

# Celestial Suppers: The Political Economy of America's Chop Suey Craze, 1900-1930

Susan B. Carter  
Department of Economics, UC Riverside  
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## ABSTRACT

According to culinary scholars, American cuisine retained a strongly British character through most of its history. Despite the waves of immigrants from many parts of the world, ethnic cuisine did not gain a place at the American table until the food revolution of the 1970s. This paper challenges that view by developing and analyzing systematic, quantitative measures of America's foodways. I demonstrate that beginning about 1900, Americans began to embrace Chinese food. It was the start of a love affair that continues to this day.

I attribute America's chop suey craze to the entrepreneurial efforts of the Chinese who arrived in America during the Exclusion Era, the period between 1882 and 1943 when a series of legislative initiatives severely circumscribed their options. Their entry into the United States was made difficult. They couldn't naturalize. Restrictions were placed on their ability to marry, conduct businesses, and educate their children. Racism limited their employment and housing options. The Chinese responded to these constraints by organizing, moving into self-employment, and dispersing into small cities and towns throughout the country, often living as the only person of their race in their home community. When Americans began to express an interest in inexpensive, healthful, and exotic restaurant fare, the Chinese were poised to respond. A fad was born.

PRELIMINARY AND INCOMPLETE. PLEASE DO NOT CITE.

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A largely forgotten chapter in America's culinary history is the chop suey craze that swept the nation beginning in the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Adventurous Caucasians had begun visiting Chinatowns in San Francisco, New York, and other large cities as early as the late nineteenth century, but these excursions were not a part of the cultural mainstream. Donna Garbacia describes the visitors as "culinary tourists in search of inexpensive exoticism" (Garbacia 1998: 102). Samantha Barbas reports white journalists' names for them: "gawkers," "slummers," "curiosity seekers," "up to no good" (Barbas 2003: 671). Opium, gambling, and prostitution appear to have been the primary quest of at least some of these diners.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the opprobrium, newspapers regularly reported on such culinary adventurers to the general public. A three column story in the 1889 *Boston Globe* led with the headline, "Lizard's Eyes and Bird's Nest Soup by Pig-Tailed Chefs; How Almond-Eyed Celestials Serve Up Boston Baked Beans" ("Chinese Restaurants:" 1889).<sup>3</sup> Another began:

"Come and dine with me" was the cheering invitation extended to me by a jolly New York lawyer of decidedly Bohemian tendencies the other evening. But I knew my man, and was aware of his penchant for mousing into all sorts of out-of-the-way quarters of the city, where he fairly reveled in dirt and mystery and strange viands ("New York's Chinatown:" 1886).

When this *Washington Post* correspondent learned he was being invited to dinner in New York's Chinatown, his initial response was, "Thanks, awfully. But my palette is not educated up to rats and dogs yet." By the end of the evening he declared the meal "...not only novel, but it was good, and to cap the climax the bill was only 63 cents!" ("New York's Chinatown:" 1886). Yet the American public remained suspicious. An 1885 *Globe* article began:

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<sup>1</sup> What is chop suey? Culinary historian Alan Davidson defines it as: "a dish whose ingredients can vary – indeed, its very nature is that this should be so – but which usually includes things like bits of pork or chicken, bean sprouts, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, and other vegetables such as celery, all chopped, plus soy sauce and perhaps some stock; the whole to be stir-fried or simmered and served with rice or noodles" (Davidson 1999: 182).

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the prevalence of these trades see Light (1974). The Opium Exclusion Act of 1909 outlawed the importation of opium, the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act of 1914 outlawed its use. San Francisco banned the public smoking of opium ("opium dens") in 1875.

<sup>3</sup> "Celestials" was a term used in the nineteenth-century America west to describe the Chinese, who at the time were subjects of the emperor of China, also known as the Son of Heaven. Unlike some other names used at the time to refer to the Chinese, the term "Celestials" was intended as a show of respect.

The average American when he first approaches the Chinese table does so in fear and trembling. Vague presentiments of ragout of rats, mayonnaise of mice, and similar luxuries float through his mind.

It continued on, however:

Nine times out of ten he will leave the table feeling he has learned something and that the almond eyed sons of the queue are the best cooks in the world" ("Chinese Cooking:" 1885).

There must have been some interest on the part of the larger public because the newspapers continued to print accounts of exotic dinners and advice on what to expect in a Chinese restaurant and on how to order once you are there ("What a Chinese Menu is Like:" 1893). Perhaps because of these various encouragements, Americans' experimentation with Chinese food grew. The *Globe* speculated that "It is safe to say that in 1880 not more than 100 New Yorkers had ever dined in oriental style. In 1885 the number is far up among the thousands" ("Chinese Cooking:" 1885). Yet these adventurous diners remained a minority. In 1889 it wrote, "Probably very few readers of THE GLOBE are aware of the fact that there are no less than half a dozen restaurants in Boston where meals are served in the most approved Chinese manner" ("Chinese Restaurants:" 1889). Chinese ingredients remained unknown. A *New York Times* article from 1898, reporting on the establishment of a farm near Washington, D.C. dedicated to growing Chinese vegetables, described them as "four acres of queer crops," adding that,

In all Lee's farm there is not a single plant which is known to his neighbors, who are thoroughly familiar with American farming ("Lee Has a Chinese Farm:" 1898).

But by 1900 newspapers were beginning to proclaim the more wide-spread acceptance of Chinese food. In that year, the *New York Times* reported: "Judging from the outbreak of Chinese restaurants all over town, the city has gone 'chop suey' mad" ("Heard About Town" 1900). The *Los Angeles Times* declared: "With the advent of so many Chinese restaurants in different parts of the city, it is confidently declared that chop suey and other well-known Chinese delicacies are consumed more by Americans than by Chinamen" ("Graphic Pen Sketches from Afar:" 1900). A *New York Times* article from in 1903 reported on the recent movement of Chinese restaurants out of New York's Chinatown and into Caucasian neighborhoods. It began with a humorous lead-in describing the predicament of "...six guileless young strangers from Staten Island...who went into a chop suey 'joint'...ordered steak and onions [and] landed in a police station" ("Chop Suey Resorts:" 1903).

One of the attractions of Chinese food was its low price. In 1904 the *Los Angeles Times* described the growing popularity of Chinese food in Washington D.C. in the following terms:

The Chinese chop suey joints have become a feature of the after-dark lunch business of this city. With the diminution of the all-night coffee-houses has come a marked increase in the number of Chinese establishments. A few years ago a Chinaman, Fer Low opened the first chop suey establishment on Pennsylvania Avenue. He was discovered by some of the rounders "on the Bowery," who sampled his chop suey and yokami, broadly pronounced "yokimy." They declared this stuff to be good and told others of their find. Soon his dining rooms would scarcely accommodate the rush of men who wanted a dish of chop suey or yokami. Other shrewd Chinamen took the cue and soon Hung Fer Low had opposition. Now there are at least a dozen such establishments in this city, and they have plenty of patrons, too, for many Washingtonians have become very fond of the oriental dishes ("Faces in Washington:" 1904).

But demand was also growing for more upscale establishments. In 1907 the *Los Angeles Times* reported on plans to open "the most gorgeous chop suey restaurant in the world....It is said that the fittings will be of black Egyptian and white marble. The walls will be hung throughout with silk. The furnishings and building will cost about \$125,000, the furnishings alone will amount to \$75,000" ("Will Surprise Chicago:" 1907). When the restaurant opened the next year, *The Chicago Daily Tribune* devoted a full page to report on the opening of a new Chinese restaurant in the downtown that was purporting to offer an entirely more authentic and expensive version of Chinese food than what had previously been available:

A Chinese kitchen in which native chefs will labor from morning until night preparing native dishes just as they are prepared in the great kitchens of the walled empire; a huge, oriental dining room, ornamented like the banquet halls of the mandarins, with Chinese waiters moving hither and thither serving the delectable native dishes just as they are served in China. That is what the Joy Hing Lo Company will give to Chicago tomorrow night when the new Chinese restaurant in the building at the southwest corner of State and Adams streets will be formally opened with the singing of a Chinese good luck ballad in English by a Chinese tenor, dressed in the brilliant costume of singers of Peking.

The Joy Hing Lo restaurant will look like a part of China brought over the ocean and put down in Chicago; the food will be cooked as it is cooked in China and served as it is served there. Ever since the Chicagoan became a devotee of the Chinese restaurant illuminated chop suey signs have been hung out in every corner of the city – over the stairs descending to stifling cellar cafes, over second story windows, and over ornately decorated entrances to pretentious dining rooms, which are called Chinese restaurants chiefly because the waiters are natives and the tables are made of teakwood inlaid with shells and mother of pearl. In many of the Chicago Chinese restaurants the famous dishes of the orient are not prepared as they are in the kitchens of the empire. They are prepared in the American way to meet the American demand. Cheaper ingredients are used and less time is consumed in their preparation. The Joy Hing Lo Company intends to give Chicago a real Chinese restaurant in which everything is to be typically Chinese ("Joy Hing Lo:" 1908).

The article goes on to proclaim: "The Chinese as a race are the greatest epicures the world has ever known."

As the popularity of Chinese food grew, food writers began to be asked for recipes for chop suey and other Chinese delicacies. Restaurateurs were generally reluctant to share their secrets with the general public. Obtaining authentic recipes required real detective work. In 1908 the *Chicago Daily*

*Tribune* published an extensive and humorous account of its New England-bred food editor's journey to Chicago's Chinatown in search of a recipe for noodle warmein (Brown 1908). See Figure 1. Despite heroic efforts, she was not successful. Those recipes that were published at the time will appear strange to modern sensibilities. A chop suey recipe that appeared in the *Boston Daily Globe* in 1908 called for boiling strips of beef round for two hours before adding chopped celery and then boiling the concoction for another 20 minutes ("Household Department:" 1908).

Indirect evidence suggests that at least some readers were experimenting with these recipes at home. A humorous note in the *Christian Science Monitor* of 1909 read:

"George," asked Mrs. Ferguson, "how do you like the chop suey?"

"First rate, Laura," answered Mr. Ferguson. "I didn't know you could make it. I was afraid we were going to have a third warming over of the turkey. By the way, I hope there's nothing left of that turkey now – is there?"

"Yes; you're eating it." – *Chicago Tribune* ("In a New Form:" 1909).

Over time, Chinese food began to assume a more regular place in Americans' lives. In 1908 the Household Advice column of the *Boston Daily Globe* advised a correspondent to choose a Chinese theme for her 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary celebration.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary why not have it Chinese. Decorate with Chinese lanterns [sic], use chopsticks, Chinese spoons, etc. Chinese flags may be purchased for decorating. Use red as the color, as to the Chinese it is symbolical of life, love, joy and hope. Candied puffed rice could figure among the bonbons, and chop suey be served in small blue bowls ("Household Department:" 1908).

Women looking for ways to earn money working at home were advised to prepare vegetable chop suey and sell it to "students, neighbors, and acquaintances" by the pint or quart ("Here Are Some of the Ways That Women Can Earn Money at Home:" 1912). American restaurants proudly served chop suey along with American dishes ("Jack Armstrong Open Elmwood Café:" 1914). See also Figure 2. Chop suey was routinely being served at celebratory events – the completion of a movie in Atlanta ("Edison Movie Men Give Farewell Supper:" 1913); a farewell dinner for departing relatives. Notice the familiarity with which the social desk in Gary, Indiana writes about chop suey in 1913:

Mrs. Thomas Cain, Mr. Cain's mother, who has been visiting her sisters, Mrs. Preston and Mrs. Matthews, and her brother, Mr. George Hall, here, for the past ten days, left yesterday for her home in Summit, Miss., accompanied by little Nedra Johnson. A midnight chop suey was given in their honor last Thursday evening at the home of Mr. and Mr. Perry Matthews of 662-12 Connecticut Street ("News in Gary, Ind:" 1913).

It isn't even "chop suey dinner," simply a "midnight chop suey."

By the nineteen teens, dinner at a chop suey restaurant had become an intimate part of the courtship ritual. Writing in 1914, the *Chicago Tribune* reported:

The chop suey restaurant has for years filled an important place in the life of the \$12 a week clerk and the \$6 a week sales girl. It was to them what the gilded cafes and lobster palaces are to the well to do. It provided novelty, excitement, change. The young man of the tenements took his girl out for a chop suey and they derived as much pleasure from this experience as the young man and young woman of the boulevard derive from an evening at the opera and a champagne supper.

The young married couple who live in light housekeeping rooms, or even in a modest flat, rounded out a Sunday's pleasure inexpensively with a visit to an "oriental eating house." The elaborate furnishings and subdued lights gave an air of mystery and romance to the food, and for a time at least dispelled the grayness and monotony of their lives ("In Place of Chop Suey:" 1914).<sup>4</sup>

Not every young lady was pleased with this development as we see in "Goldie's" letter to *Chicago Daily Tribune* advice columnist Laura Jean Libbey in 1911:

Dear Miss Libbey: I am a young lady 20 and have gone out with many young men. Most of them have asked me to have chop suey, which I always refuse. I dread going to those places. Have never been in one, and I believe I have lost most of my beaux that way. Should I go in to try to keep their friendship, as I like to go out with them? My parents object to my going out alone.

Goldie (Libbey 1911)

By the 1920s, Americans were trying to remember back to a time when Chinese food was *not* a regular part of their diets. A weekly column in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* asked readers to submit their conclusions to a question that began, "Do you remember way back when?" In 1920 one of the winning answers was:

Chop suey first appeared and we lamped it with suspicion and then tried to eat it with a set of chopsticks. S.M.H. ("In the Wake of the News:" 1920).

In 1921 another winner read:

It was considered slumming to visit a Chinese restaurant. J.P.F. ("In the Wake of the News:" 1921).

In a sentimental end-of-the-year reflection on the year 1925, *New York Times* columnist Bertram Reinitz offered this assessment of the role of chop suey in the life of the City:

[C]hop suey has been promoted to a prominent place on the midday menu of the metropolis. This celestial concoction is no longer merely a casual commodity. It has become a staple. It is vigorously vieing with sandwiches and salad as the noontime nourishment of the young women typists and telephonists of John, Dey and Fulton Streets. It rivals coffee-and-two-kinds of cake as the recess repast of the sales forces of West Thirty-fourth Street department stores. At the lunch hour there is an eager exodus toward Chinatown of the women workers employed in Franklin, Duane and Worth streets. To them the district is not an intriguing bit of transplanted Orient. It is simply a good place to eat. They see it as a coldly commercial

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<sup>4</sup> The title of the article, "In Place of Chop Suey," refers to the writers' discovery that, "Investigators have now found many of these chop suey places to be adjunct to saloons, and not infrequently even to immoral hotels." The author asks whether there might be some other, less dangerous amusement for young people of the working classes. On the association between chop suey and romance see also: "Forgives Wife Who Fleed; Peace at Chop Suey Dinner:" 1911, "Their Married Life: Warren Takes Helen for a Chop Suey Dinner at a Chinese Restaurant:" 1913, and many of the short stories by O. Henry.

centre. With its thin thoroughfares choked by mammoth motor trucks loaded with bamboo shoots, soy beans and dried mushrooms for shipment to wherever in the five boroughs, Long Island, New Jersey and Connecticut chop suey is chopped.

The mechanical pianos that are standard equipment in the restaurants retailing this exotic edible are poorly patronized during the day, when the diners, unlike the more leisurely guests of the evening, are seeking sustenance and not diversion. Long before its emergence as an item of daytime diet chop suey achieved city-wide significance as an alleviating alternative to the young man who could not afford to act as host to a companion, however fair, at a supper club. The cover charge at a club can, in most instances, easily cover the cost of Chinese comestibles for two, with a sufficient surplus for lunch for a week for one.

Chop suey, in the opinion of a Doyers Street purveyor of it, seems destined to become a necessary of New York life. He reports that, in addition to liberal luncheon trade, he has three customers who eat it for breakfast. He says it is his dream to go back to his Canton home some day and introduce the delectable dish to his fellow-countrymen. (Reinitz 1925).

The popularity of Chinese food in general, and chop suey in particular, inspired artists working in a variety of media. Samantha Barbas (2003) provides a few examples: the popular tune, "Who'll Chop Your Suey (When I'm Gone)"<sup>5</sup> and Carol Kennicott's escape from Gopher Prairie to a Minneapolis Chinese restaurant in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, but these examples merely scratch the surface. Louis Armstrong named his first composition, written in 1925, "Cornet Chop Suey."<sup>6</sup> A music lover says of it, "His style on the cornet...produced one of the most copied jazz solos of all time." Chinese food was the subject of at least three important American paintings from the early twentieth century. Ashcan artist John Sloan (1871-1951) painted "Chinese Restaurant" (1909) as part of his effort to portray typical New York scenes that earlier artists had ignored. Abstract artist Max Weber (1881-1961) juxtaposes images, including frenetically rushing waiters, in his "Chinese Restaurant" (1915) to express the jarring effect of this popular eatery on American culture. Edward Hopper (1882-1967), perhaps America's best known realist painter in the interwar years painted "Chop Suey" (1929) in the same year he painted his iconic "The Lighthouse at Two Lights" on the coast of Maine.<sup>7</sup>

I will end my recital of evidence from newspapers and the broader culture at this point and just say that the popularity of Chinese food never waned. Unlike Americans' rejection of German food during and after World War I (Mariani 1991: 71; Mendelson 1996) or the Bush Administration's attempt to punish the French by renaming french fries as "Freedom Fries," Chinese food remained popular with Americans

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<sup>5</sup> Sidney Bechet, composer. First recorded Jan. 8, 1925 by the Clarence Williams Publishing Co.

<sup>6</sup> David Maleug provided this reference.

<sup>7</sup> Other artists and illustrators from the period who found inspiration in chop suey included Frank Walts, Helen Dryden, and A.A. Blum. See "American Humor In Art" (1915).

through shifts in international politics. Even after the Communist takeover of China and at the height of tension between China and the United States during the Korean War, Americans' retained their love of Chinese *food*. Sherrie Innes quotes from an article in the 1954 issue of *McCall's*:

The Chinese do the most wonderful ...things with food. Completely different from American cookery but so delicious and refreshing that even dyed-in-the-wool, steak-and-apple-pie Americans fall straight in love. (Helen McCully, "Let's Cook Chinese Tonight." *McCall's* January 1954: 40+ cited in Innes 2006: 39).<sup>8</sup>

Today, *New York Times* reporter Jennifer 8. Lee states that, "There are some forty thousand Chinese restaurants in the United States – more than the number of McDonald's, Burger Kings, and KFCs combined" (Lee 2008: 9).<sup>9</sup>

### Historiography of American Food and Foodways

I began this paper with what I believe is convincing anecdotal and quantitative evidence of Americans' love of Chinese food and their patronage of Chinese restaurants because the Chinese influence is either ignored or downplayed in the many culinary histories of the United States. Except for the work of Donna Gabaccia and James Comer, one would never know of Americans' interest in Chinese food from reading the culinary histories. One reason, perhaps, is the focus of many of these works. Richard Cummings's *The American and His Food* (1940) and Harvey Levenstein's *Revolution at the Table* (2003) are interested in the impact of technological and organizational changes in the production, marketing, and character of American food. Their primary cultural interest is in the governmental and professional efforts to "improve" the American diet that arose in response to these developments. There is very little in either book on culinary style.

Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont are interested in style, but they choose to emphasize the pervasive influence of English cuisine while downplaying other influences. They write:

For good or for ill, the United States was perhaps a political melting pot, perhaps a cultural melting pot, perhaps an ethnical melting pot, but it is not a culinary melting pot. Its capacity for digesting esoteric gastronomic contributions is narrowly limited (Root and de Rochemont 1976: 276).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Innes implies that the widespread popularity of Chinese food was a post-World War II development (Innes 2006: 47).

<sup>9</sup> I have not attempted to verify Lee's assertion.

<sup>10</sup> Root and de Rochemont were writing just as America's food revolution was getting underway. On the dating of the American food revolution see Kamp (2006) and Freedman (2007). It is worth pointing out that no one would write about Americans' "capacity for digesting esoteric gastronomic contributions" today in the way Root and de Rochemont wrote about it in 1976. They were clearly out of touch with the precursors for and the contemporary evidence of the culinary revolution that was taking place in America at the very time that they were writing.

The only foreign cuisines to exert any influence, in their view, were those of the Dutch and the Germans, but even these influences were minor since these cuisines greatly resembled that of the English. They assert that, "American Chinese cooking ... has not entered into the main stream of American cooking..., despite the travesties of a few of its dishes available throughout the country in cans" (Root and de Rochemont 1976: 276).<sup>11</sup> They further dismiss the influence of popular "foreign" dishes such as chop suey, cioppino, vichyssoise, and chile con carne by defining them as "entirely American."

There is, for instance, chop suey, which has gotten around the country, in restaurants or in cans, though the many Americans who eat it certainly do not think of it as part of their native fare; yet it was invented in the United States and was unknown in China until very recently, when it began to be imported into that country for the delection of the American visitors beginning to arrive there...One of the stories told to explain the birth of chop suey is that it was devised to feed the Chinese coolies brought in to give the American land transcontinental railroads; in the process, they gave the American language the word "chow" – as in "chow mein." Their idea of satisfactory chow was rice plus vegetables and, if possible, a little meat. The Chinese laborers were hard workers and their employers were willing to give them the food they wanted to encourage their continued efforts, but the railroad gang cooks know little about Chinese cooking except the vague ideas they had been able to gain from the Chinese food of San Francisco. They did their best, and what they came up with was chop suey, simple but acceptable (Root and de Rochemont 1976: 277).

John and Karen Hess adopt a similar position, comparing the "chop suey joints that serve middle America with the taste of Howard Johnson" (Hess and Hess 1972: 236).

I find this argument unpersuasive. Americans clearly viewed chop suey as exotic. Moreover, as Barbas notes:

The appearance of Chinese recipes in mainstream cookbooks and women's magazines of the 1920s marked a significant departure from established culinary preferences and patterns. Requiring no salt, bread, or dairy products, and instead such rare and unfamiliar ingredients as bean sprouts, ginger root, soy sauce, and water chestnuts, the new recipes for "Chinese Chop Suey" and chow mein must have seemed strange if not daunting, but for those who had eaten in Chinese American restaurants, perhaps slightly less challenging (Barbas 2003: 679-680).

Barbas might have also noted that the Chinese use of sauces, their use of meat as a flavoring rather than as the centerpiece of the meal, and their preference for combining a variety of ingredients into a single dish.

A newspaper reporter in 1903 noted still other differences:

Bread seldom is served in Chinatown; rice takes its place – steamed instead of boiled. Tea is served with every order; a pot of tea, drunk out of little, handleless cups. Neither cream nor sugar should go with it, for

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<sup>11</sup> It is not clear what evidence formed the basis for this conclusion since Root and de Rochemont's book contains no footnotes. For them, "footnotes are the enemies of style....The little index finger which beckons you to the bottom of the page or the back of the book, whether you obey its preemptory order or not, interrupts the flow" (Root and de Rochemont 1976: 483).

the Chinese contend that cream and sugar spoil the flavor of good tea, which they knew how to brew long before the occident was aware that such a beverage existed ("Secrets of the Chinese Viands:" 1903).

These practices stood in stark contrast to the American style.<sup>12</sup> American dieticians and home economists at the time certainly noticed these differences. Less concerned with flavor than with nutrition and economy, they hailed the Chinese use of vegetables and their quick cooking methods. In 1919, when commodity shortages in the aftermath of the World War meant high prices for many traditional American foodstuffs, the American Chemical Society urged Americans to embrace the sprouted grains, beans, and peas, employed by the Chinese.

In these days when fruits and vegetables are soaring in price beyond the reach of many persons, sprouted grains, beans, and peas, are excellent substitutes. They develop the much needed vitamins, the invisible power of which adds to the nourishing quality of foods, and is so often destroyed by improper methods of preserving, canning or cooking. The sprouting as it does in the case of malted barley develops the starch into a more digestible form which is quickly assimilated and is especially valuable for the feeding of children and invalids. The Chinese hundreds of years ago recognized the worth of foods of this class, and employ them in savory stews adding a little meat to give flavor. Thus chop suey, containing as it does sprouts of rice or beans, if not drenched with Oriental sauce, furnishes a far better food than is commonly believed ("Chemists Search for Cheap Food:" 1919).

Richard Pillsbury telegraphs his conclusion in the title of his book, *No Foreign Food*. He argues that successive waves of immigrants coming from countries outside of northwestern Europe had little impact on the American diet because they tended to live in ethnic enclaves. While they continued to consume their traditional foods, they didn't share their cuisines with the larger community. Regarding Chinese food specifically, he asserts that the La Choy Food Products Company, founded in 1920, "...attempted to market a product to a population that had little interest in the consumption of Chinese foods in restaurants and almost no interest in doing so at home" (Pillsbury 1998: 92).

James Comer, author of the North America chapter in Kenneth F. Kiple and Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas's two-volume *Cambridge World History of Food*, did note the popularity of Chinese cuisine. He pointed out that the Chinese were "Far more exotic to Americans than the Eastern Europeans... and that they:

grew Asian vegetables in their garden plots and introduced stir-frying, the use of new seasonings, and above all, the Chinese restaurant. Preserved ginger, Chinese oranges, dried seafoods, and bean curd were imported, and each immigrant was allowed to carry in two jars of ginger for personal use. Shipping records

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<sup>12</sup> Octavio Paz offers an entertaining meditation on American (Yankee) cuisine, calling it, "...a cuisine with no mysteries: simple, spiceless, nutritious food. No tricks: the carrot is the honest carrot, the potato is not ashamed of being a potato, and the steak is a bloody giant. It amounts to a transubstantiation of the democratic virtues of the founding fathers: honest cooking, one dish after another, like the sensible and plain-spoken sentences of a virtuous speech" (Paz 1972: 74). Paz was writing just as America's food revolution was getting underway.

show imports of foodstuffs as mundane as rice and as exotic as sharks' fins....Such "Chinese" dishes as "chop suey" and "chow mein"...became American favorites.... (Comer 2000: 1313-1314).<sup>13</sup>

Incomprehensibly, Kenneth Kiple's discussion of Chinese food, based – according to his footnotes -- entirely on Comer's essay, states that Chinese food *lost* its influence on Americans following the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

[T]he influence of Chinese food and the Chinese themselves ran afoul of American xenophobia when Congress yielded to public pressure and passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which took effect in 1882 and was not repealed until 1946. With neither new arrivals nor fresh ideas to invigorate it, Chinese food in America became an increasingly poor rendition of the dishes of Canton (Kiple 2007: 203).<sup>14</sup>

Donna Gabaccia subtitles her book, "Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans." She emphasizes similarities in the ways in which the ethnic foods of many different groups became incorporated into the mainstream American diet. Her goal is not so much to rank the relative importance of various cuisines as to describe the process that led to the marvelous diversity of cuisines that Americans enjoy today.

She notes that the initial response of immigrants upon their arrival was to maintain their familiar foodways:

[F]ood initiated and maintained traditional relationships, expressed the extent of social distance between people, demonstrated status and prestige, rewarded and punished children's behavior, and treated illness. Thus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even immigrants settling in urban areas tended to eat differently from native-born Americans or immigrants from other backgrounds, and with only limited recourse to processed foods (Gabaccia 1998: 51).

Since many of the familiar foodways differed significantly from those of Americans, immigrants were compelled to import or raise their special ingredients. Demand for such foods provided an opportunity for ethnic entrepreneurs who could fill the needs of their countrymen.

But ethnic entrepreneurs did not remain tied to the exclusive provision of ethnic goods in ethnic enclaves for long. Gabaccia shows that:

Even as enclave businesses flourished and the cultural conservatism of their consumers seemed invincible, savvy but financially insecure ethnic businessmen looked for less volatile markets. They began to deliver the products of the national marketplace to enclave consumers. At the same time, they also learned to lure new customers to cross ethnic boundaries and purchase dishes of ethnic roots and inspiration different from their own. A second round of multi-ethnic borrowing and blending was soon under way (Gabaccia 1998: 92).

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<sup>13</sup> How Comer arrived at these conclusions is unclear. The sources he cites, Linsenmeyer (1972) and Smallzried (1956), provide only fragmentary, anecdotal evidence for the popularity of Chinese food and cooking techniques in the United States.

<sup>14</sup> Not only is Kiple wrong regarding the influence of Chinese food, he is also wrong about the migration of the Chinese during the Exclusion Era. On Chinese migration see Lee (2003) and Chew and Liu (2004).

In Gabaccia's telling, the process was similar for all ethnic groups. She incorporates the story of the Chinese into her overall tale, describing their experience in the same terms that she uses for the Italians, the Jews, the Germans, and the Mexicans. My goal is to convince you that the Chinese story is unlike any other.

### **Chinese Restaurants in City Directories: 1900 to 1930**

The restaurant has become one of the most potent agents of change in altering the character of American dining. Virtually all of the new cuisines, cooking styles, and foods of the past several decades first entered the American diet in restaurant settings (Pillsbury 1998: 165).

If Pillsbury is right, we should be able to measure of the popularity of Chinese and other ethnic foods by observing the appearance and spread of their restaurants. Such quantification is possible using the city directories published for most of America's cities and towns beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing, for many, up through 1960. These directories provided four types of information: a complete listing of adults by residence, organized according to surname; a complete inventory of residents and establishments by address, organized according to street; a classified section listing businesses according to type and including street address, and later, telephone number; and a similar listing for governmental, religious, civic, and social organizations. The directories also included ads and a variety of annotations to the entries. In many communities these directories were published annually and included notations that described individuals' status. We know, for example, whether an individual owned, rented, or boarded and his or her occupation and place of employment. In many cases notes indicate the whereabouts of persons who had appeared in the previous year's issue but who were no longer resident in the community at the time of the current survey. Some of these individuals were known to be deceased; others to have "removed" to some other community or even to another country.

City directories were compiled by commercial publishers who updated them annually or biennially and made their money selling them within the community. In the days before telephones were widely used, city directories provided the only listing of residents, businesses, and governmental, religious, and civic organizations. Publishers also sold advertising, though they made an effort to every organization, whether or not it took out an ad. Here I use data from city directories to describe the spread of Chinese restaurants across the country in the early years of the twentieth century.

In most city directories for 1900, eating establishments were classified under a number of different headings. "Dining Rooms," "Eating Houses," "Oyster and Refreshment Saloons," and "Restaurants" were the most common headings. Root and de Rochemont and Levenstein argue that a considerable amount of

food was also sold at establishments listed under the headings "Liquor, Retail" and "Saloons" (Root and de Rochemont 1976, Chapter 28 and Levenstein 2003, Chapter 15). The growing popularity of restaurants and the passage of the Volstead Act on October 28, 1919 meant that by 1920, all eating establishments were classified under the heading "Restaurants."

Except for those establishments that took out ads, there is little to indicate the type of cuisine that was served. Only a few restaurants telegraphed their offerings in their names -- *New York Quick Lunch Oyster House and Restaurant*, *Roma Restaurant*, *American-Chinese Restaurant*, and *Hof Brau Haus* were exceptions. Most operated under the name of their proprietor. Beginning in 1920, some but by no means most, ethnic restaurants received a special identifier to indicate ethnic cuisine. For example, in the Providence, Rhode Island city directory, *Chin Lee Co.* was designated as American and Chinese and *Chin & Co.* was designated Chinese. Inexplicably, *Far East Restaurant* received no ethnic designation even though its ad clearly states that it was a Chinese and American restaurant. See Figure 3. Overall, explicit ethnic food designations were rare. The 1920 city directory for Rhode Island explicitly identifies only nine out of a total of 386 restaurants as ethnic.

I deal with these limitations by constructing two estimates of the prevalence of ethnic food. Both use restaurant names to classify the cuisine served. My lower-bound estimate classifies as ethnic those where the restaurant name itself is an explicit ethnic reference as in *Far East*, *Canton*, *Napoli* and *Venezia*. I also include those with a specific ethnic designation. My upper-bound estimate adds restaurants named with surnames of people outside of northwest Europe and French Canada. Many of these names -- *Bun Far Low*, *Allegretti Gaetano*, *Paul Pappas* -- are easy to classify. Where I was unsure I searched for the name on Ancestry.com using the federal census closest to the date of my survey. In only a few cases was I unable to classify a name using this tool.

My lower-bound estimate surely understates the number of ethnic restaurants and the amount of ethnic food served. Patrons didn't need a specific ethnic designation to know the type of food they would be served at *Bun Fong Low* or at *Cambopiano Francesco*. Another reason my measure understates the amount of ethnic food is that many Chinese restaurants carried out business under the names *Royal* and *Palace*. Because these names are ambiguous, I count them as Chinese only where I find some explicit indication that they served Chinese food. Yet another problem is that some popular ethnic dishes were also served at non-ethnic restaurants. Chicago druggists were reported to serve chop suey and chili at

their lunch counters ("Health Hurts Drug Trade:" 1908). Imogene Lin found chow mein sandwiches in lunch counter, drugstore, five-and-dime and amusement park menus:<sup>15</sup>

During its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, the sandwich was served both at non-Chinese and Chinese eateries. Every lunch counter in Providence, whether drugstore or five-and-dime, as well as all the Chinese restaurants, offered a Chow Mein sandwich. Charles' Lunch, a.k.a. Nickel Charlie's, of New Haven, Connecticut served sandwiches in the 1930s, as well. Besides the counters like Woolworth's and Kresge's, one could order a Chow Mein sandwich at amusement parks: Rocky Point (Warwick, Rhode Island, Willows Park, and, most notably, at Nathan's Famous of Coney Island (New York) which began serving it in the 1920s. Woolworth served the sandwiches at its lunch counters and snack bars until the early 1950s; it was reputed to be especially popular in the New York City area. And Nathan's continues to offer the sandwich at its Coney Island location (Lin 2004: 137).

Pittsburgh restaurants and proprietors with clearly Western-sounding names specialized in Chinese food:

Dearings' fame for its superb Chinese food served in a colorful Oriental Garden has spread afar. Gauffney's Auburn Palace, under the management of Mrs. Richard Gauffney, comely wife of our good friend Richard Gauffney, extends a special welcome to Frog patrons. They, too, specialize in Chinese food ("Local Merchants To Welcome Frog Visitors:" 1931).<sup>16</sup>

The same was true of any of a number of other "American" restaurants. See "Jack Armstrong Opens Elmwood Café" (1914). Thus, even my upper-bound estimate understates Chinese food.

Greek restaurants are something else entirely. Greeks began entering the restaurant industry in large numbers in the first decade of the twentieth century, but, unlike the Chinese or the Italians, they rarely served their national dishes. As a lengthy article in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1909 pointed out:

Of the foreigners who are invading the restaurant field in the city, Greeks are coming to the front as leaders. The Italian may run a sort of an artistic café, the Chinese may cater to the fancy trade of chop suey eaters. The Greek caters to the American workman. His meals are not fancy. They are plain and wholesome and in general strive to give one "his money's worth.".... Today every Greek who wants to make money in the restaurant business goes out of his own colony and establishes a restaurant in an American neighborhood ....According to the opinion of some of these Greek proprietors of restaurants, American cooking is the easiest thing on earth. By keeping an American cook for about two month at the time they open up the restaurant they can easily learn the "art." Then they do the cooking themselves. The reason for this is that there are no elaborate dishes to be prepared and because the American likes to have his meat cooked while he is waiting for it (Miller 1909).

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<sup>15</sup> What is a chow mein sandwich? Here is Lim's answer: "The Chow Mein part is easy enough to describe, a mixture of minced meat (pork), celery, onions and bean sprouts in gravy over deep fried noodles. The Chow Mein is placed between a hamburger bun or sliced white bread" (Lim 2004: 134). Emiri Lagasse offers an updated recipe at: <http://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/emeril-lagasse/chow-mein-sandwich-recipe/index.html>. Many thanks to Robert Boslego for the latter reference.

<sup>16</sup> FROGS stands for "Friendly Rivalry Often Generates Success." According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, "The FROGS, a social group dedicated to the mission of having a good time, has been around since 1910."

Theodore Saloutos argued that, “The general idea was to develop a profitable business that did not call for heavy overhead costs or place too great a reliance on trained skills” (Saloutos 1964: 264). Greeks pioneered the development of the American diner, which offered such American staples as sliced roast turkey, mash potatoes with gravy, and corn (Witzel 1999). Gabaccia reports that in Charleston, SC, where Greeks operated about a third of all restaurants, cafes, and lunchrooms, “They offered standard southern fare” (Gabaccia 1998: 115). Since my upper-bound estimate would greatly overstate the amount of Greek food, I don’t use it as a measure of their ethnic food, only as an indicator of Greek involvement in the restaurant business.

### **Ethnic Restaurants in Rhode Island: 1900-1930**

I begin by examining listings from Rhode Island, a state whose city directory conveniently displayed entries for all cities and towns for a given year in a single volume. By 1900, when this investigation begins, Rhode Island had already had a long urban and industrial history. The state was home to America’s first factory, founded by Samuel Slater in Pawtucket in 1790. Over the nineteenth century, Slater’s textile mill was joined by other cotton and woolen manufacturers and later by manufacturers of machine tools, silver, and jewelry. Rhode Island became the most urban, industrialized state in the nation. This growth continued during the early part of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1930, the state’s population grew from 428,556 to 687,497 with much of the increase due to immigrants drawn to its manufacturing employment opportunities. About a third of the population was foreign-born and another third native-born of foreign parents. The largest of these ethnic groups was Italian. With a population of 92,036 in 1930, they accounted for almost 20 percent of the state’s foreign white stock.<sup>17</sup> There were only 197 Chinese. The median age for the Rhode Island population was 25-29 years. Despite the high proportion of immigrants, the sex ratio in the 20 to 29 year age group was only 90.2.<sup>18</sup> Among native-born whites, 42.3 percent of women 15 years of age and older were single. In other words, a large share of the Rhode Island population were employed, single young adults, the primary patrons of restaurants in that era.

I present the results of my classification of Rhode Island restaurants by ethnicity in Table 1. It offers snapshots of the restaurant population taken ten years apart, beginning in 1900 and continuing

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<sup>17</sup> Foreign white stock includes foreign-born whites and native white of foreign or mixed parentage (U.S. Census 1932).

<sup>18</sup> The sex ratio is calculated as the number of males per 100 females.

through 1930. Numbers are displayed for the state as a whole and for each of the 12 cities and towns that had a population of 20,000 or more by 1930. Ethnic restaurants by type, calculated according to my lower- and upper-bound estimating procedures, are shown for the three ethnic groups with the largest number of restaurants – the Chinese, the Italians, and the Greeks. The Portuguese and Armenians also operated a number of restaurants in the state.

In 1900, Providence, home to about one-third of the state's residents, accounted for two-thirds of its restaurants and seven out of 10 of its ethnic restaurants. Consistent with Gabaccia's model, the ethnic restaurants appear to have been serving primarily co-ethnics. The Italian restaurants of Providence were located in the Federal Hills neighborhood, part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward in which 59 percent of Providence's Italian-born population resided. The Chinese restaurants were located in the downtown, part of the 4<sup>th</sup> ward that was home to 42 percent of Providence's Chinese.<sup>19</sup> Over time the number of Chinese restaurants increased and more of them located outside of their ethnic enclave. By 1910, there were 12 Chinese restaurants in the state, six new ones in Providence and one each in Pawtucket and Woonsocket. A decade later in 1920 the number of Chinese restaurants more than doubled for a total of 26, with new locations in Newport, Westerly, and three small towns. Within Providence ethnic restaurants began to appear outside of the downtown. By 1930, although the total declined from 26 to 24, half of the 12 larger cities and towns had at least one Chinese restaurant.

### **Chinese Restaurants Outside of Rhode Island: 1900 to 1930**

An examination of city directories from other states demonstrates that the appearance of Chinese restaurants in the early years of the twentieth century was not unique to Rhode Island, but was instead a nearly national phenomenon. Figure 4 maps the appearance of Chinese restaurants in New England cities of 25,000 or more from 1900 through 1930. In 1900 only the four largest New England cities – Boston, Providence, Bridgeport and New Haven -- had a Chinese restaurant. By 1930, there was at least one Chinese restaurant in nearly every one of these 46 communities. See Figure 5.

To measure the reach of Chinese restaurants across the country I examined city directories of all cities with a population of 30,000 or more. This lower-bound population level of 30,000 corresponds to the threshold used by the Census Bureau's *Census of Distribution* (1933), conducted in 1929, for reporting

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<sup>19</sup> I calculated the residential distribution of the Italians and Chinese from information made available on Ancestry.com. In 1900, 3,507 of the 5,929 Providence residents born in Italy lived in the 9<sup>th</sup> ward and 105 of the 246 Chinese lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> ward. As these numbers suggest, the Chinese were considerably more geographically dispersed than were the Italians.

detailed results at the city level. That census included in its canvass all restaurants, cafeterias and lunch rooms.

Table 3 summarizes the data on presence of a Chinese restaurant by city size for the 313 cities in the United States in 1930 with a population of 30,000 or more. Examining the city directories I found that every one of the 37 cities with a population greater than 250,000 had at least one Chinese restaurant. Among the 56 medium-size cities for which I could find city directories, 75 percent had at least one Chinese restaurant with an explicit ethnic identifier aimed at Americans and 91 percent had a Chinese restaurant that could be identified as Chinese through its Chinese name. Even among the small cities Chinese restaurants were quite common. Among the 191 such cities for which I was able to find city directories, 53 percent had at least one Chinese restaurant explicitly identified as an ethnic restaurant while 65 percent had a Chinese restaurant that could be identified through its Chinese name. Figure 6 plots the distribution of medium-size and small cities according to the presence of Chinese restaurants by state. Medium-size cities without Chinese restaurants are located in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Indiana. Small cities without Chinese restaurants are located in the South, Nebraska, and perhaps surprisingly, in the Western states of Nevada and Arizona. It may also be surprising that in the western states of Washington, Utah, and Colorado fewer than 75 percent of small cities had a Chinese restaurant. Many Chinese were living in those states in 1930.

### **The Demand for Restaurant Meals**

The growth in the number of Chinese restaurants occurred at a time of growth in demand for restaurant services more generally. Part of this increased demand resulted from the declining popularity of restaurant substitutes.

In 1900, restaurants were not the only – or indeed even the most important – venue for procuring meals outside the home. Hotels, boarding houses, and even saloons and taverns outnumbered restaurants and may have sold more food (Pillsbury 1990). Before the widespread availability of electricity, single men and women working away from their parents' homes lived in boarding houses and hotels without personal cooking facilities. These establishments typically offered the "American Plan" in which meals were included in the price of lodging. Saloons competed for the lucrative alcohol trade by offering free or heavily subsidized meals to accompany the drinks.

Growth in per capita income, urbanization, and the advent of trolley service (most restaurants were located in the city center) further expanded the market for restaurant services. Employment for women,

especially white collar employment, created a new clientele. The Volstead Act ("Prohibition") outlawed a major competitor. Electricity and the residential building boom of the 1920s generated alternatives to the boarding house. The automobile stimulated travel, leading to a boom in restaurants at vacation spots such as Newport, Niagara Falls, Atlantic City, and Miami.

One measure of the rapidity of restaurant growth is shown in Table 1 which lists the number of Rhode Island restaurants at the decennial years 1900 through 1930. Decadal growth rates are 76, 37, and 58 percent, respectively, for the successive ten year periods. Except for the 1920s, the number of Chinese, Italian, and Greek restaurants grew even faster. Like the Chinese, and consistent with Garbaccia's argument, the Italians increased the number of their restaurants and began locating them outside of strictly Italian neighborhoods. The patterns for Providence, Rhode Island are shown in Figure 7. But Table 2, which displays what I call "ethnic restaurant density," shows that while Italian restaurants per Italian doubled between 1900 and 1930; Chinese restaurants per Chinese increased more than 11-fold. At 121.8 restaurants per thousand Chinese in 1930, the Chinese ethnic restaurant density rate was 305 times the level for Italians and 6.5 times the level for Greeks. The increasing number of Italian restaurants largely reflected the growth in the Italian population. The increasing number of Greek and Chinese restaurants reflected significant growth in their non-ethnic customers.

### The Supply of Chinese Restaurants

Why did the Chinese devote so much effort to running restaurants compared with the Italians? How were the Chinese able to promote their own cuisine while the Greeks -- heavily involved in the restaurant industry and heirs to a sophisticated, glorious culinary tradition -- served American, but not Greek, food? The explanation, I suggest, derives from three factors: extreme racist attitudes and practices directed toward the Chinese, the strength and operation of Chinese mutual aid societies known as *huiquans*; and economies of scale and scope in the operation of ethnic restaurants.

#### *Racism*

The Chinese first began arriving in the United States in the early 1850s and from the beginning they faced a level of discrimination that had few parallels. While they were valued by employers for their industry and their willingness to work for low wages in remote locations such as mines and on railroad construction projects, these same qualities engendered the wrath of other workers. Responding to public uprisings, laws passed as early as the 1850s limited the ability of the Chinese to make mining claims and

own land (Brown and Philips 1986 and Boswell 1986). Jean Pfaelzer (2007) describes episodes of mob action that resulted in murder, the seizure of Chinese property, and the forced abandonment of their businesses and homes. These hostile actions culminated (but did not end) in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which severely limited Chinese entry into the United States.

After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Chinese faced restricted prospects. They couldn't naturalize. In many states they could not marry outside their race, conduct businesses, or educate their children. Racism limited their employment and housing options. Shih-Shan Henry Tsai cites a study of Americans conducted in 1927 that found "only 27.0 percent who said they would accept Chinese as fellow workers, 15.9 percent as neighbors, and 11.8 percent as friends" (Tsai 1988: xi).

Mining and construction had been major employers of the Chinese in the nineteenth century, so when the railroad-building era came to an end and the mining claims ran out, the Chinese moved into general labor, domestic service, laundries, and restaurants. In Ivan Light's view, these occupational choices were the direct result of discrimination that the Chinese faced in other sectors. He writes:

The Chinese did not "by nature" gravitate into laundry and restaurant businesses. These operations required very long hours of work at low rates of remuneration. When higher paying wage or salary jobs became available, they took them. The Chinese preference for high wages was indicated by the alacrity with which they abandoned Chinatown occupations when the labor shortages of World War II opened new employment opportunities for them. Since World War II, salaried white collar jobs have become increasingly available to college-educated Chinese-Americans who prefer these jobs to self-employment in restaurants, curio stores, or laundries. But prior to 1940, discrimination in employment virtually eliminated opportunities for Chinese in the general labor market. The classic small businesses of prewar Chinese were, in this sense, monuments to the discrimination that had created them (Light 1972: 7-8).

Roger Daniels, in a case study of the Chinese in Butte, Montana, elaborated on these themes:

[H]ow to explain the exceptional growth in "outpost" Chinatowns like Butte of businesses that catered largely to non-Chinese customers? Here a number of factors obviously interacted: Chinese men were driven from some of their earliest occupations, such as placer mining; the relative scarcity of women in the American West pushed these men into "women's work"; they came from a culture in which business and business dealings were highly developed; the law itself both barred them from many professions and gave special preference to what were called "treaty merchants." The Chinese American could exploit the labor of other Chinese, sometimes his kinsmen and usually his fellow clansmen, who had fewer employment options than other American workers. Furthermore, the Chinese employer often had a special hold on his workers – many of them were "illegals" whom he could turn in (Daniels 1988:77).

Daniels also mentions the possible importance of "rotating credit associations" but ultimately decides that they cannot in and of themselves explain Chinese business success since other ethnic groups developed similar institutions (Daniels 1988: 77).

Figure 8, calculated from the IPUMS, shows the industrial distribution of Chinese males 14 years of age and older by region from 1900 through 1940. The patterns it displays are consistent with the outlines

of the story as told by Light and Daniels. The laundries and later restaurants employ large and increasing fractions of the Chinese workforce over time, but only in those regions of the country where alternate employment was not available. Particularly noteworthy are the employment patterns of the Chinese in Hawai'i (a region not studied by either Light or Daniels). There the Chinese were generally well integrated into the larger society and could select from a wide range of industries (Glick 1980 and McKeown 2004). It is therefore notable that laundry and restaurant work occupy only a tiny fraction of the Hawaiian Chinese labor force.

Chinese occupational change was accompanied by geographic change. Daniels called attention to these "great and continual changes" in the Chinese community during the Exclusion Era, "with geographic changes being only the most easily noticeable" (Daniels 1988: 68). He focuses on the movement of the Chinese out of the rural areas and small towns where they were initially employed in mining and construction activities and emphasizes the emergence of "Chinatowns" in big cities. He notes that:

In 1880, for example, only 21.7 percent of Chinese lived in cities of over 100,000. This percentage increased with every census. By 1910 almost half (48.5 percent ) of Chinese Americans lived in such cities. By 1940 the figure had risen to 71 percent (Rogers 1988: 69).

Perhaps even more remarkable, however, was the Chinese movement into smaller-sized communities without Chinatowns. Even as the total number of Chinese in the country fell, small towns across America witnessed the arrival of an often solitary Chinese laundryman or restaurateur.<sup>20</sup>

One measure of the timing and extent of this Chinese American diaspora can be constructed with published census data and summarized using the Duncan index of dissimilarity in state of residence. The results of comparing the proportionate distribution of the Chinese and non-Chinese populations across states and over time as shown in the published censuses is presented in the first column of Table 4. The index plummets from 97.3 in 1870 to only 55.6 by 1920. To provide some perspective, column 2 displays the same index for the black versus the non-black population. It shows that the impact of the fabled "Great Migration" was to reduce the Duncan index from 67.7 to 49.1 between 1910 and 1920, after which it rose to 54.5 in 1920. Altogether, this is a considerably smaller reduction in geographic concentration than that achieved by the Chinese.

Table 5 displays another set of calculations designed to place the geographic dispersion of the Chinese population in an even broader context. These indices are calculated from county-level data for

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<sup>20</sup> A highly regarded study of the social isolation experienced by Chinese laundrymen of this period is Siu (1987), originally published as the author's Ph.D. dissertation in 1953.

1920. They compare the dispersion of the Chinese with that of other racial and ethnic minorities at the time. Here the index for Chinese is 64.0, substantially lower than that for the numerically-similar Japanese (87.5) and Portuguese (91.1). At this county-level of aggregation it is even lower than that of the black population which numbered almost 10.5 million and had already begun its Great Migration to the North. The peripatetic Italians were more geographically dispersed than the Chinese, but, as the table shows, they were also more than 25-times as numerous.<sup>21</sup>

For such a tiny population to achieve such a high degree of geographic dispersion, individuals had to move into communities where there were very few persons like themselves. If the 61,639 Chinese resident in the 48 states of the United States in 1920 were distributed equally across the 3,063 counties at the time, each county would be home to approximately 20 Chinese (average county *total* population was almost 34,363). Table 6 displays the actual percentage of 1920 counties according the number of their Chinese residents. 61.2 percent of all counties had no Chinese residents at all, but that percentage falls by half, to 30.7 percent when we restrict the sample to counties with a population of 25,000 or more. An amazing 10.4 percent of all counties and 14.4 percent of counties with populations of 25,000 or more had exactly one Chinese resident. Another 20.3 percent of counties had from two to 20 Chinese persons, 36.9 percent if we limit the sample to the more populous counties. Every county with a population of 250,000 or more – and such counties were home to approximately a third of the total population – had at least one Chinese resident.

One of the implications of these indices for the chop suey craze is that they show that many Chinese had already moved out of California, out of Chinatowns, and into small cities and towns across America before Americans fell in love with Chinese food. These migrants weren't restaurateurs at the time; they were laundrymen.

Neither Light nor Daniels comments on the shift over time of the Chinese out of laundries and into the restaurant business. The shift is evident in the census data and it was noted by the press at the time. The popular analysis was that the Chinese could afford to leave the laundry business because their growing experience with American language and culture and also because of their thrift. The combination allowed them to accumulate the necessary capital for establishing restaurants; they were motivated to do so because restaurants were more profitable. Thus, the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1924:

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<sup>21</sup> The IPUMS sample for 1920 does not permit a more detailed study of the geographic dispersion of the Chinese. Except for California and Hawai'i, no state has more than 71 individuals included in IPUMS.

Laundries run by Chinese in this country are not nearly so conspicuous as they were a few years ago. Their number is decreasing. Chinese who first came to America were poor and ignorant, and could not go into any business that required capital or a knowledge of the language and customs of the country.

In order to be independent they resorted to the laundry business which required little of either, and they began to save money and acquire the necessary knowledge for a more pleasant and a more profitable occupation. There are fewer Chinese laundrymen today, but in New York alone Chinese own and operate more than three hundred restaurants ("Chop Suey vs. Shirts:" 1924: 2).<sup>22</sup>

The *Wall Street Journal* analysis implies that the Chinese came to the United States with few assets and through hard work and abstemious living, gradually amassed the capital that allowed them to move into a more profitable industry. That is the standard immigrant story, and it surely was part of the Chinese story as well. But there is another, possibly more important, factor that contributed to their success. It involved the huiguans.

### *Huiguans*

Huiguans are transnational Chinese mutual aid societies built around similarity of dialect and surname. The first American huiguan was organized in San Francisco in 1851. By 1862, when there were six, they joined together in a federal association with the English name Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. As the Chinese moved into new cities they brought their huiguans with them, establishing local branches that operated with some autonomy while retaining strong ties to similar organizations in other cities. San Francisco's Chinese Benevolent Association remained the most prominent branch and was known to Americans as the Chinese Six Companies (Hoy 1942, Lai 1987, Tsai 1988: 46, Brown 1995, McGlinn 1995, Hsu 2000, and Yee 2003).

The huiguans provided a wide variety of services to Chinese Americans. Tsai notes that they were the first contacts in-coming Chinese made upon their arrival in America and the last before their departure.

As soon as an immigrant ship arrived from China, the company sent an interpreter to the wharf to welcome the arrivals. In the company headquarters, the new immigrants were furnished water, fuel for cooking, and a room in which to spread their mats. Chinese laborers from inland towns and mining camps, embarking for return to China, often stayed in the company houses instead of in the more expensive boarding houses. The sick and indigent were also welcomed; the idle and irresponsible, however, were quickly weeded out...For all except transients and invalids, the membership fee was \$10, in the 1850s. Finally, members intending to return to China were required to make that fact know, so their accounts could be examined and measures taken to prevent their departure if debts remained unpaid (Tsai 1988: 48).

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<sup>22</sup> A similar article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* during the same month. See "Chinese Laundries Gone; Restaurants Are Many" (1924).

The huiguans also helped their members find employment and obtain credit and insurance. They provided public goods such as fire safety, garbage collection, and even police protection that were often denied the Chinese by hostile white communities. They made provisions for their members' observance of religious rituals, adjudicated disputes, and provided legal services. They also organized trade between China and the United States, including the importation of Chinese specialty foods such as rice, soy products, sauces, dried seafood, and ethnic fruits and vegetables that were otherwise unavailable in the United States at the time. Robert Spier (1958) uses evidence from the railroads for which the Chinese furnished much of the manual labor to show that these workers had access to their ethnic foods even in remote locations. Critics of the Chinese argued that the huiguans also engaged in illegal activities including the importation of "coolies" and prostitutes, the operation of brothels and gambling and opium dens, and the extortion of money from their own members (Tsai 1988: 48).

Passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act greatly increased the power of the huiguans. Under the law, only "treaty merchants" and their families, religious figures, scholars, and the foreign-born children of American-born Chinese *men* were allowed to enter the country. Enforcement was tough and even persons with the proper credentials were challenged upon their arrival (Barde 2008). Just prior to passage of the Act, in 1880, the Chinese population numbered 105,465. After its implementation the Chinese population fell precipitously so that at its trough in 1920 it was only about half its 1880 level. Population figures disaggregated by sex and nativity show that the declines were concentrated among the foreign-born males who constituted the majority of the Chinese population in 1880.

Despite the stringent entry restrictions, recent scholarship shows that a surprisingly large number of Chinese were able to enter the United States. Because the number of Chinese at successive censuses is consistent with a "no migration" model and also because of the paucity of detail on age and country of birth in the published censuses, scholars for many years assumed that the Chinese Exclusion Act effectively prohibited new entrants and that Chinese Americans during the Exclusion Era constituted an "aging bachelor population" of survivors from the earlier era of open borders.

Recent work by Kenneth S. Y. Chew and John M. Liu (2004) and by Erika Lee (2003, 2006) demonstrate that this characterization cannot be sustained. Using the IPUMS samples from the manuscript censuses, Chew and Liu show that although the number of Chinese at each census is consistent with a "no migration" model, there was in fact quite a bit of in- and out-migration of Chinese. Their conclusions derive from their discovery of many more individuals in the young-adult age groups than would be predicted by the number of those ten years younger in the previous census. They write, "...no plausible combination of vital

rates accounts for the observed population structures" (Chew and Liu 2004: 65). Through a process of elimination they conclude that:

Notwithstanding immigration policy intended to preclude two-way migration, our projections indicate that many (if not most) Chinese who left the United States were replaced, one-for-one, by others (Chew and Liu 2004: 66-67).

Because of the small size of the IPUMS samples, however, Chew and Liu were not able to analyze the characteristics of the post-Exclusion Act migrants. Lee's investigations of the reports of the Commissioner-General of Immigration for the period 1910 through 1924 suggest that these later migrants were quite different from the laborers who predominated prior to Exclusion. She finds that a large proportion of the men were new or returning merchants and their sons and that the women were merchants' wives and daughters (Lee 2006: 8, 11). She is also impressed by the volume of the flow, concluding:

...considering the immense barriers that the Chinese exclusion laws posed to new immigrants, returning residents, and citizens alike, the fact that over 300,000 Chinese successfully defied exclusion is testament to their persistence and motivation (Lee 2006: 21).

Since the total Chinese American population in the United States in 1920 was less than 62,000, many of those 300,000 entries had to have been made by repeat migrants.

Some insight into how the character of the Chinese community was affected by migration is provided by Table 7, which compares various attributes of the Chinese who had migrated into the United States during the ten years prior to the census with the rest of the Chinese American population. Surprising, given the stringency of the restrictions and of border enforcement, recent migrants comprised a substantial share of the Chinese American population during the Exclusion Era. In the year with the lowest value, 1910, their share is 11.3 percent. In 1900 it is almost a third. Between 1910 and 1930, even as immigration law was becoming more restrictive and the native-born Chinese population was growing through natural increase, the proportionate representation of recent arrivals grew. Constituting only 11.3 percent of the Chinese American population in 1910, the recent arrival share grew to 20.4 percent by 1930. The large share of recent arrivals and the large number of arrivals (which must have been matched by departures) is consistent with the emphasis in the institutional histories of Chinese Americans on the transnational character of their community. See for example, Hoy (1942) and Hsu (2000).

The growing share of recent arrivals is important, in part, because their personal characteristics differed substantially from those of the native-born Chinese Americans and from those who arrived at an earlier time. The recent arrivals were younger, less likely to settle in the Western states, and more likely to

be engaged in whatever industry happened to be the growing industry for the Chinese at the time of their arrival. Surprisingly, they were similar to American-born Chinese and earlier arrivals in their English language fluency, that is, they were amazingly fluent in English! In 1910, 42 percent of Chinese recent arrivals could speak English; in 1920 the share was 76 percent. The other important distinction of recent migrants is that they were much more likely than the others to be living in households as a non-relative. Some of the "households" were boarding houses, but many were headed by co-ethnics and included only one or two non-relatives. Overall these measures suggest that for the Chinese – and perhaps more so than for other ethnic groups -- migration to America was a business venture. The characteristics and apparent motivations of recent migrants from China would appear to have played an especially important role in enabling the Chinese to capitalize on the new American fondness for exotic restaurant meals.

To understand the mechanisms that strengthened the power of the *huiguans*, it is useful to focus on the avenues through which Chinese could enter the United States during the Exclusion Era. Under the new law there were only two potentially large classes of persons born in China could legally enter – merchants and their immediate families and China-born children of Chinese men born in the United States.<sup>23</sup> To qualify as a merchant one had to show proof of ownership of a trading company or similar business organization. This requirement could be satisfied by having one's name listed as a partner in an American business organization. It appears that there developed, in response to the new law, a transatlantic market for such listings. Chinese Americans, operating through their *huiguans*, could sell "partnerships" to Chinese wishing to enter the United States. Emma Woo Louie describes some evidence supportive of this conjecture:

During the Chinese exclusion period, a Chinese store may have had many more owners than was expected of a small business because being a merchant was a viable way of making a living in this country and to being able to bring a wife from China. For example, in 1906, the Man Jan Company in San Francisco listed 29 partners and the Peking Bazaar listed 18 partners in 1916. No doubt some were laborers who were partners in name only because this was the only way they could bring their families to this country. (After the role of a Chinese merchant was defined in 1893 (28 Stat. 8), immigration authorities required Chinese stores to submit partnership lists so that they could keep track of those claiming this exempt classification.) (Louie 1998: 101).

To enter as the China-born child of an American-born Chinese male required that a male American citizen of Chinese descent had previously established his American citizenship with immigration authorities, usually by showing an American birth certificate. He would then have had to have left for China and spent some time there. Upon his return he could either bring his China-born child with him, or, as was more

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<sup>23</sup> Altogether there were ten classes of Chinese exempt from exclusion but only the merchants and China-born children of American-born Chinese men were numerically important. See Tsai (1988).

common, bring evidence of a child or children born to him while he was abroad. These claims of children born in China created “slots” that could later be used to facilitate the immigration the child or children but also of persons who would otherwise be denied entry. There was strong demand for these “slots.” Evidence suggests that transnational Chinese organizations bought and sold such slots and that they provided coaching to potential immigrants on strategies for getting through U.S. border control. Unrelated persons making use of these slots are referred to as “paper sons” (since almost all of those making use of the slots were males) or more generally, “paper families” (Lau 1997).

The Chinese had developed strong family, business, and fraternal organizations even prior to the Exclusion Act, but, as Estelle Lau argues, that U.S. immigration law and the Chinese response to it greatly strengthened those ties:

Adoption of these techniques was not without long-term consequences for the Chinese – they were forced to change their names, adopt fictitious family histories, and maintain these deceptions over time until these fictions themselves became inescapable elements of the stories the Chinese told about themselves. These manipulations not only changed the ways Chinese spoke and understood themselves, but it changed the ways in which they interacted as a community and with the greater population. The need for the paper slot to roughly match the individual seeking to enter created a market that extended beyond immediate kinship. And the need to learn and create a plausible family in the eyes of immigration inspectors required a substantial level of coordination within the Chinese community in the United States and China. As the network of paper kin developed and was maintained over time, the Chinese became mutually interdependent, liable, and obligated to each other (Lau 2007: 7).

Scholars offer conflicting estimates of the quantitative impact of these practices. We will probably never know the precise extent of illegal entry, but the IPUMS data allow us to construct an indirect measure, the proportion of the Chinese population known by the most popular Chinese surnames. If entry restrictions strengthened the cohesiveness of the Chinese community and strengthened the position of those whose assets allowed them to buy and sell slots, then we should see wealthy clans growing at the expense of the others. The manuscripts from the federal censuses up through 1930 provide surnames of the enumerated population and the IPUMS makes these available in an electronic format. Table 8 shows the share of the Chinese American population with the ten most common surnames at each census data. For the years 1900 through 1930, I also report the fraction of recent arrivals who share the ten most popular surnames.<sup>24</sup> Consistent with the argument that U.S. immigration law strengthened the power of the best established clans, the figures show a strong increase in the share of the Chinese American population using the ten most popular surnames along with an even stronger concentration of the recently-

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<sup>24</sup> Emma Woo Louie argues that by the late nineteenth century American census takers were systematically and accurately recording Chinese names. In the early years of Chinese immigration to the United States, however, generic names such as “Chinaman, John Chinaman, and Chinese” were frequently recorded in the census. Louie also notes that the vocative “Ah” was recorded as a surname during the nineteenth century and continues to be listed as such in the *Soundex* (Louie 1998: 97-101).

arrived population with those names. By 1930, over a third of all Chinese Americans belonged to one of the ten most predominant Chinese surname groups. No other ethnic group comes anywhere close.

### *Economies of Scale and Scope*

Most early-twentieth century American restaurants were small-scale operations. They involved little capital, advertising, special equipment, ingredients, or special training for their chefs and wait staffs. Indeed, the modest requirements and ease of entry into restaurant work is what made the industry so attractive to the impoverished Greeks. But a Chinese restaurant –or, for that matter, any other ethnic restaurant operating outside of its own ethnic neighborhood – was different. Precisely because it was selling an exotic experience, its costs were potentially high. To make good on its claim to the exotic, such restaurants had to offer hard-to-find ingredients, special plates and other service items, unique menus, and secret recipes. Non-ethnics had to be encouraged to give this new experience a try.

Imagine for a moment the logistical difficulties facing an independent restaurateur wishing to establish a Chinese restaurant in, say, a small town in Western Massachusetts in 1920 that had never before been exposed to this type of ethnic cuisine. Where would he procure the soy sauce, tofu, oyster sauce, bean sprouts, bok choy, and other necessary inputs? How could he be assured of continued supplies for the long term? How would he finance the provisioning of the necessary supply chains? One could imagine long-term contracts accomplishing these supply requirements, but where would the finance for such contracts come from? Imagine the advertising campaign required to persuade Western Massachusetts residents accustomed to meat and potatoes to try something different.

Contrast the problem facing an independent restaurateur with the opportunities available to an organized entity that supplied and managed a large number of Chinese restaurants. Such an entity could buy exotic ingredients in bulk – contracting for the production of ingredients such as bean sprouts that could be grown in the United States, arranging for the importation of ingredients such as shark fin that were available only in China. It could standardize the format of Chinese restaurant menus and centralize their printing. It could set up a system for the training of chefs and the selection of new restaurant sites. It could regulate competition to prevent too many Chinese restaurants from selecting any particular location. Under such an organization the cost of provisioning *each individual restaurant* could be lower. Such reductions in the cost per restaurant as the number of restaurants increase are called economies of scale.

Other scale effects also derived from reputation. Given the white community's hostility toward the Chinese and their suspicion of their ingredients and hygiene, it is difficult to imagine how such restaurants

could attract their first patron, let alone develop a loyal clientele in the absence of positive publicity surrounding Chinese restaurants in other cities. Because of these reputation effects, the success of any individual restaurant was dependent upon the quality of all of others. Each had an interest in promoting the success of his colleague. Each was engaged, either consciously or unconsciously, in marketing the services of other present and future Chinese restaurants. Efficiencies associated with marketing the Chinese restaurant are called economies of scope.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Chinese organized to take advantage of these economies of scale and scope soon after Chinese food became popular with Americans. A 1903 article in the Chicago Daily Tribune describes a "Chop Suey Trust: Has Tentacles in Chicago." It is worth reproducing the article in full because it describes the wide range of Chinese foods admired by non ethnics, the movement toward single ownership and control over Chicago's Chinese restaurants very soon after the chop suey fad took off, and also the possible consequence for consumers of unified ownership—higher prices.

And now it is a chop suey trust.

Chicago epicures who have extended their gastronomic adventures to the mysteries of chop suey, bird's nest soup, gamgott, chow mein, and a score of other Chinese delicacies are appalled to learn that prices are going up.

Twenty-five of the thirty-five Chinese restaurants in the city have been absorbed by a Chinese company. The others are holding out for better offers, but the trust has threatened to cut rates and drive out competitors who refuse its terms.

Time was when Chicago could boast of but two chop suey cafes, one in State street, the other in South Clark street. Now Clark street has a dozen, and scarcely a principal street but has its Chinese cafes. Most of them are presided over by chefs and waiters from the Chinese colony in South Clark street,

At first the resorts were owned by individual companies, many of which were engaged in mercantile business in Clark street. Gradually the Hip Lung company and representatives of the Six companies in Chicago bought one restaurant after another, until now Hip Lung is the chop suey king of Chicago.

How soon the rumored raise in the prices of Chinese dishes will come no one in Clark street would divulge yesterday. It seems that the plans of the trust have leaked out prematurely, the negotiations for the restaurants outside the combination still being under advisement.

"Yes, I suppose you call it a trust," said Lung Chen, one of the prime movers in the consolidation. "Americans have trusts, why not Chinamen? Chop suey business good business – better when all in together. Prices go up? Mebbe, can't tell. Americans put up prices, sometimes, eh?" ("Chop Suey Trust Octopus Has Tentacles in Chicago:" 1903).

Another article describes a Philadelphia-based chop suey trust soliciting participants from the Washington DC area in 1907 ("Chop Suey Will Not Go Up:" 1907). Also suggestive of the prevalence of organized restaurant businesses is evidence that restaurant space owned by a popular New York nightclub, put out of

business by Prohibition, was purchased by “a syndicate of American and Chinese food dealers who converted it into a chop suey restaurant” (“James Churchill, Restaurateur, Dies.” 1930). I plan to do further explorations into the number and character of such organizations. For now I can provide a glimpse into how these organizations may have operated by looking at the establishment and management of a Chinese restaurant in Northampton, Massachusetts in the early twentieth century.

### **The Restaurant Sector and the Chinese Restaurant in Northampton, Massachusetts, 1900 – 1960**

Northampton, Massachusetts is a small community in western Massachusetts located in the Pioneer Valley on the eastern bank of the Connecticut River. It was founded in 1684. By 1900 it was a local center of industry, commerce, transportation, education and the arts. It is home to Smith College, a small liberal arts college for women, one of the “Seven Sisters” and then one of four institutions of higher education in the area. In 1900 it boasted a population of 18,643 which rose to 24,381 by 1930. In 1930, 20 percent of the population was foreign born and another 40 percent were native born of foreign parents. The predominant ethnicities were French Canadian, English Canadian, and Italian.

In 1900 Northampton supported only seven restaurants but had 15 saloons and several hotels, all of which served food. There were nine laundries, six of which were operated by Chinese. There were no ethnic restaurants. All but one of the restaurants took the names of its proprietor. Two – Miss Eda M. Chapman and George H. Lester, proprietor of the Union Lunch room – had begun operation only that year. The ads taken out by two of the restaurants in town, and shown in Figure 9, give some sense of these restaurants’ character. Charles A. Daniels, who called his establishment a “Dining Room and Domestic Bakery” combined a retail food establishment with cooking, baking, and catering. The Union Lunch Rooms catered to repeat customers, offering a discounted price to those willing to pay in advance for 21 meals. It served “Regular Dinner,” meaning that a fixed meal was offered each day for patrons to take or leave as they saw fit.

Ten years later, in 1910, the number of restaurants had grown to ten and saloons to 18. Only T.C. Leahy’s night lunch survived from 1900. While most restaurants continued to be identified by the proprietor’s surname, and continued to combine meals with other services, some changes had taken place. The Ideal Restaurant was now offering “Cooking to Order” in addition to “Regular Meals.” This is the more modern style of service in which patrons sit at individual tables and order from a menu. Another innovation involved specialization in the lunch trade, offering quick hot lunches to workers. F. W. Woodward called his restaurant “*Woodward’s Lunch*” and emphasized lunches, soda, and ice cream in his ad. He reported

being closed “only from 1.00 a.m. to 4.00 a.m.” There were seven laundries in town, three of them operated by Chinese.

Northampton’s first Chinese restaurant arrived in 1917 when the *Pekin* opened in a venue just off Main Street at 20 Center. The 1920 directory indicates that it was operated by Tom Lee, someone who apparently moved to Northampton for the restaurant business since he is not listed in the directory the year before. Mr. Lee joined six other Chinese residents of Northampton (including another Tom Lee), all of whom operated laundries and lived on the premises of their establishments.

Perhaps to emphasize its character and menu, the restaurant’s name was changed to *Pekin Chinese and American* for its listing in 1918. Northampton’s population at the time was about 20,000 and the town supported 14 other restaurants, 11 hotels, a number of boarding houses and 15 saloons. There was a lot of turnover among the restaurants; their median age was only three years.

The *Pekin* appeared in Northampton at a time of substantial change in the restaurant industry. I have already mentioned the shift from set meals to cooking to order and the rise of the lunch trade. These innovations were clearly popular in Northampton. Altogether, five of the 15 restaurants in town in 1917 included the word “lunch” in their name. There were no lunch rooms just 16 years earlier. Still another innovation was to cater specifically to women who, either because of modesty or outright prohibition, did not eat in saloons and taverns. Two of Northampton’s 1917 restaurants call themselves “Tea Rooms.”

The Chinese-American restaurant, then, responded to the demands of the time. It offered a selection of items to be ordered off a menu; the food was cooked to order, served quickly, and served in an environment that was comfortable for ladies and families as well as for gentlemen. On top of it all, Chinese food was inexpensive. Ethnic restaurants today display many of these same set of characteristics as the Chinese restaurants of the early-twentieth century, yet what is striking about the Northampton restaurant scene in 1917 is that the *Pekin Chinese and American* was the only explicitly-ethnic restaurant in town. To be sure there were proprietors whose names suggest ethnic origins outside of England – Beaudry, Boyden, Callahan, Pinkosh, Prokup, and Uvanni – but none of them advertised their offerings as ethnic.

The 1920s were a boom time for Northampton restaurants. One stimulant was Prohibition, which became the law of the land in January 1920. The closing of saloons and taverns removed an attractive substitute. With the alcohol banished, men had no choice but to dine in the types of establishments that had been favored by women all along. Prohibition also hurt the profitability of those restaurants that had served beer, wine, and spirits. With the opportunity for high markups eliminated, restaurateurs had to focus on reducing the cost of their food and their service. Self-service and simplified menus became more

common. The desire to reduce service must have also been stimulated by the end to unrestricted immigration which was followed by a surge in average hourly earnings.

The number of Northampton restaurants grew steadily so that by 1929 there were over 75 percent more restaurants per capita as compared with the beginning of the decade. Fifty-six new restaurants opened during the 1920s while only 45 closed; the median age of establishments rose from three to four years. Of the 29 restaurants in operation in 1929, six were tea rooms, five luncheonettes or lunch wagons, and two diners. The town also sported a cafeteria and a sandwich shop. Restaurants were increasingly identified by cute phrases ("SOS Sandwich Shop", "Tarry-a-While Tea Shop" and "White Owl Diner") rather than their proprietors' surnames. A number of restaurants were operated by proprietors with non-British surnames. Yet, Chinese remained the only explicitly ethnic cuisine that was offered. While the Chinese restaurant seemed to prosper, the number of Chinese laundries in the city shrank. In 1929 there were only two Chinese laundries, down from four at the beginning of the decade.

Northampton's second Chinese restaurant arrived in 1920, just as the restaurant boom was taking off. The *Royal Restaurant* located at 40 Main Street, just around the corner from the railroad station in the premises vacated by Sydney Hall's *Ideal*. During its first year in town it took out an ad in the city directory describing itself as "Chinese and American" and a "First Class Restaurant with Reasonable Prices." See Figure 10. The proprietor is identified as "Wong & Co." The residential portion of the directory lists four Wongs -- Berry, Sing B., Suey, and W. James --all residing on the restaurant premises. None of these individuals appeared as residents of Northampton the year before, suggesting that they, like Tom Lee, moved to Northampton specifically in order to operate their restaurant. It is perhaps noteworthy that these proprietors were members of the two most powerful Chinese clans in the United States at the time. Nonetheless, the *Royal's* arrival may have been too much competition for the *Pekin Chinese and American*. In any case, the restaurant and its proprietor, Tom Lee, disappeared the following year. I could find no trace in the public record of what became of him.

The *Royal* remained in operation through 1927 although it experienced considerable turnover of its personnel. Berry Wong left town in 1922 though his name continued to be listed as one of the proprietors. In 1923, Suey and W. James Wong removed to China, P. Howe Wong arrived in Northampton and assumed the role of sole proprietor. Sing B. Wong also disappeared in 1923, leaving no public information regarding his whereabouts. P. Howe Wong appears to have run the *Royal* by himself through 1926, but in 1927 Frank Wong joined him as a renter and presumably as an assistant. The next year, 1928, P. Howe Wong removed to China, B. Pang Wong arrived, and the restaurant changed its name to *Wong & Co.*, though it continued to operate in the same location.

*Wong & Co.* operated from 1928 through 1933 with personnel changes that mirrored those of the *Royal*. In 1930 Frank (sometimes listed as Frankie)<sup>25</sup> removed to Lawrence, Massachusetts and was replaced at *Wong & Co.* by Jimmie Wong. Jimmie stayed only a year so that from 1931 through 1933 the restaurant was again run under the sole direction of B. Pang Wong.

By this point Northampton, along with the rest of the country, was feeling the effects of the Great Depression. The number of restaurants actually grew over the course of the 1930s from 30 to 42. But of the 72 new restaurants that were founded over the decade, 62 subsequently closed. These years were of course, the very worst ones of the Great Depression and it was a time of great turmoil. Among those founded between 1930 and 1939, 21 survived only a year; another 12 for only two years. An apparent paradox is that despite the high unemployment and reduced incomes in the communities, the number of restaurants per capita grew substantially. It would appear that at least some of the new restaurants were similar to the curb-side apple carts that also appeared at this time, operated by people searching for an alternative source of income after losing their wage or salary jobs.

In 1934 B. Pang Wong left for China and was replaced by Sam Wong, who changed the name of the restaurant back to the *Royal*, while again keeping it at its original location. The next year B. Pang Wong reappeared from China to join Sam while another employee, Charlie Wong, removed to Boston. In 1936 B. Pang Wong again left for China – this time apparently for good – leaving the *Royal* in the hands of Sam Wong. The next year Sam removed to Boston and the *Royal* was run for two years by the first person not named Wong – a Ying Yee Fon. Fon removed to Burlington Vermont in 1940 when Charles Wong appeared and renamed the restaurant *Pagoda*, again keeping it at the same location.<sup>26</sup> This situation

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<sup>25</sup> It is possible that Frank and Frankie are two different persons.

<sup>26</sup> In the 1941 city directory for Rutland Vermont I find two new arrivals, Kenneth Ying and Thomas Ying, running the new *Kong Chow Restaurant*. The *Kong Chow* replaced the *Oriental*, which closed in 1938 after its proprietor Wong Toy removed to

continued until 1942 when Charles Wong was joined by Lou Shee Wong ("widow Chung") and a William Wong. As both live on the premises of the restaurant; it would appear that they are relatives.

The year 1944 witnessed the departure of Charles and a large influx of other Wongs. Frank Wong became the new manager. He was joined by Blanche C. Wong and Walter C. Wong who also worked at the restaurant and resided on the premises. Also residing on the premises were Edward C. Wong, U.S. Navy, and Thomas C. Wong, U.S. Army. William C. Wong was chef at the *Pagoda* though he and his wife June lived elsewhere.

Following the end of the war, the most remarkable changes of all began to unfold. In 1947, Thomas C. Wong, apparently discharged from the U.S. Army, returned home to share chef duties with William. Then in 1948 Thomas married Gladys and moved into separate living quarters. Walter left the *Pagoda* to work as a baker in another establishment. In 1949 Frank, who had previously been identified as the manager of the *Pagoda* was listed with a new status – student. In 1950, the restaurant moved around the corner to 44 Pleasant Street and the family moved into separate quarters next door at 42 Pleasant Street. In 1952 Thomas, the former chef, left the restaurant to take up employment at one of the corporations in town. In 1954 the family changed the restaurant name to *China Garden* and brought in You E. Wong to work there, but the restaurant under this new name closed its doors after only one year in business. You E. Wong left town but, despite the close of the restaurant, the rest of the Wong family continued to reside in Northampton. By 1956 two family members were students, three were working in non-restaurant establishments, and two were retired. Figure 11 summarizes the restaurant name changes and the change in personnel over the 34 year period when the business was operating. What an American story though one with unfortunate consequences for the residents of Northampton! The success of the Wongs meant the loss of their Chinese restaurant.

## Conclusion

This is a preliminary effort to both document and explain the popularity of Chinese food in early twentieth century America. The popularity is the easy part. As Shirley Cheng (2004) points out, the Chinese have been developing and improving their cuisine for thousands of years. Chinese food tastes good. The biggest hurdle for Americans was gaining access to it. The Chinese Exclusion Act produced a small and shrinking population of Chinese Americans, but one that was unusually well organized and which

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Burlington, Vermont to open the *Royal*. Since the Chinese place their surnames before their given names and because they were in the process of Americanizing their given names, it is quite possible that either Kenneth Ying or Thomas Ying was formerly known as Ying Yee Fon.

maintained close ties to financial centers in Asia. Their organization and capital and entrepreneurship enabled the Chinese to meet the demand of the American people.

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**Table 1**  
**Restaurants by Ethnicity, Rhode Island Cities, 1900 through 1930**

	All Restaurants				Non-Ethnic Restaurants				Chinese A				Chinese B			
	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>
State	160	282	386	608	150	219	259	470	0	8	17	16	4	12	26	24
Bristol	5	3	3	4	5	3	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Central Falls	1	5	8	27	1	5	4	21	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Cranston	2	3	2	1	2	3	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Cumberland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
E. Providence	2	3	2	4	2	3	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newport	14	33	49	57	14	31	34	42	0	0	1	2	0	0	4	3
N. Providence	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pawtucket	4	25	31	53	4	18	19	42	0	1	3	3	0	1	4	3
Providence	106	163	199	255	96	110	114	174	0	6	9	7	4	10	12	10
Warwick	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Westerly	7	4	10	17	7	4	9	15	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
Woonsocket	3	12	21	45	3	11	16	39	0	1	2	2	0	1	2	2
Rest of State	12	31	61	145	12	31	56	130	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	4
	Italian A				Italian B				Greek A				Greek B			
	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>
State	1	1	6	9	3	8	22	34	0	0	1	3	0	29	53	41
Bristol	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Central Falls	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Cranston	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cumberland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
E. Providence	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newport	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	8	8
N. Providence	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pawtucket	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	5
Providence	1	1	3	7	3	8	15	22	0	0	1	3	0	23	39	26
Warwick	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Westerly	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Woonsocket	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Rest of State	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

*Notes:* Restaurants by city were computed as the total of the entries under the various headings used for eating establishments in the business classified sections of city directories for the State of Rhode Island for each of the four years shown. In the small number of cases where a single restaurant name indicated more than one location, I counted each location as a separate restaurant. I show values for two definitions of ethnic restaurants for each of the three ethnicities presented. The narrower definition, "A," counts only restaurants whose ethnicity would be unambiguously apparent to an outsider based on the city directory entry alone. This unambiguous ethnic indicator can be the restaurant name itself, for example, *American-Chinese Restaurant*, *Hong Kong*, *Oriental*, *Roma*, or *Venizia*. It could also be an indicator added by the city directory. Some examples are: *Low Bon Hong* (Chinese), *Nikko Restaurant* (Chinese), and *Kakarian Madros* (Armenian). The broader definition, "B," includes those in category "A" but also counts restaurants with names that can be linked to people with a clear ethnic heritage. Most restaurants in this period were named for their proprietor. I can determine the ethnicity of a very high fraction of restaurant owners by going to the census manuscripts for the census year closest to the survey date of the city directory, as shown in Ancestry.com.

*Source:* City directories for the State of Rhode Island. Analysis based on the City Directory collection at the Library of Congress.

Table 2			
Ethnic Restaurant Density by Ethnicity Rhode Island, 1900-1930			
<u>Year</u>	<u>Chinese</u>	<u>Italians</u>	<u>Greeks</u>
1900	10.9	0.2	0.0
1910	44.1	0.2	15.1
1920	115.6	0.4	21.8
1930	121.8	0.4	18.7

*Notes:* Ethnic restaurant density calculated as the number of ethnic restaurants per thousand of the ethnic population. Ethnic restaurants represent the expanded definition, "B" shown in Table 1. Ethnic population defined for the Chinese as those of the Chinese "race." For the Italians and Greeks, it is the number of foreign born plus the number of native whites whose foreign parents were born in Italy and Greece, respectively.

*Sources:* Ethnic restaurants from Table 1. Chinese ethnic population from the published census volumes. For 1910 and 1930 Italian and Greek ethnic populations are also from the published census volumes. In 1900 and 1920 the published censuses did not include state tables on the number of native whites of foreign parentage by country of origin. For these years I took the foreign born population by country of origin from the census but estimated the number of native white of foreign parentage by country of origin using the IPUMS.

Table 3				
Presence of Chinese Restaurants by City Size United States, 1929				
<i>City Size</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Number with City Directory</i>	<i>Percent of Cities with Chinese A</i>	<i>Percent of Cities with Chinese B</i>
250,000+	37	37	100%	100%
100,001 to 250,000	58	56	75%	91%
30,000 to 100,000	218	191	53%	65%

Notes: See notes to Table 1.

Source: City directories for the year 1929, or a nearby year when 1929 was not available. Analysis based on the City Directory collection at the Library of Congress.

1900			
1910			
1920			
1930			

Table 4

Restaurants per Thousand, Rhode Island and Various Cities, 1900 - 1930

Table 4		
Duncan Indices of Dissimilarity in Residence by State Chinese vs. Non-Chinese and Blacks vs. Non-blacks		
	Chinese vs. Non-Chinese	Blacks vs. Non-Blacks
1870	97.3	66.6
1880	93.6	66.6
1890	85.4	--
1900	70.0	66.2
1910	65.7	67.7
1920	55.6	49.1
1930	57.4	54.5
1940	62.0	52.4
1950	57.2	45.5
1960	52.7	34.6
1970	51.8	22.9

*Notes and sources:* Data used to compute indices comparing Chinese and non-Chinese are from the published census reports. Data used to calculate indices comparing blacks and non-blacks are from the IPUMS.

Table 5		
Duncan Dissimilarity Index Population by County, 48 States, 1920		
Group	Index	Population
Chinese (all)	64.0	61,639
Japanese (all)	87.5	111,010
Blacks (all)	66.1	10,463,131
Italians (foreign-born)	42.2	1,610,113
Portuguese (foreign-born)	91.1	69,981

*Notes and sources:* Calculated using the ICPSR county data set for 1920, supplemented with data for the Chinese and Japanese population found in the published census.

Table 6			
Percentage of Counties by Number of Chinese Residents 48 States, 1920			
<i>Number of Chinese</i>	<i>All Counties</i>	<i>Counties of 25,000+</i>	<i>Counties of 250,000+</i>
0	61.2%	30.8%	0.0%
1	10.4	14.4	0.0
2 to 20	20.4	38.0	2.1

Table 7

Recent Chinese Immigrants as Compared with All Other Chinese  
Continental United States, 1900 through 1930

Characteristic	Recent Arrivals				All Other Chinese			
	1900	1910	1920	1930	1900	1910	1920	1930
Percent of total	31.3	11.3	15.2	20.4	68.7	88.7	84.8	79.6
Percent Male	98.7	92.4	90.8	83.0	97.7	93.5	86.7	77.1
Average Age	29.9	29.4	28.1	27.5	41.9	42.8	41.4	32.4
Percent Who Speak English	11.3	42.3	76.1	71.6	50.7	53.1	78.2	75.2
Percent Living in the West	9.9	62.6	55.1	41.5	66.2	56.3	63.8	60.1
Percent Restaurant Workers	0.2	3.3	15.6	28.5	0.2	7.7	17.5	23.9
Percent Laundry Workers	6.4	19.0	30.5	21.2	20.5	20.7	24.1	22.4
Percent Head of Household (if male)	4.8	14.4	12.2	23.4	22.0	24.7	34.3	41.3
Percent Non-Relative (if male)	92.7	81.7	78.1	68.6	75.6	69.2	57.7	47.5
Percent Spouse of Household Head (if female)	66.7	30.0	87.5	84.0	45.5	46.2	47.5	42.1
Percent Non-Relative (if female)	33.3	50.0	12.5	8.0	40.9	26.9	15.0	6.6

*Notes:* "Recent arrivals" are defined here as foreign-born Chinese who immigrated to the United States during the ten years prior to the census date. Percent restaurant and laundry workers refer to the male population 14 years of age and older. The percent who speak English and the relationship to household head measures refer to the population 14 years of age and older.  
*Source:* IPUMS.

Table 8		
Percent of Chinese with One of the Ten Most Common Chinese Surnames, Continental United States, 1880 through 1930		
Year	All Chinese	Recently Arrived Chinese
1880	20.3	--
1900	26.8	32.2
1910	25.9	34.0
1920	31.1	45.5
1930	37.0	36.5

*Notes:* Percent of Chinese with the ten most common Chinese surnames calculated from among those with legible surnames and excluding those identified with the vocative "Ah" or as "Chinaman." In 1880, 30 percent of those with legible names were identified with the vocative "Ah." By 1900 it was only 3.3 percent. In later years the practice had all but disappeared. "Recently arrived Chinese" defined as those who immigrated to the United States less than ten years prior to the census. Year of immigration is available for the censuses of 1900 through 1930. Surname is available only for the censuses of 1930 and earlier. The ten most popular Chinese names in 1930 are: Lee, Wong, Chin, Young, Fong, Yee, Louie, Gee, Ng, and Hom.  
*Source:* IPUMS.