

2 | Chinese Take-Out

On a hot, sultry day in the summer of 2011, an irate woman in Savannah, Georgia, called 9-1-1. An audio recording revealed the nature of the emergency: “I need the police. It’s this Hong Kong restaurant type to go. I ordered food and they done bring me the wrong food. I done brought it outside and they ain’t going to give me my money and I need my money. Uh-uh, I need to [*sic*] someone to handle this. They ain’t going to do me in any kind of way.”¹ Instead of charging the woman with abusing the 9-1-1 service, as they could have, the police instead let her off with a reprimand and a valuable lesson: a mix-up with the order at a Chinese take-out does not an emergency make.

This incident serves as an ideal backstory to an uncontested gastro-nomic fact: Chinese restaurants in the United States are beset by a culture of complaint. This appears to neither bear out nor belie the fact that Chinese is without question one of the most popular cuisines in America. Other cuisines prevail, of course, when considered regionally: Creole and Cajun in New Orleans, Mexican-inspired (such as Tex-Mex) throughout the West, and barbeque in the South and Midwest—each rules its respective geographic roost. But when viewed from a nationwide perch, Chinese easily ranks above Thai, Japanese, Middle Eastern, Greek, Indian, and virtually all other so-called ethnic foods, with the notable exception of Italian, the cuisine that gave pizza and spaghetti to the world.

As the artist Indigo Som contends, “Chinese restaurants are so ubiquitous throughout the United States that they constitute an integral part of American life.” She reminds us that while Chinese restaurants are the primary point of contact with all things Chinese for most non-Chinese Americans, “this potent influence remains generally unacknowledged,

even invisible.” Through a composite of photography, instillations, and words, Som asks why, “despite its position as a fixture in the American foodscape,” Chinese food “remains an exoticized outsider to the usual consideration of ‘American’ culture and identity.”² In what she calls the Chinese Restaurant Project, Som embarks on road trips to areas of the country where, despite the absence of discernable Chinese American populations, Chinese restaurants are nonetheless omnipresent, a phenomenon that hints at the commonness of Chinese food in, for example, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Yazoo City, Mississippi.

Equipped with a twenty-dollar Holga camera, a Chinese product renowned for a design flaw that produces distorted images, including vignetting (the softening or shadowing of the edges of a photograph), Som photographs a series of random Chinese restaurant exteriors whose motley designs range from an imitation of a lavish imperial Chinese palace to a tumbledown building that once perhaps housed a Taco Bell.³ No matter the location or appearance captured, these photographs reaffirm the quintessential American character of Chinese restaurants, placing them on par with, and in the company of, burger joints, coffee shops, barbecue shacks, and other definitively American—to borrow a phrase from the Food Network’s Guy Fieri—diners, drive-ins, and dives.

Most foods synonymous with American gastronomy have thoroughly shed their Old World origins. Hamburgers, French fries, pizzas, pretzels, hot dogs, macaroni and cheese, and apple pie, for instance, are such fixtures at the nation’s lunch counters that they appear natural, indigenous, routine, and incontestable. Trace the mythical roots of a typical pizza pie and we are as likely to end up at Gennaro Lombardi’s grocery store in turn-of-the-twentieth-century New York City, Papa’s Tomato Pies in 1920s Trenton, Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana in 1920s New Haven (where the dish goes by the name “apizza,” pronounced *ah-BEETZ*), or even Pizzeria Uno in 1940s Chicago, as we are in tenth-century Naples. Follow the hot dog back to the dawn of its creation and we are as liable to see the handiwork of Charles Feltman, a German American butcher in 1860s Coney Island, or Antonoine Feuchtwanger, a German American sausage vendor in 1870s St. Louis, as we are any eighteenth-century *brühwurst* maker in Frankfurt.⁴ In contrast, foods identified as specifically Chinese—say, chow mein, chop suey, or wonton soup—retain an aura of perpetual foreignness despite a lengthy presence in the United States that dates back to the nineteenth century. Or, to be more precise, Chinese



Chinese Restaurant Project, South China, Natchez, Mississippi (2004–2005). Photo by Indigo Som. Courtesy of Indigo Som.



Chinese Restaurant Project, China Garden, Yazoo City, Mississippi (2004–2005). Photo by Indigo Som. Courtesy of Indigo Som.

food is treated as an alien presence in America despite a lengthy American provenance.

Records indicate that Norman Asing, aka San Yuen, who wrote a letter in 1852 challenging California governor John Bigler's call to deny Asian immigrants full legal rights, opened a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco perhaps as early as 1850, which would have made Asing's eatery one among at least five that were concurrently open for business.⁵ New York City's Chinatown had by the 1870s already become known to outsiders for its restaurants. By 1903 there were four on Mott Street alone and one each on Doyers Street and Pell Street. Among the more notable of these was the Chinese Tuxedo Restaurant, located on 2 Doyers Street on the corner of the Bowery, which featured a richly decorated exterior façade of a large wooden carved dragon and dining rooms with pressed-tin ceilings and mosaic tile floors. First opened in 1897, the Tuxedo, like its nearby competitors, which included Chinese Delmonico on Pell Street and Port Arthur Restaurant on Mott Street, catered to "high-class" clientele and to both Chinese and white Americans alike.⁶

As Robert G. Lee reminds us in *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, the words "foreign" and "alien," while often used interchangeably, convey different connotations. "Foreign," he explains, "refers to that which is outside or distant, while 'alien' describes things that are immediate and present yet have a foreign nature or allegiance." While the foreign is a temporary condition (like, say, the tourist) the alien is a permanent pollutant, a defiler of neat categories that separate "us" (i.e., real Americans) from "them" (i.e., immigrants). The alien, Lee posits, is "always out of place, therefore disturbing and dangerous."⁷ Chinese food is an alien American cuisine. As such, Chinese restaurants go hand in hand with culinary ambivalence, as Americans flock to them en masse to consume simultaneously the foreign and familiar alongside a serving of sweet and sour.

Samantha Barbas, author of "'I'll take Chop Suey': Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Exchange," cautions that the popularity of Chinese food in the United States does not necessarily "correlate with racial and social attitudes." She argues that the corporeal—as opposed to strictly culinary—presence of Chinese Americans continues to stir deeply held racial anxieties but "may seem far less threatening to dominant social groups when placed in context of food and dining."⁸ As Frank Wu puts it in *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White*, "Eating at a Chinese restaurant is not the same as 'breaking bread' with Chinese people."⁹ In

other words, it is one thing to relish Chinese food but altogether another to tolerate Chinese people.

Culture of Complaint

In Warren Zevon's 1978 song "Werewolves of London," a werewolf is spotted with a "Chinese menu in his hand, walking through the streets of Soho in the rain." We are told that he was "looking for a place called Lee Ho Fooks" in order to "get a big dish of beef chow mein." This satirical song aptly illustrates how Zevon, an American rock singer, imagines Chinese food to play an ordinary part of daily life in the United Kingdom. Of course, in reality, Chinese food is even more quotidian in the United States. Recent estimates indicate that there is a Chinese restaurant for every ninety-three square miles, or seventy-five hundred people, in the country. Numbering more than forty thousand, Chinese restaurants exceed the total number of—and no doubt deliver more calories than—McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's franchises combined.¹⁰ This ubiquity, however, is not without detractors and gadflies who recognize not only a dependable meal in Chinese restaurants but also danger, fear, and loathing. While criticizing some aspects of the restaurant experience (the décor, service, food quality, price, etc.) may be as much a consumer's inalienable right as complimentary tap water, complaints brought on by visits to Chinese eateries are especially shrill, at least compared to other ethnic eateries such as Italian, Thai, Japanese, or French. Indeed, one wonders whether there is a "kick me" sign taped to the back of all Chinese restaurants, the Rodney Dangerfield of American gastronomy. Chinese food, at least in the United States, gets no respect.

The pervasiveness of the grievances is strongly suggested by the number of urban legends that lampoons the perils of eating out—and taking out—Chinese. Urban folklorists have found Chinese restaurants a subject substantial enough to merit several separate categories, placing them alongside such classic food fables as the "Kentucky Fried Rat" and "Mouse in the Coke." Jan Harold Brunvand, author of several books on urban legends, posits that conspiratorial stories about the remains of pets, pests, and even human bodies unexpectedly appearing in Chinese food rank as among "the most venerable categories of food-contamination legends." One such legend tells of a severed finger found in a dish of chop suey,

which is traced to a Chinese leper who loses one digit after another over the course of his career as a cook. Another popular story has a scientist of some sort, after finding a mysterious, stringy piece of meat in his kung pao chicken, discreetly taking it back to his lab to discover the remnants of a dog, cat, or rat. A frequent reputed whistleblower of Chinese restaurant shenanigans is the government health inspector who turns up unannounced to find pelts, bones, and severed heads of cats or dogs in kitchen refrigerators or garbage bins.¹¹

The radio personality and song parodist Bob Rivers capitalized on this legacy of culinary Sinophobia with a song titled “Cats in the Kettle,” sung to the tune of Harry Chapin’s “Cat’s in the Cradle.”¹² The parody begins,

Did you ever think when you eat Chinese
It ain’t pork or chicken but a fat Siamese
Yet the food tastes great so you don’t complain
But that’s not chicken in your chicken chow mein
Seems to me I ordered sweet and sour pork
But Garfield’s on my fork
He’s purring here on my fork

The song, for which no less than thirty-five different homemade video accompaniments can be viewed on YouTube, concludes,

There’s a cat in the kettle at the Peking Moon
I think I gotta stop eating there at noon
They say that it’s beef or fish or pork
But it’s purring there on my fork
There’s a hair-ball on my fork.

More widespread and recurrent than legends about catflesh, however, are rumors of dogmeat served in Chinese restaurants. Indeed, the specter of not just Chinese but a general Asian proclivity for dogmeat looms large enough to reach far beyond the arena of ethnic eateries to the backyards of average Americans. A typical urban legend features a mystery of someone’s missing pug and the suspicious behavior of an immigrant family—typically Korean or Vietnamese—that recently moved to the neighborhood.

These “mystery meat” stories constitute just the tip of the urban legend iceberg. Rumors of the unsanitary practices of Chinese restaurant workers, identified as outlandish aliens, are commonplace in all regions of the

United States. Often scatological in nature, these rumors typically concern sickened diners who take leftovers to health officials only to discover to their horror some sort of bodily discharge—saliva, urine, or semen—mixed with the beef and broccoli. American diners have long joked that no matter how much you eat, Chinese food leaves you hungry an hour later. A 1991 episode of *Seinfeld* about an endless wait for a table due to the inscrutability of a Chinese restaurant maître d' and a 2000 episode of *Sex in the City* about a phone mishap while ordering Chinese take-out are considered television classics.

In 1995 the American pop group Lyte Funky Ones (aka LFO) released a song called “Summer Girls” that included the line, “Chinese food makes me sick.” The song was a huge hit. A decade later, in a nationally televised commercial, a portly man standing over an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet drops a utensil and appears to suffer a heart attack. To his relief, it is only heartburn, which is quickly quelled by a new antacid his nephew offers him. In recent years health- and consumer-advocacy groups have dubbed Chinese restaurants a nutritionist’s nightmare. Accused of peddling products that contain dangerous levels of sodium, fat, and sugar in popular dishes such as General Tso’s chicken and orange-flavored beef, Chinese restaurants are now grouped with fast food chains, carbonated soft drinks, processed foods, and sedentary lifestyles as leading causes behind the nation’s reputation as the most overfed but undernourished population on the planet.

In New York City diners lament that dishes sold at countless Chinese take-outs scattered throughout the five boroughs are too uncannily similar for it to be a mere coincidence. A well-circulated joke conjectures that a single centralized source, a gargantuan factory in a secret underground location, mass produces and distributes the same batch of food to every Chinese restaurant in the country via an elaborate subterranean plumbing matrix. Also, a legion of apartment dwellers complains of the unregulated proliferation of take-out menus, likening them to lethal banana peels strewn across hallways and stairways by a horde of Chinese-food deliverymen leaving a trail of leaflets in their wake. As a result, a common fixture in the entranceway to many apartment buildings is a “No Menus” sign—in English and often Chinese—specifically directed at Chinese-food deliverymen.

And there is, of course, the pinnacle of complaints, the granddaddy of them all, the inscrutable malady whose moniker, “Chinese restaurant syndrome,” brazenly identifies not the alleged poison but the poisoner. Despite



"No Menu" (2012), a photographic collage of signs posted in apartment building entrances in New York City, by Cynthia Ai-fen Lee. Courtesy of Cynthia Ai-fen Lee.

the absence of conclusive medical evidence that identifies monosodium glutamate (MSG) as the root cause, several generations of Americans since the late 1960s have complained of bodily ailments—most notably headaches—stemming from consuming what they believe to be MSG-laden Chinese food. Exasperated by what he sees as a collective irrational fear of MSG among Americans, an irked Jeffrey Steingarten once characterized those who claim to get sick from MSG as "psychologically troubled" people who "see things that don't exist." You are an "MSG crybaby," accuses Steingarten in an essay titled "Why Doesn't Everybody in China Have a Headache?"¹³

The culture of complaint that tails Chinese restaurants is not limited to the bounds of the dinner plate or the take-out container, but spills over to the larger entrepreneurial aspect of the Chinese restaurant business itself. Accusations of corrupt or illegal business dealings have joined the litany of consumerist quibbles, as Chinese restaurateurs, whether deservedly or not, have increasingly become targets of legal and political rebukes, reprimands, and punishments. A close scrutiny of these complaints and their fallout indicates that consumerist objection to Chinese restaurants is often not a matter of food per se but of the nation's collective uneasy feeling about the perceived foreignness or alienness of the people who are in the business of selling it. In sum, the culture of complaint that

hounds the Chinese restaurant in the United States is the gastronomic reification of anti-Chinese sentiments that began during the days of the Gold Rush a century and a half ago and persisted throughout the twentieth century. The message behind this sentiment is still palpable: Chinese Americans, along with their cultural trappings, including food, are alien to the United States, which makes them at best dubiously American. Serving as instructive cases in point are recent newspaper items of the pillorying of two Chinese restaurants in New York City prompted by disgruntled customers and backed by locally elected officials.

Case Number One

It is spring 2007. As reported by Manny Fernandez in a May 4, 2007, *New York Times* article, “When Pennies Fail to Pay the Bill, a Bronx Man Pushes for Change,” a man named Wayne Jones orders four pieces of fried chicken wings at a neighborhood Chinese take-out and proceeds to pay with exact change, which includes ten pennies. The cashier, a Chinese woman named Juan Lin who speaks very little English, refuses to accept the pennies and a quarrel ensues. Outraged, Jones returns home and e-mails several elected officials with details of the incident, arguing that the restaurant’s rejection of pennies discriminates against the poor and the homeless. Soon, a swarm of protestors, reporters, and the simply curious descends upon the humble take-out, the Great Wall Restaurant in the Soundview neighborhood of the Bronx. The aggrieved patron stands among the gathering crowd, which includes several Christian ministers and a state senator, Rubén Díaz Sr., who promises to take up the issue in Albany. One of the ministers demands that the city shut down the business. When questioned by a journalist, Lin denies the charge and breaks down in tears. A good while later, after the crowd has dispersed, Jones, now feeling vindicated, shakes hands with the humiliated Lin, who, perhaps not knowing what else to do, apologizes to him. Jones then orders four pieces of fried chicken wings and pays with exact change, which includes ten pennies.¹⁴

This news item, carefully crafted as a self-contained narrative in the morning paper, appears wondrously pithy and perfect, like a Baudelaire prose poem, Kawabata Palm-of-the-Hand story, or O. Henry tale. It is symmetrically equipped with a narrative arc that contains a beginning,

middle, and end. With newsprint in hand, an entire saga comes full circle in less time than it takes to travel a single subway stop during the morning commute. Serving as a modern-day parable or object lesson, this sort of news tidbit invites readers to tease out for themselves the moral—as in the “moral of the story”—embedded in a random, offbeat incident snapped up from real life. Complete and tidy as they may appear, it is also true that social conflicts rendered in such abbreviated fashion are merely the left-over remains of fuller, more nuanced affairs, picked clean by the distorting powers of tabloid journalism.

Within this convention there is little if any need to offer up a more substantive dish garnished with extraneous narrative complexities, which, truth be told, only gets in the way of the winsome morality tale. This is especially true in cases involving conflicts that can easily be defined as oppositional. It is an added bonus if the conflict can be structurally characterized as one that pits a member of an “in-group” against a member of an “out-group.” The newspaper coverage makes little or no attempt at neutrality, as the narrative willfully hinges on the perspective of the crusading “American” customer rather than that of the “alien” Chinese merchant, who is cast as the unscrupulous profiteer, a modern-day version of a Chinese Shylock.

An observation made by Toni Morrison in her essay on the literary imagination of whiteness and the Africanist presence in American literature helps to elucidate an important point. “For reasons that should not need explanation here,” she writes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, “until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white.”¹⁵ In placing such luminaries as Cather, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Hemingway, and Twain under her critical microscope, Morrison leads us to a not altogether unexpected verdict: “Deep within the word ‘American’ is its association with race.” Specifically, “American means white.” This, however, is not to say that there is an absence of nonwhites in American literature. On the contrary, dark figures (e.g., African Americans) abound. Morrison believes the Africanist presence in American literature informs in “compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature.”¹⁶

In a potent demonstration of her thesis in play, Morrison interrogates a single sentence in Ernest Hemingway’s 1937 novel, *To Have and Have Not*. While the novel is told through a voice that alternates from that of the

main character, Harry Morgan (a fishing boat captain and smuggler of contraband goods in the Caribbean), to a third-person point of view (presumably Hemingway's), the sentence in question occurs through the former. Among Morgan's crew is a black man who remains nameless for four chapters and is referred to most commonly as "nigger." Early in the novel, while Morgan tends to a customer who has hired his boat out for recreational fishing, the black man is the first to see promising signs of good water ahead while tending the wheel. Through Morgan's voice, Hemingway pens an ungainly sentence: "The nigger was still taking her [the boat] out and I looked and saw he had seen a patch of flying fish burst out ahead."¹⁷

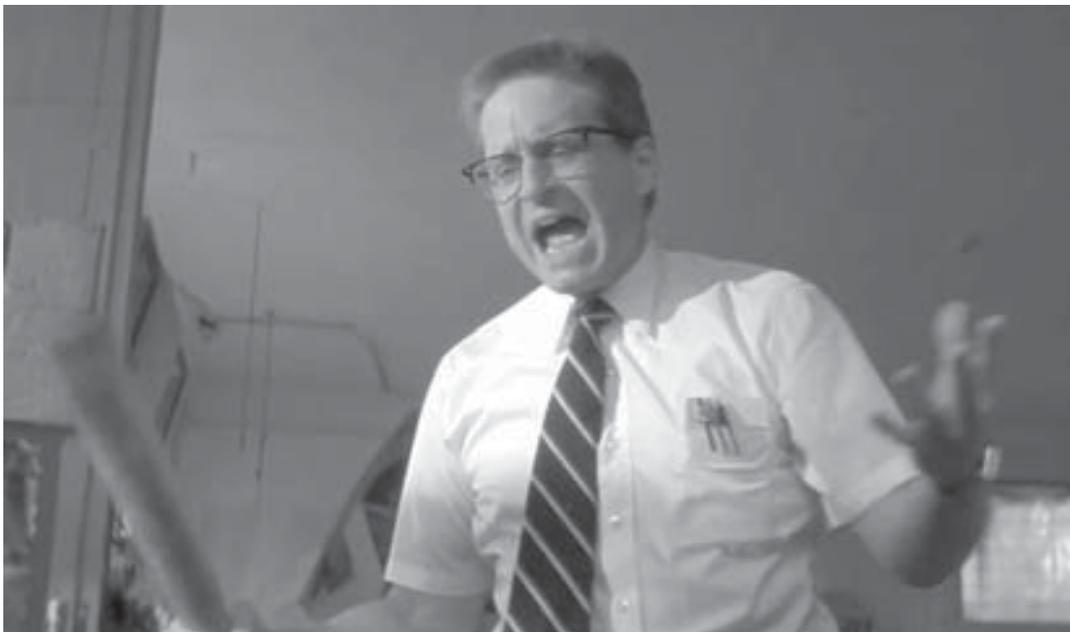
The specific fragment of the sentence Morrison underscores is "saw he had seen," which, for her, is "improbable in syntax, sense, and tense but, like other choices available to Hemingway, it is risked to avoid a speaking black." How does a writer, after all, "say how one sees that someone else has already seen"? Morrison contends that the awkward locution preserves the black character's "nameless, sexless, nationless Africanist presence" that Hemingway presupposes. Usually praised for his terse if not flawless prose, Hemingway in this instance opts for inelegance of diction over allowing the black man "a verbal initiative of importance." But why? "What would have been the cost," Morrison wonders, "of humanizing, genderizing, this character"?¹⁸ Likewise, we might wonder what it would have cost—or have been lost—to give the cashier of the Chinese take-out *her* verbal initiative of importance in the newspaper coverage. What is the price of humanizing and genderizing this character? Can it be said of American newspaper readers what Morrison says of readers of American fiction, that they are virtually always positioned as white?

In the annals of the nation's cultural self-portraiture, the figure of the crusading-white-citizen-consumer is as emblematic of what is traditionally construed as the quintessential American character as any other possible sequence of descriptors. Consequently, the opposite, or the quintessential *non*-American, is construed as an infidel-nonwhite-immigrant-merchant—such as a Korean grocer, Pakistani cab driver, Vietnamese manicurist, or Chinese restaurateur. This notion is aptly illustrated in Joel Schumacher's 1993 film *Falling Down*, in which the lead character, a white male played by Michael Douglas, indignantly asserts his rights as an American and a consumer before taking a baseball bat to a convenience store run by a pidgin-speaking Korean merchant. As the Douglas character demolishes

the store, the immigrant merchant is seen cowering in fear. The film makes it clear that the Korean, due to his surly treatment of customers, got what was coming to him. The film invites the audience—positioned as white—to empathize with the anger and resentment experienced by Douglas’ character, a white American Everyman and wronged consumer, and not with the fear, shock, and awe experienced by the Korean merchant played by the third-generation Chinese American actor Michael Paul Chan.

Perhaps Morrison is onto something when she asserts that in American literature the word “American” always equates to someone who is white. But if we expand the discursive arena further to include, say, the news account of the beleaguered Chinese take-out, then her assertion falls short in a particularly crucial way. Yes, the word “American” first and foremost means white. But when the nonwhite presence of a story, instead of being solely Africanist, also happens to be Asianist, that is to say, someone Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Pakistani, etc., then American can also mean black.

As Asian American scholars and activists have repeatedly pointed out, Asians in the United States, regardless of their citizenship or immigration



An enraged William Foster (Michael Douglas) berates a terrified Korean merchant curled in a fetal position on the store floor. Convinced he was overcharged for a can of soda, Foster goes on to demolish parts of the store with a baseball bat. Frame enlargement from *Falling Down* (1993).

status, are habitually regarded as perpetual foreigners. This tendency was displayed during the 1998 Winter Olympic Games, when Tara Lipinski, a white American, edged out Michelle Kwan for the gold medal in figure skating. Immediately after the Chinese American Kwan was awarded the silver metal, the headline “American beats out Kwan” appeared on the MSNBC website. The Asian-American-as-perpetually-foreign perception was also evident during the 2011–2012 National Basketball Association season, when a surprising breakout performance by the American-born Jeremy Lin forced many in the mainstream media to reassess the differences between what it means to be a Chinese American (à la Jeremy Lin) versus a Chinese national (à la Yao Ming).

Paying the biggest price of all for being perceived as a foreigner was the Chinese American Vincent Chin, who died on June 23, 1982, from a brutal beating he received on the night of his own bachelor party. Two white men, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, blamed Chin for the decline of the US auto industry due to the rise of Japanese imports. “It’s because of you little motherfuckers that we’re out of work,” Ebens reportedly shouted during a verbal argument that eventually escalated into physical violence, culminating in Chin’s skull being cracked open by a baseball bat repeatedly swung by Ebens. Charged with second-degree murder, Ebens and Nitz pleaded guilty to manslaughter. If the crime was not shocking enough, the sentence the two men received was truly outrageous: three years of probation and a fine of three thousand dollars. The men never served a day in jail. The case would become a rallying cry for widespread Asian American protests across the nation.¹⁹

Five years after the deadly incident, the filmmaker Michael Moore interviewed Ebens for an article published in the *Detroit Free Press* on August 30, 1987. The occasion for the interview was the acquittal of criminal charges and the settlement of a civil suit the US Department of Justice had filed against Ebens. In the interview, Ebens tells Moore that he does not understand why the Asian American community is so against him. “They blew it [the killing] all out of proportion,” he remarks. Moore asks why the Asian American groups were against him. “To show the plight of the Asian-Americans in America,” he answers, adding, “I still don’t know what their plight is.” What are Asian Americans shooting for, Moore asks. “I don’t know,” Ebens answers. “Do you see any Asian-Americans around here? I don’t even know them. I don’t know what their plight is. I’ve never been around them. The only ones I had ever met are the ones in the

Chinese restaurants, and they were always nice and I was always nice to them.”²⁰

African Americans often face different sorts of racial hurdles than those encountered by Asian Americans. While it is undeniable that African Americans have had their rights as citizens routinely compromised and at times outright denied since emancipation, the fact that African Americans are citizens has rarely been questioned—at least not to the degree experienced by Asian Americans. This contrast is evident in Spike Lee’s 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*, in which the American citizenship of the black rioters is never in question. As for the Korean merchants whose store is demolished by the angry mob, not only are they not regarded as true Americans, they are not even considered legitimate members of a neighborhood in which they spend every moment of each day working. (Korean-run delis in New York City are usually open twenty-four hours.)

Although not stated explicitly in the newspaper account, one can surmise that the Bronx man with the ten pennies is African American. Giving credence to this supposition is a photograph of the two adversaries that accompanied the article, in which Jones appears to be an African American. Also, the residents of the Soundview section of the Bronx, where Jones lives, are predominantly Latino and African American, and Jones is not a typical name among Latinos.

Moreover, it is probable that Jones is an individual who holds a keen sense of social and racial justice. This is indicated by the fact that the article identifies him as an active member (a preacher and community liaison) of the neighborhood Mount Zion Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, whose membership is almost entirely African American. According to the national Christian Methodist Episcopal website, the organization “came into existence as a result of the movement from slavery to freedom,” in which “the emancipation of Blacks from slavery created the desire by Blacks to have and control their own church,” and “formerly enslaved persons who had been members of the Methodist Episcopal Church South” started this independent religious organization.²¹ Given the church’s historical mission and his prominent role in the Bronx affiliate, Jones no doubt made public his grievance with the Chinese take-out by calling his state senator and rallying his church members because he sincerely believed that he was a victim of racial discrimination.

Although both Jones and Lin are nonwhite, the former is nonetheless a nonimmigrant citizen with the wherewithal to take his consumerist grievance to his locally elected officials, who immediately jumped to his aid. In contrast, the article implies that the restaurant worker Lin is a noncitizen immigrant, meaning she is treated as an outsider to a neighborhood in which she spends the better part of every day, morning to night, working. Thus, as journalistically rendered, it is the black man's verbal initiative of importance—manifested as a complaint against the Chinese take-out—that resonates with the general American readership, not the Asian woman's. This is possible because the word "American," while almost always meaning white, can also periodically mean black, as in moments like this, when a conflict between an African American and Asian American manifests as a tabloid-ready public spectacle. This is demonstrated not only in this case, but it also was on full display nationwide throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the so-called Black-Korean conflict, in which disgruntled African American customers confronted Korean American-run grocery and liquor stores with lawsuits, boycotts, and other forms of protest, including, some argue, a full-blown riot in Los Angeles following the acquittal of the police officers involved in the Rodney King beating.²²

A brief culinary analogy can apply here: when compared to the foods most strongly identified with African Americans (e.g., soul food), whose American fiber is unassailable, Chinese food, as well as the people associated with it, appears perpetually foreign and conspicuously alien.²³ While it is possible to label black-eyed peas, collard greens, and chitterlings with a term that insinuates blackness (or regionally "Southern," as the two culinary categories often overlap),²⁴ it is unreasonable to call them foreign or alien. The same cannot be said of eggrolls, wonton soup, pork fried rice, and other Chinese menu options, which are essentially American fare of Chinese descent with origins that date back a century and a half to the earliest years of Chinese immigration. In other words, while the difference between what is African and African American appears self-evident to most Americans, so much so that to conflate the two can often seem racially problematic, the contrast between what is Chinese and Chinese American is not so obvious. Thus the factors that set soul food apart from Chinese food are not necessarily culinary; rather, it is the troubling and troublesome fact that only the former is associated with a group that can without much complication be regarded as authentically American.

Case Number Two

A few months prior to the squabble over ten pennies at a Chinese take-out in the Bronx, at the other end of the city a man walks into a Chinese restaurant, threatens the owner, and leaves with a pocketful of cash as the mayor of the city cheers him on. No, this is not one of those political corruption stories you see in movies—such as *City Hall*, the 1996 Harold Becker film starring Al Pacino and John Cusack—about an illicit relationship between the mayor of a major city and the mob. In this actual case covered in the city’s tabloids (stories ran in both the *New York Post* and *New York Daily News*), a Wisconsinite tourist named David Lopez orders a meal at the Canal Seafood Restaurant in Chinatown but grows suspicious when he is told that a serving of rice costs a little extra. His suspicion increases when he notices nearby customers eating a similar dish served over a bed of rice. Lopez soon discovers that the restaurant gave out two different menus, an English-language version for non-Chinese customers like him and a Chinese version for Chinese patrons. He compares the menus and determines that the dishes on the English version are on the average a dollar more per item than those on the Chinese.

Convinced he is being discriminated against because he is not Chinese, the tourist takes his complaint to the city’s Human Rights Commission. An investigation ensues and the commission sides with the complainant, formally charging the restaurant with price gouging based on racial or linguistic preference for Chinese customers. When a reporter asks for his comment, Mayor Michael Bloomberg urges a public boycott of the establishment. Threatened with multiple legal actions, including a fine of fifty thousand dollars in punitive damages, the restaurant agrees to settle out of court, paying Lopez one thousand dollars and promising to list and charge identical prices for the same dishes on all its future menus. The restaurant’s counsel, however, insists that the terms of settlement are “absolutely no admission of wrongdoing.” When asked about the outcome, the tourist replies that he is happy, adding that the food at the restaurant, incidentally, is “excellent.”²⁵

Perhaps Lopez, the tourist, did the right thing in exposing what he believed was the restaurant’s policy of denying non-Chinese customers a gratis bed of rice and overcharging them a dollar more per item. It is quite possible that the restaurant did in fact gouge non-Chinese customers with

separate but unequal menus. It is just as likely, however, that the two menus were just that—two separate menus intended for two separate but not necessarily unequal customers, where the price difference was either inconsequential or an unintended consequence of a commercial strategy in service of a greater cause. Generally speaking, in New York City's Chinatown, as in all Chinatowns around the world, different customers—Chinese, non-Chinese, or what have you—walk into a Chinese restaurant with diverging culinary expectations. It is not uncommon, therefore, for enterprising restaurateurs to employ the two-menu solution in dealing with this gastronomic reality.

It is not only possible but altogether probable that the two menus Lopez encountered listed a separate litany of dishes, each pointing toward an alternative universe of gustatory expectations. This bifurcation reveals not only the complex nature of what Chinese food is and means to various people in this era of culinary globalization, but also suggests that the meaning of Chinese food is not so much a matter of cost but taste.²⁶ For



Canal Seafood Restaurant in New York City's Chinatown. Following the media scrutiny, the restaurant changed its English name to Canal Best Restaurant. The Chinese name remains the same. Photo by Shara Richter.

Chinese restaurants that cater to a heterogeneous clientele (meaning almost all Chinese restaurants outside China and increasingly those within), the two-menu strategy is not only financially shrewd but represents a pragmatic assessment of the world as it is, as opposed to the world someone—say, some sort of a culinary purist or absolutist—thinks it ought to be. Akin to parents of young children preparing separate meals according to an individual child’s gastronomic predilection, Chinese restaurateurs often attempt to offer the version of Chinese food that an alternate set of diners desires or believes Chinese food to be. To complicate this matter further, many Chinese restaurants in the United States are known to feature not merely two but three or more menus: an English version for “outsiders,” a Chinese version for “insiders,” a bilingual menu, a “secret” (i.e., unwritten) menu for the “very” insiders, and so forth. These different menus, moreover, although equal in terms of importance in serving as potential revenue streams, are unequal in terms of perceived “authenticity” of the food contained therein. To wit, the more a dish or set of dishes appears to be intended for Chinese diners, the more luminous the halo of “authenticity,” meaning the more it strikes the non-Chinese as daring, adventuresome, and daunting. Hence the old adage that non-Chinese diners looking for “real” Chinese food seek out restaurants in which you, the non-Chinese, are a conspicuous minority. In theory, Chinese food in the United States is tastiest in places that are yet to be discovered by non-Chinese patrons.

It is noteworthy that none of the newspaper accounts about the Lopez story identified the precise dish at the center of the storm. This omission indicates that compared to the legal, cross-cultural, linguistic, and interpersonal aspects of it, the culinary aspect, or what was on the plate, mattered very little. What exactly did the tourist order? This story takes on a completely different tenor if he ordered, say, General Tso’s chicken, perhaps the most popular dish among non-Chinese eaters of Chinese food in the United States today,²⁷ as opposed to *siu ngaap*, the ever-present and atmospheric Cantonese-style roast duck that hangs alongside other roast meats in the windows of many Chinatown restaurants. For that matter, why did he choose *this* restaurant among scores of others in Chinatown? Was it mentioned in a guidebook? Was it recommended by a friend? Did he walk into it randomly? Did the exterior or another environmental detail portend a promising meal? In fact, why come to eat Chinese food in New York City in the first place? Surely there had to be no shortage of Chinese restaurants in the state of Wisconsin.

Given the ubiquity of Chinese restaurants and the quotidian nature of Chinese food nationwide, one could argue that eating Chinese food in Chinatown is analogous to seeking out a Big Mac in Paris or Tokyo. You essentially eat there (at the tourist site) what you eat here (at home).

Perhaps operating under the assumption that Chinatowns are the closest thing to the “real” thing (i.e., China) without actually having to travel there, the tourist pilgrimaged to New York City’s Chinatown in search of something familiar that has been rendered more “original”—that is, exotic—by the aura of an unadulterated China that Chinatown supposedly exudes. If so, what he searched for was not food per se but something that is best expressed *through* food; he was searching for the one thing tourists typically desire the most, a desire that in many ways defines the very essence of the tourist—a taste of the authentic.²⁸ Thus his belief that he was swindled by unscrupulous foreign merchants provided him with a greater sense of what eating in China would be like than eating a dish he ended up ordering. After all, mustn’t Americans abroad always be on guard against the devious and underhanded chicaneries of the natives, especially natives of the so-called Third World? And despite the fact that the dish he ordered was from the English-language menu, he no doubt went away thinking that it was a more authentic, and therefore more delicious, version of a familiar taste he first experienced back home in Wisconsin.

Just as the Chinese cashier of the Great Wall Restaurant in the Bronx denied the charge that she rejected pennies as legal tender, so did the proprietors of the Canal Seafood Restaurant in Chinatown deny the charge leveled against their establishment—that the two menus listed different prices for identical items. In each case, a Chinese restaurant was accused of violating the civil rights of non-Chinese customers, of racially discriminating against the non-Chinese. The trouble in the Chinatown case appears to have begun when Lopez felt there was something fishy about a Chinese restaurant that charged extra for rice, especially since some of the other customers—namely, Chinese people—were served “similar dishes” over a bed of rice. Like bread and olive oil at an Italian restaurant, chips and salsa at a Mexican eatery, and assorted *banchan*, especially kimchi, at a Korean establishment, Lopez no doubt assumed rice was either gratis or a standard entrée accompaniment to a typical Chinese restaurant meal.

Of course, charging extra for rice is not an actionable offense, no matter how powerful or automatic the expectation. What is clearly illegal is for

a business to charge different prices for the same goods or services in accordance to a customer's race, ethnicity, or language. The tourist concluded that he was discriminated against only after comparing the two menus side by side. What makes the legal outcome of this case a foregone conclusion is the fact that Lopez, by his own admission, did not know how to read Chinese. He may have had the capacity to calculate the discrepancy in prices, leading to the conclusion that the English version listed higher prices on average, but did the menus feature the same items? How plausible, really, is it for this or any Chinese restaurant to offer the same bill of fare to Chinese and non-Chinese customers, especially when both clienteles, whose gustatory disparity may be as wide as the starchy gulf between Uncle Ben's converted rice and Thai jasmine rice, represent equally indispensable sources of revenue? Surely the difference between the two menus—between what non-Chinese and Chinese believe and desire Chinese food to be—amounts to more than a dollar and a bed of rice?

Food for Barbarians

To E. N. Anderson, author of *The Food of China*, a highly regarded scholarly survey of traditional Chinese food systems, there is a vast difference between the version of Chinese food consumed by non-Chinese people, especially of the West, and that consumed by Chinese people, specifically in China. The difference is evidenced in what he sees as the deplorable state of Cantonese cuisine in the United States and Europe. In describing it, Anderson cannot help but inject the language with vitriol: "Much of what passes for Cantonese cooking in the Western World would sicken a traditional Cantonese gourmet. Canned pineapple, canned cherries, and even canned fruit cocktail; enormous quantities of dehydrated garlic, barbecue or Worcestershire sauce; canned vegetables, corn starch, monosodium glutamate, cooking sherry, and heavy doses of sugar are found in many of these bizarre creations." Anderson traces the origin of this "fusion of pseudo-Cantonese and pseudo-Polynesian food" to a "renegade" Cantonese chef who once worked at a Trader Vic's restaurant in California. He sums up the "basic formula" of the Western version of Cantonese cuisine thus: "take the fattest, rankest pork you can get; cook it in a lot of oil with the sweetest mixture of canned fruits and sugar you can make; throw on a lot of MSG and cheap soy sauce; thicken the sauce to gluelike

consistency; and serve it forth.” Anderson adds that this sort of corruption of their food is regarded as “proof” to the Cantonese people that “Westerners are cultureless barbarians.” To make matters worse, in recent years “even many Taiwan Chinese (having eaten Cantonese food only in cafés catering to American G.I.s) are convinced that this is typical Cantonese cooking.”²⁹

As anyone fond of American-style Chinese food can attest, the vast majority of Chinese food sold in the United States does not resemble the mishmash that Anderson limns. (Given the profusion of Chinese restaurants in the United States, that would mean tens, if not hundreds, of millions of people.) In fact, it might be safe to say that Chinese food even at Trader Vic’s looks nothing of the sort. If it is any indication, a recent dinner menu at Trader Vic’s in Atlanta listed several Chinese dishes, such as Szechwan prawns, made with wood-ear mushrooms, snow peas, and sweet peppers; kung pao chicken, made with red bell peppers, cashews, and spicy chile sauce; and special fried rice, made with chicken, prawns, and *char siu* pork—with nary a canned fruit in sight. To be sure, such a version as Anderson describes once existed in the United States, but how universal or widespread was it, really? In his attempt to illustrate the destructive power of Americanization on Cantonese food, Anderson, an otherwise objective gastronomic historian writing a straightforward book, suddenly and uncharacteristically resorts to hyperbole. But why? What is the motive behind the magnified complaint? What might he achieve by exaggerating, if not misrepresenting, Chinese food in the United States?³⁰

A clue to his motive can be found in his use of highly charged words like “bizarre,” “pseudo,” and “renegade.” For these words to relay the meaning Anderson intends, we must first acknowledge the other side of their locutions, their antonyms. That is to say, we must first believe in the existence of Chinese food that is “normal” or “conventional,” “genuine” or “authentic,” and “loyal” or “unchanging.” In essence, what these words presuppose is a transcendental culinary standard that is violated or betrayed when Chinese food travels beyond the borders of China, and especially to the United States. In fact, according to Anderson, regional Cantonese cuisine needs to travel only five hundred miles or so to Taiwan—given the island’s close political relationship to the United States—for it to undergo irreparable damage. Anderson’s belief in “proper” Chinese cuisine is so absolute that he is able to identify the individual he believes was the first to set into motion Cantonese cuisine’s diasporic degradation and downfall. And it

just happens that the original miscreant, an unnamed apostate, was a native Cantonese chef who once worked at a California restaurant whose primary claim to fame is not food, but a drink. According to cocktail lore, propagated most zealously by the restaurant itself, Trader Vic's is the birthplace of the mai tai—a tropical drink, now considered the epitome of tiki-kitsch, originally made of Jamaican rum, Dutch orange curaçao, French orgeat (an almond-based sugary syrup), and fresh lime juice.

Founded in the 1930s by Victor Jules Bergeron Jr., Trader Vic's began as a modest pub in Oakland. The establishment was first called Hinky Dink's before it adopted Bergeron's nickname and grew into a global franchise worth \$70 million, with numerous locations, including in the United States, Bahrain, England, Lebanon, Germany, Japan, United Arab Emirates, and China.³¹ (In the aforementioned Warren Zevon song, the werewolf is eventually spotted not at Lee Ho Fooks, but at the London Trader Vic's, first opened in 1963, drinking not a mai tai, as one might expect, but another famous tropical drink, a piña colada. This is probably due to no intrinsic shortcoming of the mai tai other than lacking the required number of syllables to fit the lyrics.) Anderson's scoffing allusion to Trader Vic's is not without purpose: he clearly means to disparage Cantonese food in the West through guilt by association. For him, Trader Vic's is the contemptible yin of debased Americanized Chinese food to the sublime yang of authentic Cantonese cookery in native China. In other words, Trader Vic's is ersatz Cantonese, distorted, and therefore ludicrous and inedible.

Anderson is irked by what he sees as the low status consigned to Cantonese food—compared to, say, Hunan or Sichuan food—around the world. He calls the rumor of Cantonese culinary inferiority a “myth,” a direct result of the cuisine's widespread diffusion overseas, where “a lamentable Cantonese tendency to seek the lowest common denominator in business practices” took root. Although he does not specify what these practices are, one can assume he means abbreviated cooking techniques and use of substandard or cheap ingredients, among other cost-cutting measures and culinary shortcuts.

Anderson lavishes praise on what he believes to be the uncorrupted version of Cantonese food, which, “at its best, is probably unequalled in China and possibly the world.” He compiles a running list of Cantonese culinary achievements that no other cooks in the world, including those of other Chinese regions, can duplicate: “insist on such absolute freshness,”

“control cooking temperatures so perfectly,” “insist on such quality in ingredients,” “draw on such a wide range of ingredients,” “can be so eclectic while maintaining the spirit of their tradition,” “excel in so many techniques,” “produce so many dishes,” and so forth. As a cuisine, Cantonese has no rival anywhere in the world, “not even in France,” Anderson avers.³²

To him, what typifies Chinese food in the West are the awful, apocryphal dishes that most Westerners consume in bulk, such as sweet-and-sour pork (“Cantonese more often cook sweet-sour fish,” he opines), fried rice (“not of the height of the true cuisine”), chow mein (“a counterpart of fried rice”), and chop suey (an Americanized Toisanese dish). These foods are all in the “nature of hash,” he charges, “cheap, quick, easy ways to get rid of less than desirable leftovers and other scraps.” In other words, “all the stuff that would otherwise have to go to the animals can be fed to people.” (In this, Anderson parrots the British lexicographer Samuel Johnson, who, in his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, notoriously defined oats as “a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.”) Anderson, however, adds an important caveat: these otherwise dreadful dishes are delicious when found in “traditional cafés and homes in Hong Kong.” But diners had best beware, for versions served up in Hong Kong restaurants that specifically cater to Westerners are as atrocious as those found in the West.³³ Anderson’s formula for good Chinese food is simple: made in China, presumably by Chinese hands, for Chinese people. The formula for bad Chinese food is equally simple: made anywhere but China or made in China for non-Chinese people.

Some two decades after Anderson published his polemic against Chinese food in the West, the creators of perhaps the most popular restaurant guides ever published—at least for New York City—made their own contribution to the fertile culture of complaint that surrounds the Chinese restaurant in the United States. In a June 21, 2007, *New York Times* op-ed titled “Eating beyond Sichuan,” Nina and Tim Zagat, the brainchild behind the vast Zagat Guides franchise, bemoan the woeful state of Chinese food in America. In comparison to other Asian foods, such as Korean, Thai, Vietnamese, and Japanese, all of which have “soared” as of late, Chinese food in America has “stalled,” they charge. Chinese food is the “same tired routine” American diners have experienced for years, “unimaginative dishes served amid dated, pseudo-imperial décor.” They compare Chinese food in the United States to Chinese food in China and ask, “Where

are the great versions of bird's nest soup from Shandong, or Zhejiang's beggar's chicken, or braised Anhui-style pigeon or the crisp eel specialties of Jiangsu?"³⁴

Although phrased as a question, their query is strictly rhetorical since they presumably already know the answer—nowhere outside China, and least of all in America. “There is a historic explanation for the abysmal state of Chinese cuisine in the United States,” they assert; blame it on the nineteenth-century Chinese immigrant railroad workers and their Chinese American descendants who, lacking access to proper ingredients, “improvised dishes like chow mein and chop suey that nobody back in their native land would have recognized.” Anxious to cater to the “naïve palates” of Americans, pioneering Chinese American restaurateurs incorporated many deplorable culinary changes, including the replacement of the heat of “chili-based dishes served back home” with “sweet, rich sauces to coat the food.”

But that was then. Today, unlike during the nineteenth century, proper ingredients from China are readily available in the United States, the Zagats point out. How is it, then, that things have not changed? Why is Chinese food still so lamentable here? We must hold the past and current population of Chinese food purveyors in America culpable, they argue, for it is they who have failed to live up to the standards set forth by their counterparts in China, where, due to the rise of capitalism, “restaurants have become a place for people to spend their newfound disposable incomes.” Simply put, Chinese food in the United States is “lackluster” because “Cantonese, Hunan and Sichuan restaurants in this country do not resemble those you can find in China.”

The Zagats then pose a solution: a joint US-China “culinary visa program that makes it easier for Chinese chefs to come here.” Due to post-9/11 immigration restrictions, skilled chefs from the increasingly capitalist China, where the culinary scene is “thriving,” find it difficult to obtain working visas, and this subsequently derails heroic efforts by Chinese restaurateurs in the United States—like the head of the Shun Lee line of restaurants in New York City—to revolutionize Chinese food in America. American diners have come a long way since the nineteenth century, the Zagats assure us. “Eating food prepared by an influx of Chinese chefs would be like opening up a culinary time capsule.” Besides, we Americans are ready for ambitious dining, as evidenced by the noticeable popularity of sophisticated culinary offerings such as offal, *sous-vide* preparations,

and tasting menus. “So, we welcome Chinese chefs to share their authentic cuisines with us,” the Zagats proclaim. “American palates, unlike those of previous generations, are ready for the real stuff.”

Only in China?

The charge put forth by Anderson and the Zagats is essentially the same: Chinese food in America is terrible because it is not the “real stuff,” and it is not the real stuff because it is made in America, not China. It is, moreover, made by Chinese American hands, not by the hands of the “real” Chinese over there. By extension, then, it is only in China where we find real Chinese people, and it is only they who are capable of making authentic—and therefore delicious—Chinese food. Chinese Americans, by virtue of residing in the United States for too long, cannot qualify as bona-fide Chinese, and the food they cook up can best be described as ersatz Chinese, a poor imitation of the original, and not original in its own right. Chinese Americans, using this logic, are either poor imitations or irredeemable corruptions of the real thing; they, like their food, must therefore be considered not authentically Chinese. Moreover, given that Chinese American food purveyors have unscrupulously served and continue to serve corrupt versions of Chinese food to unsuspecting, if not gullible, non-Chinese customers, the entire Chinese food experience in the United States, according to Anderson and the Zagats, has to be considered a sham.

On the face of it, the belief in the infallibility of Chinese cuisine in China and the dubiousness of Chinese food in America appears plausible if not wholly valid. But for this assertion to remain incontrovertible, two conditions must hold true: first, there cannot be “good” Chinese food anywhere in the United States. We are asked to categorically condemn American-style Chinese food as entirely unpalatable. There is no way for quality versions of the type of Chinese food that Americans adore—egg rolls, sweet and sour pork, General Tso’s chicken, beef with broccoli, and so on—to exist because the very notion of American Chinese food is illegitimate. We are also asked to put aside the possibility that excellent regional Chinese food of the sort Anderson and the Zagats rave about exists in the United States, and has been available for nearly half a century (if not longer), most notably in the vibrant culinary enclaves populated by new

Chinese arrivals. The three primary New York City Chinatowns—in lower Manhattan, Flushing (Queens), and Sunset Park (Brooklyn)—as well as Chinatowns in San Francisco and Monterey Park (near Los Angeles), for example, are sites where Chinese food that not only rivals but arguably surpasses the food of China proper might very well exist and may have existed at least since 1965, when the Hart-Celler Act reopened American borders to thousands upon thousands of new Chinese immigrants.

Second, for Anderson's and the Zagats' position to be tenable, there must not be any "bad" Chinese food anywhere in China (unless intended for Western visitors, that is). We are thus compelled to ignore the possibility that poor Chinese food abounds in China, too. Surely the notion of subpar native food that caters to local denizens, wherever in the world they might reside, is a culinary fact of life. In other words, there has to be bad Chinese food in China, just as there is bad Korean food in Korea and bad French food in France. It is through their failure to acknowledge these possibilities that Anderson and the Zagats rest their polemic—that Chinese food in the West, and especially in the United States, is nothing more than a culinary racket.

The notion that Chinese food in America might be a fraud is not new, but rather has a long history. In describing the popularity of chop suey among American diners since the late nineteenth century, Jennifer 8. Lee, author of *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food*, labels it "the biggest culinary prank that one culture has ever played on another."³⁵ Andrew Coe asserts in *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* that rumors of the "chop suey hoax" were in circulation as far back as 1904, when a Chinese cook who first worked in San Francisco materialized one day in New York City and claimed that he was the inventor of the dish. Chop suey "is no more a national dish of the Chinese than pork and beans," the cook reportedly said. "There is not a grain of anything Celestial in it." Stories of chop suey's fraudulence proliferated, according to Coe, when "American travelers just back from China or more often Chinese themselves, often highly educated diplomats or businessmen from anywhere but the hinterland of the Pearl River Delta," became the source of the accusation.³⁶ Although Coe's description is of a scenario that took place a century ago, he could just as easily have been referring to a similar sentiment expressed more recently by critics of American Chinese food, such as Anderson and the Zagats, who fancy themselves well-traveled culinary authorities. In fact, within

the so-called foodie scene, American Chinese food is routinely singled out as the epitome of the inauthentic dining experience in a time of rapid McDonaldization of traditional foodways. In this, the critical reception of Chinese food in America is not unlike that of a certain monumental Hollywood product—a blockbuster film, which, like Chinese food in America, the masses tend to love and professional critics love to hate.

With global box office sales exceeding \$1.8 billion, *Titanic*, the 1997 film directed by James Cameron and starring Leonardo DiCaprio, is the second most profitable film in cinematic history. It is also among the most decorated, with fourteen Academy Awards nominations and eleven wins, including Best Picture and Best Director. This, however, has not resulted in critical accolades. As David Lubin puts it, *Titanic* has been derided by critics as a “crude, tawdry, manipulative example of cinematic art,” closer to the kitsch of *The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Love Boat* than the artistry of *Battleship Potempkin*.³⁷ The *Los Angeles Times* film reviewer Kenneth Turan once described it as “a witless counterfeit of Hollywood’s Golden Age, a compendium of clichés that add up to a reasonable facsimile of a film.” He also dismissed the legions of devotees who flocked to the film (many repeatedly) by accusing them of being “mainstream”—that is to say, of being conventional, conformist, and common. They are “desperate people,” he averred, “deadened by exposure to nonstop trash” spewed forth by producers of contemporary popular culture.³⁸ In other words, while it may be cynical, immoral, and in bad taste for a filmmaker and his financial enablers to produce cultural trash, it is nothing short of foolish for the audience to blindly consume it. After all, that (producing junk) is what profit-minded companies do. The question Turan poses is, Why do so many people buy it? His answer: because they lack not only smarts but also taste.

The charge of the critics of American Chinese food is comparable. Yes, Chinese food is widely available in the United States, but why should anyone feel obligated to consume it? The fact that there are over forty thousand Chinese restaurants in America is seen as evidence that the product is tailored for the benighted masses. To paraphrase Turan, Chinese food, like McDonald’s burgers (over 100 billion sold, and counting), is a witless counterfeit of a preindustrial gastronomic Golden Age, a compendium of throwaway animal parts and synthetic chemicals that adds up to a reasonable facsimile of human fodder. According to this view, Americans who eat Chinese food are no less desperate than those who flock to the multiplex to

see *Titanic*, their higher senses of taste and refinement having been deadened by nonstop exposure to junk spewed out by our contemporary food culture. In this regard, *Titanic*-ization and McDonaldization are viewed as interrelated processes. Turan himself notes this parallel in comparing his job as a film critic to that of a restaurant critic who refuses to send diners “straight to McDonald’s on the ‘everybody goes there, it must be the best’ theory.”

Despite the copious amount of General Tso’s chicken, beef and broccoli, and pork fried rice consumed in the United States (or perhaps due precisely to that reason), people who believe themselves to be “in the know” (i.e., self-professed gourmands) do not consider these foods to be legitimate examples of Chinese food. Instead, they are seen, to paraphrase Turan, as witless facsimiles of wondrous Chinese cuisine corrupted by dark forces of philistine Americanization. Moreover, it is often someone recently arrived from China, or someone with an extensive knowledge of China, who is especially dismissive of American Chinese food. More than dismissive, they are often annoyed at, if not down right hostile to, the idea that anyone could confuse ordinary Chinese take-out for real Chinese cuisine. A commonly expressed sentiment is that what popularly passes for Chinese food in the United States either does not exist in China or that a real Chinese person would not recognize, let alone eat, any of it.

Therein lies the rub (to misquote *Hamlet*). For all intents and purposes, the cultural legitimacy of Chinese food in the United States is measured against a standard that is impossible to live up to—a largely mythical benchmark that points to the food of so-called real or authentic Chinese people defined as those who live there (in China), not here (in the United States). Not only there, but a there that is frozen in cultural stasis and resistant to the march of historical time. The Chinese presence in America—whether gastronomic or corporeal—is therefore defined as a dubious thing, neither legitimate nor appropriate, neither completely this (Chinese) nor that (American). Taken to its logical conclusion, then, to consider American Chinese food as “not the real thing” is to argue that nothing innovated by and made with Chinese American hands can be authentic, which is a fancier way of saying that nothing Chinese American can qualify as culturally legitimate.

Most, if not all, of the numerous complaints levied against Chinese food in the United States—that it is unsanitary, that it contains suspicious ingredients, that it is calorically shallow, that it is unhealthy, that it is rep-

etitious, that it is boring, that it tastes awful, that it is inauthentic, that the selling of it is corrupt—boil down to a single overwhelming perception: the Chinese presence in America is first and foremost alien. Despite a *longue durée* of cultural and corporeal history in the United States, Chinese America is still seen as out of place. It is regarded as neither entirely American nor authentically Chinese.

Question: how long must Chinese Americans wait before they are no longer compared unfavorably to their supposedly authentic relatives on the other side of the globe? What characteristics must Chinese food in America exhibit before it can be considered just one of many “regional” Chinese foods that exist around the world? Is it really that untenable to argue that Chinese food in, say, Hong Kong, is simply different—not better or worse, but *different*—than Chinese food in Beijing or Shanghai or Sichuan or Xinjiang or Taiwan or Japan or Korea or India or the Philippines or Cuba or New York City or Baton Rouge? And aren’t the differences among these diverse versions of Chinese food more a matter of regional particularity, migratory history, diasporic taste, and the individual skills of a particular cook than they are a matter of innate worth, legitimacy, superiority, or authenticity? (Based on personal experience, General Tso’s chicken can taste anywhere from dreadful to spectacular depending on the quality of the restaurant.) How long must we wait before Chinese food in the United States and the people associated with it are appraised on their own terms and merits? Stay tuned.