

# Negotiating Multiple Authenticities: A Study of Regional Chinese Restaurants in Sydney

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This paper shows how Chinese migrant restaurant owners and chefs have changed the meaning of Chinese food in Sydney. I examine how migrant Chinese restaurant owners and chefs have changed the Sydney foodscape by altering long held notions of what constitutes authentic Chinese food. Chinese chefs and restaurant owners face a choice between adapting to local tastes and serve dishes that have been popular with local Caucasian customers since the 1960s and serving the dishes that they ate in China, catering to customers from their own ethnic group. In this paper I show how Chinese restaurant owners in Sydney negotiate the different notions of authenticity held by different customers of different ethnicities, and how in doing so they have changed the Sydney foodscape.

**Keywords:** *authenticity; globalisation; Chinese restaurants; Chinese cuisine; foodscape; chefs; Sydney.*

In this paper I use the term foodscape as defined by Nancy Pollock (2011) in her study of Chinese foodways in the South Pacific. According to Pollock “Foodscapes are...imagined depictions of changes and continuities in gastronomies over time, where not just components of foodstuffs are selected for or against, but broader elements of food systems such as cultural ideology, processing preparation and allocation are integral features” (2011: 48). Cooking what they know and like allows restaurant owners and chefs to change Sydney’s foodscape by changing the idea of what authentic Chinese food means in Sydney. This change has to be gradual rather than a complete switch with the arrival of new migrant restaurant owners. Restaurants have had to decide between catering to an ethnic niche of their fellow Chinese immigrants and catering to local Caucasian customers.

These different alternatives are indicative of a conflict between different notions of authentic Chinese cuisine. Appadurai points out that:

*“Authenticity measures the degree to which something is more or less what it ought to be. It is thus a norm of some sort. But is it an immanent norm, emerging somehow from the cuisine itself? Or is it an external norm, reflecting some imposed gastronomic standard? If it is an immanent norm, who is its authoritative voice: the professional cook? the average consumer? the gourmand? the housewife? If it is an imposed norm, who is its privileged voice: the connoisseur of exotic food? the tourist? the ordinary participant in a neighbouring cuisine? the cultivated eater from a distant one?” (1986: 25)*

In this paper I show that all the voices that Appadurai mentions – from the tourist to the ordinary participant – are authoritative voices when it comes to authenticity. Authentic Chinese cuisine depends on a person’s individual experience. Many of the chefs and informants I spoke to have at some stage or still are negotiating multiple authenticities, in order to maximise eco-

nomonic profit. As business owners and chefs, my informants are very aware of the different demands of different customers. Some of my informants balanced the demands of both Caucasian and Chinese clients, while others catered to Caucasian customers. There were also those that were uncompromising, catering to their ethnic niche, and relying on those locals who intended to frequent their restaurants in order to satisfy their cravings for Chinese food that is authentic to China. Authenticity is in the eye of Chinese customers seeking a taste of home, of Caucasian customers seeking a taste of the Chinese food that they have always eaten since the 1960s, as well as in the dishes that a chef cooks based on his own memories of the dishes he grew up eating in Beijing.

Adaptation is important for those cooks and chefs who aim cater to Caucasian customers. Being located in a multiethnic plural society, with several ethnic groups, restaurants also face constraints regarding what to include on their menus, based on issues such as religious belief. This is the case when restaurants, particularly chains, open in areas with a large non-Chinese population that have certain dietary restrictions like Kosher.

Whether it be adapting to local conditions or catering to the ethnic niche, my informants' decisions are economically driven. This includes serving a few dishes from their places of origin with a majority of dishes that are local favourites or having a menu of dishes that mainly catered to their ethnic niche. The main goal for all the restaurant owners I studied was profit. This paper illustrates how the need to cater to different customers' imaginations of authentic Chinese food governs the decisions they make regarding what dishes to include on their menus. In making these business decisions, my informants have changed the foodscape of Sydney by offering dishes that are different from previous ideas of Authentic Chinese cuisine in Australia.

## Methodology

This paper is based on data collected during three months of fieldwork in Sydney, starting in late May of 2011 and concluding in late August. Data was collected from interviews with informants, direct, unobtrusive observation in restaurants and also from menus collected from restaurants. Restaurants I dined in and interviewed represented some of the best known regional Chinese cuisines outside of China, including Shanghainese, Sichuanese and Beijing cuisine. I visited 37 restaurants to gather unobtrusive observations of their traffic and their customers. I consumed multiple meals at thirteen of these restaurants to check the breadth of their menus. In all, I consumed a total of 57 meals in 37 regional Chinese restaurants. Of these 37 restaurants I was able to interview the chef or owner of 12 restaurants (1 Northern Noodle restaurant, 3 Northern Beijing restaurants, 2 Shanghainese, 2 Xinjiang, 2 Northern Style restaurants, 1 Sichuan and 1 Modern Chinese fusion restaurant).

Although the main focus of this study is on non-Cantonese restaurants, I also interviewed two former operators of Cantonese restaurants, both of whom have over thirty years of experience running restaurants in Sydney and other parts of Australia, in order to gain a historical perspective. In total, 14 structured interviews and 2 follow up interviews were conducted, with current and former restaurant owners and chefs. Interviews usually lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, with some lasting up to two and a half hours. The names of informants have been altered, in order to protect their privacy.

## Reproducing Chinese Food in Sydney

Reproducing Chinese food in a foreign country is not easy. The limited ingredients often lead those who tried in the direction of localisation, as noted by David Wu (2002) in his work on Chinese food in Hawaii and Papua New Guinea. The reproduction of Chinese food faced certain economic constraints. For many Chinese cooks and chefs, the lack of ingredients and seasonings was a barrier to reproducing Chinese food as they had known it back at home, only when they first opened their restaurants. The owner of a Beijing restaurant, Mr. Gong, told me a story from

the early days of his restaurant career when he opened his first restaurant back in the late 1980s. Back when he opened his first restaurant, he bought out all the sesame paste in four stores, as there was simply not enough demand for Chinese style sesame paste. However, once there was sufficient demand, as he became more able to guarantee a minimum order quantity, he was able to convince an importer to import the sauce that he was looking for. Likewise, Mrs. Wu, who owns a restaurant that serves Hong Kong style in Beijing cuisine, recalled the early days when family members would bring crucial ingredients for dishes when they visited her and her family in Sydney.

With cheaper air travel compressing time and space, particularly for the flow of goods, it has been easier than ever for cooks like my chef informants to reproduce the food of their homelands. Ingredients that my informants needed were initially unavailable, but as the volume of demand grew, importers were more willing to source these ingredients. While it was difficult to obtain certain ingredients like jarred sauces back in the 1980s, when many of my informants first opened their restaurants, importers were eventually willing to provide these products as demand increased. Thus, in the current era as opposed to the past, modifying dishes is not so much a product of being in an environment where ingredients are not available.

There were other difficulties to reproducing Chinese food in Australia. As my informant Henry, from Beijing, told me when we went to have dinner at Mr. Gong's restaurant, his is one of the last remaining of the first wave of Beijing restaurants that opened in the late 1980s and early 1990s, one of the few that still serves a predominantly Beijing menu. The constraint of having to adapt to locally held notions of authentic Chinese food to increase revenue in their restaurants, especially when there was not enough Chinese customers, lead many restaurants to offer more dishes favoured by Caucasian customers, such as honey prawns and beef with black bean sauce. There are two solutions to this dilemma that restaurant owners face. One solution is to provide two menus, one for Chinese customers and one for Caucasian customers. Another approach is to include items that are popular with Caucasian customers, and, lastly, restaurant owners can focus on serving Chinese customers and stay in the ethnic niche.

### Local Favourites

The globalisation of Chinese food is not a recent phenomenon. It has been occurring since the 16th century with the first sojourners, Chinese traders in Southeast Asia. In multiethnic migrant states like Australia and the USA, it dates from the first coolies and the gold rushes in these respective countries. The first Chinese restaurants in Australia were opened by Chinese who came during the Gold Rush. They stuck to their ethnic niche, catering mainly to their countrymen. Bannerman writes: "Generally keeping to themselves, the Chinese workers established their own eating houses – first in tents and shanties of the gold fields. After the gold rush Chinese restaurants opened in often squalid 'Chinatowns' in Melbourne and Sydney" (2008: 63). Bannerman points out that it was until the early twentieth century that Caucasians "went [to Chinese restaurants], lured by cheap prices and tasty dishes that were more representative of Western stereotypes than of real Chinese cuisine" (63). Many of Chinese owned restaurants not only served Chinese food, but served local favourites as well. Symons writes: "The Chinese... applied their skills to running cafes, often with 'English' dishes but also, increasingly, with a version of Chinese food" (2007: 91).

The experiences of my informants are influenced by this history, as the notion of Chinese food is already entrenched in the minds of Caucasian diners. Chinese cuisine was not new to Australia when they arrived, the migrants chefs that I study have had to negotiate the local perspective of what authentic Chinese cuisine is, while introducing their version of authentic cuisine. Scholars have noted that authenticity is locked in time and space (Weiss, 2011; Bao, 2011). With the arrival of the chefs and restaurant owners I studied, there was a meeting of two perspectives of authenticity based on different spatialities – one emanating from China, with the migrant chefs and restaurant owners that are the focus of this study, and another based on earlier waves of mi-

grants and their restaurants that serve dishes that have been popular in Australia since the early 20th century.

Foreign cuisines are often altered when they first enter a new country. This could be due to local conditions such as the limited availability of ingredients or the need to cater to local tastes, as certain dishes may not be accepted by the local population. The early dishes that are favoured by Caucasian customers in Australia are mostly Cantonese in origin, as most of the early migrants to Australia were from Guangdong province. Early Chinese dishes that are still consumed today include Sweet and Sour Pork, honey prawns, beef in black bean sauce, spring rolls as a starter and curry chicken.

My informant, Mr. Li, who has over 30 years of experience running and working in Chinese restaurants across Australia, told me about some of these local favourites:

*Researcher: "Were the same dishes still the favourites?"*

*Mr. Li: "Yes... Still the same dishes. Always the spare ribs, the sweet and sour pork, curry. Ab, and ub chow mein. Chop suey, you know... that's always the five dishes that are the most popular [and] omelettes."*

*Researcher: "Short soup [wonton soup], long soup [wonton noodle soup]?"*

*Mr. Li: "Before dinner, yes, mainly short soup they'd order, [it] was the most popular. Uh, mini spring roll[s] [for] entrée... So um, entrée, what [else] was there... Prawn cutlets and things like that, you know. Always the same dishes and with black bean sauce. People love black bean, I don't know why...I'm very surprised for Australian people to have the love, uh, black bean, you know."*

Local favourites, such as fried rice and sweet and sour pork, were still popular. Mrs. Wu, an informant who runs a restaurant with a menu of northern style dishes and dishes that Caucasian clients like, felt that Caucasian clients tend to enjoy more strongly flavoured dishes. She described an old couple:

*Mrs. Wu: "See the table setting over there. This old couple comes every Wednesday. I don't know if they came today, they may have been ill...Every time they come it's two short soups because they're quite old so they don't eat much. They're sixty something; seventy years old... They have a bottle of red wine, a bowl of gweilo [Caucasian] wonton soup (short soup), sweet and sour pork and fried rice. It's been like that every time for many years now. I've suggested that they try some of our northern food. We have duck and crispy beef strips. So I'd recommend these dishes to them. They'd try it once and then they'd go back to what they had before. They told me that at the end of the day they like eating sweet and sour pork and fried rice."*

Some restaurants include these dishes on their menus, while others do not. This depended mainly on their customer base, and their imagination of authentic Chinese food. When I talked about my research with my key informant Henry, a proud Beijinger, he would often bring up the fact that he would take me to real Beijing style restaurants. He told me that he would take me to some restaurants that served real Beijing food like those of Mr. Gong and Mr. Zhang. It is these restaurants that I discuss in the next section.

## **Authenticity and Cultural Reproduction**

Chefs and customers can have different perceptions of what is authentic, based on their perspective and expectations. How this is negotiated is a key factor in the dishes that a restaurant serves. One of the objections that my friend had about a menu was the matter of being authentic to the region where the chef comes from. I was talking to her about visiting a restaurant near where she lives to try their food for this study. She shook her head and coyly smiled. For her, this restaurant could not be legitimately considered a Chinese restaurant as, for example, a hole-in-the-wall dumpling and noodle shop in Chinatown. One of the things that the chef at this restaurant told me was that authenticity is not possible, but it is possible to cook dishes with the flavours of Beijing, where he was from. For him, a pure reterritorialisation of the cuisine as it is from

China is a difficult thing. He felt that the key was to cook with a Chinese feel and flavour. From his perspective, authenticity is a matter of cooking what he recognises as Chinese food, and he feels that he is not doing that, as he is catering to Hong Kong customers, who have different tastes and memories of dishes like hot and sour soup – *suan la tang*.

For others, the decision is purely pragmatic. This is illustrated by my conversation with Mr. Gong about other Chinese restaurants, whose menus are not as purely regional as his:

*Researcher: "I see other restaurants. Their menus have curry chicken..."*

*Mr. Gong: "I don't do that [those dishes]...their mentality is different from mine. My thing is pure Northern dishes. I don't do other dishes."*

*Researcher: "This type of restaurant is not opened by northerners like you. I went to Ashfield to take a look. It's mainly Shanghai food."*

*Mr. Gong: "Right! But there are also others like Northern, Xinjiang and Cantonese food... now the so called [difference] between regional cuisines; the main thing is that it's delicious. You [other restaurants] might mainly cook Northern dishes, but you may also have one or two Sichuan dishes [on the menu] even Southern [Cantonese] dishes, but as long as you make it tasty."*

Other restaurant owners emphasise the purity of their menus. A restaurant owner that caters mainly to those in the ethnic niche and more adventurous, neophilic diners does not need to compromise on the dishes that they want to serve, as Symons (2007: 315) points out, they can serve the dishes that they want to serve, instead of bowing to local demands. Their clients appreciate the restaurant more for the fact that they have not compromised their dishes. My friend, Henry, who introduced me to Mr. Gong, said to him, "You know what I respect about you is that you never put honey prawns on your menu!" Mr. Gong was very proud of this fact. He told me that Caucasian diners who were unfamiliar with the dishes he served would be willing to eat the dishes he prepared when they saw other tables ordering those dishes. Indeed, when I talked to Mr. Gong about this, the following is what he said:

*Researcher: "Did you think most Caucasian customers would understand what you were doing when you first started, given that the Chinese food here, back then, was mainly Cantonese?"*

*Mr. Gong: "Right! But, when I first started there were Hong Kongers, Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese, and also Caucasian. There were people from everywhere, but [my customers were] mainly mainland Chinese. Gradually I got some Hong Kong and Caucasian customers."*

*Researcher: "Did you see any Caucasian customers who wanted to have dishes like sweet and sour pork?"*

*Mr. Gong: "I did, but I told them that I don't do those dishes. They're not Beijing dishes. Those dishes are Australian-Chinese dishes. They're not real Chinese dishes."*

*Researcher: "Did they then leave?"*

*Mr. Gong: "There were many who left, but not often. I told them that they should try my Beijing dishes. My dishes are real Chinese dishes. Then when they ate it – 'beauty!'"*

Mr. Gong's case shows how chefs dictate what is authentic, as noted by Fung. Mr. Gong's decision not to include dishes that local clients are used to is an example of a chef defining what a cuisine is. Mr. Gong has defined what Chinese cuisine is to him, a regional cuisine from Beijing that he is deeply familiar with, having consumed those dishes throughout his life. This perspective of authentic Chinese food, being authentic to the region where the cook comes from, has guided Mr. Gong's decisions regarding the menu in his restaurant.

By catering for people who consume the cuisine every day, restaurants like Mr. Gong's are subjecting themselves to higher standards than if they were serving it to customers who are not as familiar with the cuisine. This was the case for my informant, Mrs. Wu, who felt that her and her husband's efforts in reproducing northern Chinese food as it is found in Hong Kong were not appreciated by their customers. Mrs. Wu told me that there is a downside to serving Chinese

customers, as they can often be picky and critical. Even the slightest timing issue is picked up on by these customers. She felt that they were excessively demanding, referring to the table next to mine when I had lunch before our interview, she told me: “Like this table today, they were saying ‘the spring rolls were a bit soggy last time, can you have the chef fry them a bit longer this time? I want the potstickers (*guotie*) to be browner and crispier on the bottom this time, but don’t burn them.’ Do you know how hard that is? ‘Cook it longer, but don’t burn it.’” Mrs. Wu felt that Caucasian customers are less demanding. As people who consume and know the cuisine, Chinese customers are more demanding because they care about the cuisine, they like it a certain way, the way that they remember it.

### **Pleasing the Locals: Modifying Dishes and Adding Dishes to Menus**

For Chinese restaurant owners running restaurants in areas with a small Chinese population, balancing the need to please Caucasian customers with the desire to cook what they know and what they want can be a challenge. The restaurants I interviewed employed various strategies in order to achieve this balance, including adding dishes to menus, adjusting dishes to suit different tastes and having different menus for different customers.

Mr. Zhang, who bought an existing Chinese takeaway shop serving localised favourites, used a strategy of providing two menus – one for local clientele seeking local favourites such as honey prawns, beef with black bean sauce and Mongolian lamb, and another menu with Beijing style food such as lamb hotpot and *pie la si*, a salad of *gai laan* (Chinese broccoli) hearts dressed with soy sauce and sesame oil. It was simple matter of bringing out the Chinese menu when Chinese clients showed up in the restaurant.

Other restaurants served dishes from several different regions in China. For example, a Sichuan restaurant had *xiaolong bao* on their menu. When I asked the owner, she told me that it was important to have dishes that pleased different types of customers. Other restaurants had menus with a large proportion of dishes such as curry chicken, honey prawns and beef with black bean sauce. The decision to include these dishes is based on the need to please a variety of customers, including Chinese diners and neophilic Caucasian diners who seek interesting dishes that they have not tasted before.

Some of my informants altered the taste of their dishes to suit the taste of customers in the area. The owner-chef of a restaurant in a suburb in North Western Sydney told me that he altered the taste of Hot and Sour soup, a Sichuan dish, different from the way that he would make it in Beijing, as the predominantly Hong Kong customers of his restaurant do not like the dish to be as spicy. This modification to a dish that he has always consumed, that he is very familiar with, was borne out of the need to satisfy customers in the area.

Other chefs have added dishes on their menu that are not authentic to the regional specialisation of their restaurants. Chef Tu, the head chef at one of the branches of a chain of Shanghainese restaurants in Sydney, told me:

*Researcher: “What is the most popular dish on your menu?”*

*Chef Tu: “The most popular dish is Shandong chicken. Shengjian bao [A pan fried bun with mince pork filling], xiaolong bao and guotie also sell well. All the items on the menu sell well because we check the menu; if something is not selling well, we will think of swapping in another dish.”*

Some restaurants adapt their menu based on their knowledge of local populations. The restaurant where Chef Tu works is in a part of Sydney with a large Jewish population. She told me that she tried to put more dishes on her menu that did not contain pork, as she was aware that Jewish people do not eat pork. This can be quite a challenge, as many Chinese dishes feature pork as a main ingredient. Signature Shanghai dishes such as *xiaolong bao* and *shengjian bao* are buns that are filled with mince pork. At the same time, Chef Tu felt that dishes that she would see on her annual trips back to Shanghai would not be accepted as additions to menus at the restaurant, as she works for a chain. Part of the appeal of a chain is that the dishes are popular and consistent across the different restaurants in the city.

## Conclusion

The cases in this paper have illustrated how migrant restaurant owners and chefs strike a balance between catering to the notions of authenticity held by Chinese and Caucasian clientele. Jiemin Bao writes that “By emphasising authenticity a cuisine becomes frozen in time and space” (2011: 176). Indeed many of my informants’ customers have notions of authentic Chinese food that can be traced back to a particular experience. Achieving the right balance in satisfying these customers is important for them to maximising their income. This is a process of negotiation between the chefs I have studied and their customers.

So, what are the different meanings of authentic Chinese food and how do they come about? Tan Chee-Beng notes that “the discourse of authenticity with regards to food assumes that food has an essentialised style and taste” (2011: 11). This notion of what constitutes authentic Chinese food depends on one’s experiences of Chinese food. For people such as the old Caucasian couple who are regulars at Mrs. Wu’s restaurant, an authentic Chinese restaurant is one that serves Cantonese based dishes that have been popular in Sydney since the 1960s, such as wonton soup and sweet and sour pork. For Hong Kong customers, it might be a restaurant that serves a mild *suau la tang* with several stir fried dishes like the ones they would have in Mr. Wang’s restaurant. For people from Beijing like my informant Henry, it may be Mr. Zhang’s restaurant, where they can get a true taste of home. All these restaurants are authentic Chinese restaurants in their own right. Restaurant owners need to choose which customers to cater to, in order to run profitable. At the end of the day, the decisions were not made out of sentiment, but from the need to please their customers, which is a matter of the economic reality that they face as migrants.

Many Caucasian customers are still seeking the Chinese dishes that they are familiar with, dishes that they consider to be authentic, like the old couple at Mrs. Wu’s restaurant. For immigrants, having food like it is from home is an important source of comfort in a new unfamiliar environment. On the other hand, putting local dishes on the menu takes away a sense of the unfamiliar for Caucasian diners. Mr. Zhang’s restaurant is a good example of this. When his restaurant first opened, he offered two menus: one for the Chinese clientele and one for the Caucasian customers, to meet the needs of both groups.

Migrant restaurant owners and chefs like my informants are no longer constrained by local material conditions in their reproduction of Chinese dishes that they know. The major limitation is acceptance by the customers, who have their own notions of what constitutes authentic Chinese food, based on earlier Chinese restaurant experiences that differ from those of Chinese restaurant owners and chefs. The migrant restaurant owners and chefs that I studied have changed Chinese cuisine in Sydney beyond just being predominantly Cantonese to including a variety of regional Chinese cuisines. In order to reproduce the dishes and cuisines that they have brought with them in Sydney, the chefs and restaurant owners in this study have had to negotiate the multiple authenticities held by different customers.

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