, three areas could be explored: the prevalence of Mexican immigrants and culture in southern California, Black Californians, and recent immigrants from Europe. Chinese Americans interacted with all three groups, and each one adds another dimension to the American (white and native born) vs. foreign (Chinese) axis that my thesis uses.

Throughout my thesis, I argue that Chinese American restaurants acted as a contact zone between Chinese and non-Chinese Americans in early-twentieth century rural California. Furthermore, Chinese American food served a similar, albeit non-physical, role. It too helped facilitate interactions between Chinese and non-Chinese Americans, assimilating both into each others' culture. Food, and the institutions that served it, therefore played an integral role in creating the Chinese American identity. The two lowered barriers, encouraged disparate groups

to learn about one another, and gave Chinese Americans an avenue to shape their interaction with their non-Chinese neighbors. As such, Chinese American restaurants and food shaped and reflected the Chinese American identity, being a synthesization and recognition of the immigrants' old and new homes.

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