

Research

Racialization, Exotization, and Fetization of Asian American Food

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Objective:

The Smart Development Institute (SDI), a certified IRS 501(c)(3) non-profit firm, uses a [SMART Framework®](#), to help define strategies for smart community enablement and, in conjunction, uses SMART MoBee mobile platform as a catalyst and technology enabler for fostering community collaboration supported by a strong network for information interchange and integrated services. Community collaboration involves the public, private, and academic sectors working together to provide an integrated suite of innovative solutions, services, and information portal tailored to meet the needs of a community and its citizens. SDI transforms communities into Smart Communities to improve the quality of life of the citizens of communities. The following research helps SDI better understand the growing popularity of Asian Food in the United States, in order to help provide digital inclusiveness and business partnerships for smart community enablement, for the benefit of citizens and the larger community.

Introduction:

The fetization, appropriation, and exotization of Asian food is becoming an increasingly visible topic in the United States. Thanks to rapid globalization and the rapid ability to connect and communicate through the internet, Americans are better able to communicate their thoughts and feelings on online platforms. The gastronomical experience of white Americans is increasingly yielding a surface level experience that disregards the history behind East Asian dishes. This disregard by white Americans causes a process of “othering” Asian Americans due to the exotization and fetization of the food. This is not to say the problem is only due to white Americans – Asian Americans are also guilty of self-othering or self-Orientalizing, as professor Akihiro Hirose and professor Kay Kei-Ho Pih state in their article *No Asians working here*. However, the problem is predominantly present in the culture and process of Orientalizing by white Americans. Multiple accounts of Asian American youth often experience ridicule and shaming because of the appearance of their food, described as stinky and insect-like, by their white classmates. Contrastingly, the very same food that these Asian American youth were being ridiculed for are now being celebrated in restaurants across the nation (Tam). Socioeconomic conditions are also play a role in the exotization and fetization of ‘Asian’ food. In the 1980s Chinese food became the country’s most popular cuisine (Tchen 1). The popularization was another key factor in the othering of Asian Americans through the gastronomical experience. Socioeconomic conditions along with the gastronomical consumer experience are the driving factors for the Orientalization, exotization, fetization, and othering of authentic ethnic Asian food by white Americans.

Background:

In Young Chen's article, *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America*, Chen highlights the role capitalism played in popularizing and fetishizing Chinese food. By the 1980s, Chen says, Chinese food became the most popular cuisine in the United States and the, "Popularization marked country's socioeconomic transformation, turning dining out into a democratic experience" (Chen 1). This transformation and economic prosperity in the country promoted an increase of spending by the population – a certain longing for the individuals who previously did not have as much wealth to spend it into more affordable dining. This dining, although not being necessarily "fancy" creates a feeling of socioeconomic movement up the ladder. Having a waiter serve them and food be prepared by someone else, as opposed to making the food themselves is a marker of this movement. This association of socioeconomic mobility and Chinese food are a cause for its fetization. Dating back to the formation of the United States where fine china was a marker of status in the 17th century. Many of the founding fathers of the country owned china, maybe most notably, George Washington.

To expound on early examples of Orientalism in the United States, the act of using and giving Chinese objects to one another was a way of building relationships in elitist society in the 1700s. George Washington's obsession with china was due to the circumstances of his birth – although of gentry descent, his family was not the wealthiest at the beginning of his life. Due to this, George Washington began accumulating symbols of status, among them: porcelain, which he would display proudly to guests (Tchen 6). Hosting guests at one's home and having tea was a way of establishing credibility, worthiness, and civility (Tchen 5). Additionally, the use of fine china in afternoon tea was an opportunity to show one's status to their guests, something George Washington often did.

This display and use of Chinese objects draws the parallel for the resurgence of Chinese exoticism, this time, through food. Although not seen as a symbol of elitism, the consumption of Chinese food in the 1980s and thereafter has come to demonstrate the changing socioeconomic transition of the era. What is astounding, however, is that this gastronomic popularization did not follow a 'top-down' trend in which the popularity of a certain thing or object comes from the wealthy, but come from the most, "politically disfranchised, culturally despised, economically marginalized, and numerically insignificant group of people" (Chen 1). This 'bottom-down' popularization was intriguing due to its nature not relying on political power of the government or the power of corporations. Chen, however, states that some of the most recognizable Chinese American dishes were created as a result. Foods such as chow mein and chop suey were among the most popular for white Americans. Their Americanized taste, coupled with their connotation as foreign, combined to construct a romanticized and exoticized gastronomical experience that would play a part in the ritual of demonstrating one's social status.

Two key factors collided in the construction of Chinese food as a marker of status – the changing cultural norms within the United States and the changing economy. People who refute this exoticization and fetization, however, may reply by saying that Chinese food may objectively be the best type of cuisine in the world. This begs the question: Why has Chinese food not been popularly accepted and widespread since their arrival in the 18th century? If Chinese food were accepted from the very beginning, this would have proven the point of those who refute its fetization in the 1980s. Instead, whites made it a point to avoid Chinese food at the time of the California Gold Rush, "developing derogatory notions and stereotypes about its content and, in the words of many Anglo commentators, "odor" (Chen 2).

This change in the 1980s, as stated before, was partially driven by economic conditions. The United States' status at the time of the popularization of Chinese food was that of economic prosperity and, therefore, American mass consumption. Chinese restaurants represented, "America's first truly national network of public dining, Chinese restaurants played a vital role in expanding the meaning of abundance and democracy by extending an experience that had been a privilege only of the wealthy to the masses" (Chen 3). This explains the reason for Chinese restaurant's popularity among marginalized groups (Anglos, African Americans, Jews), it provided them with an "accessible public space that was denied to them elsewhere (Chen 3). The existed two constructs related to the consumption of Chinese food: its perception to elevate socioeconomic status and Chinese food's connotation to China's cultural subordination to the United States. Tchen use of the term "empire food" is worth investigating as well. Is Tchen implying that Chinese American citizens are assigned a lesser status as members of the American Empire? The convenience Chinese restaurants presented were the epitome of the American mass-consumer. This relegated Chinese food and, therefore, Chinese people's status to one of servitude and subservience; the conceptualization of Chinese food as exotic and foreign intrinsically translated to Chinese American people. Consumers were not seeking out the Chinese gastronomical experience due to its long history and tradition as a cuisine, but for the convenience and cheapness.

At Present:

The consumer, relatedly, has been and is one of the main driving forces of the capitalist market in the United States. Businesses revolve around the consumer; their desires and competition push them to construct their product to be as appealing as possible. However, the consumer has the main role of interpreting the product. These consumers, therefore, exoticize, fetishize, and deform the authentic gastronomical experience of Chinese food which 'others' the group. Multiple factors conjoin to cause this racialization and Orientalization of East Asian cuisine in the public's mind: history, ingredients, menus, clientele, ownership, practitioners, locale, décor, price, and simplicity (Hirose & Pih 1489). Each of these aspects can be ignored (history), misconstrued (ownership), and exoticized (clientele, ownership, décor), to perfectly racialize the gastronomical experience.

Themes of the Racialized Gastronomical Experience:

Professors Akihiko Hirose and Kay Kei-Ho Pih, in response to this racialization, have cited five themes of racialized otherness in the gastronomical experience (1490) – racialized authentic otherness, generalized racial temperament, orientalist destinations, the authenticity of whiteness, and self-orientalism by the racialized alterity.

The first, racialized authentic otherness, encompasses the judgement of the establishment for its clientele, ownership, and chefs. By judging their appearance as Japanese or Chinese 'enough,' the establishment and food can, therefore, be safely deemed authentic. This presents a problem for two reasons: the history for which the cuisine is being disregarded and the assumption of the clientele dictating the authenticity of the cuisine places an unrealistic expectation on the group. Additionally, Hirose and Pih argue that when the clientele appears to be 'ethnic' enough it can become a source of entertainment. As a white woman says, "All the people were authentic older Japanese people, which I thought was super cute. We had the cutest Japanese lady waitress, she seemed like a Japanese mom

straight out of a Japanese anime” (1491). This further emphasizes the racialization and fetization taking place; assigning elderly Japanese as cute and the waitress as, “out of an anime” belittles the people at the establishment, and later extends to other Asian Americans as a whole.

Second, generalized racial temperament describes and assigns stereotypes to Asians. The traditional, polite, dirty, untrustworthy, simple, loud, friendly, and unsophisticated (1494) are just a few of the many stereotypes associated with Asian Americans. These stereotypes work to further differentiate between racial groups; applying the idea of Asian Americans as the ‘perpetual foreigner’ – one who can never assimilate into American society. The combination of these stereotypes conglomerates with the perpetual foreigner stereotype to form a powerful tool for racialization of Asian Americans, and more specific according to Hirose and Pih, Japanese and Chinese Americans.

Third, the concept of orientalist destinations racializes the space, restaurant, or establishment where the individual consumes their food. The assumption exists that a restaurants or food establishments located in Chinatown or little Tokyo, for example, contain the most authentic cuisines due to their location. Their proximity to the masses of individuals of the same ethnicity somehow are an indicator of the authenticity of the gastronomical experiences. As Hirose and Pih argue, “The exoticness of an ethnic restaurant can let customers travel to an imagined destination that is supposedly represented by the restaurant” (1494). Consumers desire the feel in a place that is almost, but not completely, foreign to them – an experience they attain through the atmosphere (*décor*) and the number of ‘ethnic’ clientele present at the establishment. As a white female reviewed a Chinese restaurant, “[I] really felt like I was in a restaurant located in Hong Kong,” later adding, “I have been all over Asia and it really feels authentic” (1494). The comparison between a restaurant within the United States with *staged authenticity* (Hirose & Pih 1495) and the ‘far orient’ distances and exoticizes the white American consumer from the Asian clientele, ownership, or worker.

The fourth theme of racialized otherness revolves around the authenticity of whiteness, where one whiteness undergoes cultural-capital-seeking behavior. For example, Hirose and Pih provide an example of a white female who was excited about being the only ‘out of place’ white person in a crowd of ethnic clientele. However, years later when the clientele started becoming diverse, it had taken away the excitement she felt. Additionally, white consumers feel that engaging and interacting with the ‘locals,’ as Hirose and Pih describe, is an aspect of authenticity in the gastronomical experience. Practicing the Japanese or Chinese language with their servers, for example, is a marker of foreignization – assuming the server can speak the language simply because of their ethnicity, perhaps not taking into account that they have been living in the United States their whole lives. If a server is unable to speak Japanese or Chinese, however, this betrays the ideal of cultural experience involving engagement with the gastronomical other (Hirose & Pih 1497).

The fifth and final theme of racialized otherness is self-orientalism by the racialized alterity. This theme rejects the view of Asians as a monolith in acknowledging the fact that while some Asians wish to reject this racialization, many do ‘self-Orientalize’ whether they realize it or not. Qualities of whiteness are not simply reserved for whites (Hirose & Pih 1497). This intra-racialization is done through Asian Americans differentiating between those who are established in the United States and those who are ‘fresh off the boat,’ or newly arrived immigrants. This can happen as a result of generational gaps; second generation Asian Americans may wish to assimilate to American culture by differentiating from their perceived role

of Asian Americans as restaurant owners and laborers. Additionally, Hirose and Pih argue that the, “Orient’s internalization of Orientalist images have been developed by Western colonial authority” (1498). This internalization forces Asian American identity to grapple with expectations imposed on them by Western society, coupled with their Asian identity. This creates a situation in which the individual can be pressured into rejecting their Asian identity in favor of societal pressures to assimilate and differentiate.

Significances:

Two articles, by the Washington Post and by Public Radio International display this societal pressure on Asian American cuisine and people of Asian American descent. In Chinese American journalist Ruth Tam’s article, *How it feels when white people shame your people’s food – then make it trendy*, Tam outlines how the Chinese food she ate growing up was ridiculed, but has now become trendy in the restaurant world. In these articles we see Hirose and Pih’s themes of racialized otherness, beginning with Tam’s childhood home being deemed as smelling of “Chinese grossness,” reflecting the racialized other. This remark returns to the very beginning of Chinese people in America, going back to California during the Gold Rush when white Anglo Americans would refuse to go near Chinese cuisine due to its ‘odor.’ Having grown up with these ‘odors,’ Ruth Tam did not process them as foreign until pointed out by another individual. Additionally, we can see societal pressures to assimilate in her embarrassment of her father installing a fish tank in her home for the fish to be fresh. Furthermore, this embarrassment manifests when Tam says, “My hunger for my family’s food was overpowered by my desire to fit in, so I minimized Chinese food’s role in my life and learned to make pasta instead” (Tam). The ‘space’ she lived in became racialized to even herself, an Asian American. The fear of being ‘othered’ dominated her mindset and the images of the ‘Oriental’ by Western society were becoming more present in her Ruth Tam’s life.

Tam also describes the experiences of other Asian Americans with foreignization and exotization. Korean cook and YouTube star Maaggchi explained that in cooking her Korean soup soy sauce in her apartment, she received a complaint by her neighbor. This experience, so entrenched in her mind, has left an imprint of embarrassment on her. Even to this day, Tam describes, a successful Maangchi living in New York City goes all the way down to the base of the Henry Hudson Bridge and cooks her dish, “where no one will complain” (Tam). Similarly, in the television sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*, which is based on the real-life experiences of being Asian American by Eddie Huang, the young protagonist named Eddie brings his Chinese dish to school for lunch. While taking his noodles out of his lunchbox, his white classmates react with disgust, making comments such as, “Ying Ming’s eating worms! Dude, that smells nasty!” This, much like Ruth Tam’s embarrassment of her own food, ultimately forces young Eddie to demand his parents pack him “white people lunches” (Tam).

Conclusion:

This experience of racialized otherness, exotization, and fetization is not unique to East Asians. To further disprove the Asian American characteristic of a monolith, in Public Radio International’s article, *No shame in sisig: Filipino chefs and scholars say they are overcoming a century of stereotypes*, Rosalind Tordesillas outlines the Filipino-American experience with their own gastronomy. Some food writers, Tordesillas says, may look at the Filipino dining scene and conclude that Filipinos are too ashamed to

bring their white friends there to eat. There exists a word in the Filipino language to describe this – “hiya.” This translates to the feeling of shame one has for something, which in this case, is Filipino food. To further disprove the narrative of Asian Americans as a monolith, some Filipino Americans look at their food with shame as opposed to a source of national or ethnic pride. As the host of “[Feast Meets West](#),” Iris Van Kerckhove, states, “They use the term hiya ... and it’s weird because it’s not something that I’ve heard other Asian cultures feel about their food,” (Tordesillas). Some Filipino’s say that due to the layers upon layers of colonization of the country, they feel as if their food is inauthentic and not worthy of presentation to the public. Additionally, we see the typical “dog eater” stereotype here, that is applied to most, if not all people of Asian descent in America. This dog eater label, as a generalized racial theme, once again aims to construct Asian Americans as a monolith. We see the Orientalist image, the reserved, the silent, and the dog eater stereotype, come into play, working to perpetuate the process of differentiating and othering people who are not white Anglos in America.

The works of John Tchen, Yong Chen, Hirose and Pih, Ruth Tam, and Rosalind Tordesillas aim to, not only discredit racialized claims of Asian Americans as a monolith, but work to help people understand the nature of Orientalization, exotization, fetization, and othering. Tchen traces the long history of fetization and exotization of Chinese objects and ideas we see in the early years of the United States in George Washington life. Though this fetization may have evolved, it is undoubtedly present in today’s America. This evolution has translated onto the gastronomical experience which Yong Chen writes about. In Chen’s journal, chop suey and chow mein – popular Chinese dishes constructed in America – and later racialized as a foreign and exotic dish. This popularity, however, did not work alone; socioeconomic conditions of the 1980s changed the way the American consumer wished to live their lifestyle into a more upper-class-like style in which they underwent a gastronomical experience so foreign to them it was fetishized. Additionally, in Hirose and Pih’s insightful study on the racialized online reviews made by white Americans on Japanese and Chinese establishments; the reader is given the tools to understand how Asians are othered in the contemporary gastronomical scene. This racialization is then reflected in the articles by Ruth Tam and Rosalind Tordesillas who provide personal accounts as well as accounts of other Asian Americans on how their own food has been racialized. The combination and conglomeration of these works and accounts of racialized otherness provide evidence as to how the dominant social class in the United States works to differentiate themselves from Asian America. The work of white America aims to characterize Asian Americans as the perpetual foreigner and as a monolith, however, as we have seen from the accounts of various Asian American groups, that is not the case as these authors continue to work towards breaking these stereotypes.

In conclusion, Smart Development Institute's research into the racialized gastronomical experience and the popularization of Asian-American food is significant in shaping their projects aimed at improving public and private collaborations for smart community enablement. Through this research, SDI can better understand how food and culture intersect with community development, providing insights on how to design and implement projects that align with the unique needs of diverse communities. As the popularity of Asian-American food continues to rise, it presents an opportunity for SDI to engage with community members and collaborate on initiatives that celebrate cultural diversity while addressing community needs. Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of tailoring strategies for smart community enablement to meet the needs of individual citizens and their living communities, leading to improved quality of life and greater collaboration between public and private sectors."

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