

Chinese Food Culture and Intercultural Communication: The American Chinese Restaurant as an Example

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Abstract

In recent years, more and more Chinese restaurants have opened in the United States. However, in order to make Chinese food better accepted by American customers, Chinese cuisine has been adapted to American tastes, and become American Chinese food. Traditional and original Chinese food is replaced gradually by American Chinese food because of this acculturation. In addition, since Chinese food entered the United States with Chinese workers, the Chinese food that Americans first came into contact with was not authentic Chinese food and they also had a stereotype of Chinese food as unsanitary and of low-quality. Thus, how to fully integrate the traditional Chinese food culture while quickly integrating into the local culture is a major challenge for American Chinese restaurants to deal with. Why do we emphasize the importance of maintaining Chinese characteristics? The reasons are as follows. Firstly, in the United States, Chinese restaurants are not only a place to serve food. For Chinese immigrants, it also has the function of transmitting information, gaining a sense of belonging and easing Chinese immigrants' homesickness. For American customers, Chinese restaurants offer them the opportunity to experience Chinese culture. Therefore, only by maintaining Chinese characteristics can these two functions be better run. Secondly, due to the stereotype of Chinese food for American customers and the competition of other ethnic restaurants, the market competitiveness of Chinese restaurants is gradually decreasing. Therefore, only by forming their own characteristics and passing on the attractive traditional Chinese culture to American customers can change the stereotype of American customers about Chinese restaurants, make Chinese food better accepted by American customers and enhance the competitiveness of Chinese restaurants. Chinese restaurants should pay attention to the Chinese cultural connotation of dishes and pay attention to the creation of the cultural atmosphere. Only in this way can they gain acceptance by American customers while better conveying Chinese culture.

Introduction

In the TV series "Friends", Chandler's mother said in an interview that she liked to eat Kung Pao Chicken. Although this is only a TV clip, it reflects the reality that Chinese cuisine has infiltrated into the lives of foreign people after the years of development. According to media reports, there are more than 50,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States (www.chinanews.com, 2006). The New York Times reported that the number of Chinese restaurants in the United States exceeds the sum of American restaurant chains such as McDonald's, Burger King and ditto. However, although the number of Chinese restaurants is increasing, they still face many problems. For example, many Chinese restaurants offer American Chinese food instead of authentic Chinese food. Americans' favorite Chinese foods such as General Tso's Chicken, Chop Suey, Sweet and Sour Pork, Crab Rangoon, Beef with Broccoli and Fortune Cookies are very different from their Chinese versions. The New York Times reporter Li Jing has conducted a survey on the origins of Chinese cuisine that is popular in the United States and has written a book called *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles*, in which she investigates the origin of General Tso's Chicken. When she came to Hunan Province, the hometown of General Tso, and asked the local people if they knew General Tso's Chicken, they said: "We have never heard of this dish" (Jennifer 8. Lee, 2013). Chinese food entered the United States with Chinese workers, but not by professional Chinese chefs, so the Chinese food that Americans first came into contact with was not authentic Chinese food. In addition, because the Chinese laborers themselves were in a difficult situation in the United States and their income was meager, the ingredients they cook were not very exquisite. This also made Americans create a stereotype of Chinese food as the unsanitary and low-quality food. In the second half of the 19th century, the rumors of Chinese eating mice were widely circulated in the United States. In 1877, in a cartoon published in the American magazine, Americans enjoyed a sumptuous Thanksgiving dinner together, and the Chinese were eating rats (Gourmet, 2016). This misunderstanding lasted for nearly a century. Thus, how to fully integrate the traditional Chinese food culture into the local culture is a major challenge for American Chinese restaurants to deal with. We talk about the current problems faced by Chinese restaurants, and why Chinese restaurants need to maintain Chinese characteristics and how to make Chinese foods fully convey the traditional Chinese food culture while being accepted by American customers. We also mention how to enhance the competitiveness of Chinese restaurants.

The Importance of Maintaining Chinese Characteristics

In the United States, you can see Chinese restaurants in both the bustling New York and the remote towns. At present, Chinese food has become a commonplace for Americans, but many Chinese foods that Americans know are not found in China. Therefore, the

Chinese food that Americans are familiar with is American-style Chinese food, which is a new dish created by Chinese restaurant chefs to adapt to the tastes of American customers. Most of these American Chinese dishes have lost their Chinese characteristics. Therefore, it is very important to make Chinese food accepted by Americans while maintaining its Chinese characteristics. Why do we emphasize the necessity of maintaining Chinese characteristics? Firstly, Chinese food is more than just food. Eating Chinese food is not just an act. It also carries Chinese culture and has a certain cultural connotation. For example, Chinese people need to eat rice balls on the Lantern Festival and rice balls are more than just a dessert. It also means a reunion. Another example, dumplings are shaped like ingots, so eating dumplings has the meaning of being rich. Chinese people eat dumplings during the Spring Festival, which means praying for peace and hoping that everything will go smoothly in the coming year. Dumplings with different fillings and shapes also have different meanings. For example, cabbage dumplings mean to make more money and fish dumplings mean a surplus. If the stuffing of the dumplings is changed to a cream or a filling of an apple pie, the dumplings also lose its cultural connotation. Therefore, Chinese cuisine contains rich Chinese culture. Only by making authentic Chinese food can we better convey Chinese culture. When Chinese people appreciate a dish, they always mention that the dish has an attractive color, the smell of the dish is nice, and it is very delicious. To achieve such standards is related to the selected ingredients, cooking methods and the time of cooking. For instance, the traditional method of cooking Kung Pao Chicken is stir-frying, so if you change to deep frying, the taste of this dish may change. The heat and time of cooking can also affect the taste and appearance of the dish. So, if you want to provide authentic Chinese food, you can't change any ingredients and cooking methods of this dish.

Secondly, American Chinese restaurants have multiple functions. For Chinese immigrants and students, these restaurants have developed multiple functions besides serving foods. First of all, for Chinese immigrants, both Chinese cuisine and restaurant decoration have created a hometown atmosphere. This gives them a strong sense of belonging and eases their homesickness. According to Ting Shi's survey on how Chinese restaurants in her research location adapt to both American and Chinese customers' tastes and dining cultures, some Chinese restaurants offer Chinese customers the privilege, for example, Chinese students are even allowed to get chopsticks and cooked dishes in the kitchen by themselves (Shi, Ting, 2017). Some Chinese restaurant owners consider Chinese students who often come to their restaurants to eat as family members and share their food with them. "At Tasty Garden, the server, who is also the owner's mother, refers to herself as 'aunt' when talking to Chinese students, who are of similar age as her son" (Shi, Ting, 2017). In some special festivals such as the Spring Festival, some Chinese restaurants will provide Chinese customers with dumplings for free. All of the above behaviors will make Chinese

customers feel warm, especially when they are treated like a family member by the owner of the restaurant, they will feel like they are back to their hometown, which will reduce their homesickness. For Chinese immigrants, Chinese restaurants also have a function, obtaining information on life and learning. For example, some restaurant owners know some part-time job information or renting information. Chinese customers who come to the restaurant can consult the boss if they need it. For American customers, the Chinese restaurant is a place to experience exotic culture and taste Chinese food. Although some Chinese dishes are not traditional, they are still American Chinese foods that are based on traditional Chinese dishes. They were not available in the United States in the past. Therefore, they can feel Chinese culture when they taste American Chinese food. In addition to food, most Chinese restaurants manifest their ethnic identity through the decoration in the store. The decorations that often appear in Chinese restaurants are Chinese knots, screens, Chinese calligraphy and paintings, lanterns, and so on. Some restaurants will place terracotta warriors on both sides of the door. Through Chinese-style decoration and playing traditional Chinese music, these restaurants can create a very strong atmosphere of Chinese culture and manifest their ethnic identity. So, when American customers step into Chinese restaurants, they can experience Chinese culture immediately.

Thirdly, because of stereotypes of Chinese food as unsanitary and of low-quality, the popularity of Chinese restaurants is challenged. In the 1920s, the first Chinese migrated to the United States. After that, a large number of Chinese continued to emigrate to the United States. As the gold rush faded, Americans began to hate and exclude Chinese immigrants. At the end of the 19th century, Americans did not like the Chinese immigrants because they believed that the Chinese had taken their jobs. Because of the prejudice, Americans are also disgusted with Chinese food. They suspect that Chinese people eat rats. There is a painting in the children's textbook of the late 19th in the United States, in which a Chinese is eating a mouse. In the 1860s, when Mark Twain interviewed a shopkeeper named Acheng, he did not hesitate to accept a glass of brandy handed over by the owner, but declined a small sausage that looked clean, because people at that time were afraid that there was rat meat in the sausage. At that time, Americans believed that the source of Chinese food was unknown, and the shape of the ingredients was strange. Nowadays, although Chinese food is very popular in the United States, people still have stereotypes about Chinese food. On January 29, 2007, CW11 television station in the United States broadcast a news report that a Chinese restaurant called "New Fujian" in Brooklyn, New York, had a rat meat in the takeaway food "Kale Chicken", which caused Americans to panic (china.com.cn, 2007). Although this report is not true, it also shows the prejudice of Americans on Chinese food still exists.

Fourthly, with the opening of other ethnic restaurants such as Japanese restaurants and Thai restaurants, Chinese food has encountered strong rivals. The Chinese cuisine that

once flourished is no longer the case, and the market competitiveness of Chinese restaurants has gradually decreased. Moreover, although the number of Chinese restaurants in the United States is huge, they are rarely certified by mainstream authorities. For example, more than 650 chefs and experts from around the world have been organized by the authoritative restaurant magazine “Restaurants” in the UK, and they selected 50 of the best restaurants in the world, but none of the Chinese restaurants were selected (www.chinanews.com, 2007). In recent years, the *Le Guide Michelin* has awarded stars to restaurants around the world, and it is still difficult to see Chinese restaurants. No Chinese restaurant has won a star while some Japanese restaurants have received two stars.

Based on the reasons above, we can see some major challenges faced by Chinese restaurants. Only by better displaying the cultural connotation and uniqueness of Chinese food, forming its own characteristics and passing on the attracting Chinese traditional culture to American customers can they change the stereotype of American customers about Chinese restaurants, and make Chinese food better accepted by American customers. Only in this way can they enhance the competitiveness of Chinese restaurants.

How to enhance the competitiveness of Chinese restaurants

Chinese restaurants are in competition with various restaurants. How do they better occupy the US market? I have the following suggestions.

Firstly, they need to maintain the characteristics of Chinese cuisine especially in appearance and taste. They need to show American customers the difference between Chinese food and other national foods such as Japanese and Thai. If Chinese food is continuously Americanized only by considering the tastes of Americans, Chinese food will lose its own characteristics. Secondly, Chinese restaurants need to have an international strategic goal in order to promote their own development, just like many international brands such as McDonald and Starbucks. Chinese restaurants should learn from these international brands, and they need to be scaled and chained rather than satisfied with small-scale operations. There are also certain problems in the management and service of Chinese restaurants. In order to expand the market, Chinese restaurants must strengthen their own management, and need to improve the quality of dishes and improve the quality of service personnel. They need to be familiar with local regulations related to restaurant operations. Chinese restaurants need to improve the dining environment in order to eliminate the stereotype of American customers about Chinese restaurants. The Panda Express that is popular in the United States is a successful case.

Panda Express is the largest Chinese fast food restaurant in the United States. Founder Zhengchang Cheng expanded it from a small restaurant to the largest Chinese fast food restaurant with more than 1,800 stores in the United States in more than thirty years. The founder believes that Panda Express can be successful mainly for the following reasons. The first one is friendly and high-quality service. Whenever a guest leaves because there is no seat, the restaurant owner goes to the parking lot to apologize to the guest and asks if he is willing to wait a moment and then delivers the drink. Sometimes when the guests finished eating, he will provide some dishes or desserts for free to surprise them. In this way, Panda Express has accumulated some loyal guests in the initial stage. Secondly, it is important to streamlined menu. This makes it easier to standardize dishes. It not only controls the quality of the dishes, but also controls the cost of the restaurant, which is one of the keys to the success of the Panda Express. Last but not least, they should create culture atmosphere from decoration, service, dishes and other aspects. For example, the ingredients are prepared in advance at the processing plant and distributed to the branches through the logistics company. All seasonings are also prepared in advance according to the recipe. In this way, Panda Express has developed into a chained restaurant and has achieved better economies of scale. Most importantly, Panda Express has introduced the information management system into the management of the restaurant. They invented the catering system management software. By using this software, they can effectively order food, automatically track inventory and purchase ingredients. In addition, it can also reduce food waste. So, if American Chinese restaurants want to expand the market, they need to learn from Panda Express. Thirdly, with the improvement of living standards, consumers pay more attention to green and healthy diets. There are many vegetarians in the United States. Chinese restaurants should follow this trend to launch healthy recipes and develop Chinese dishes with low calorie, low fat, low cholesterol, low sugar and low salt. Last but not least, it is necessary to create the restaurant culture atmosphere, from the decoration of the store to the selection of tableware, which should fully reflect the traditional Chinese culture. Restaurants can also launch cultural events based on traditional Chinese festivals. For example, in the Mid-Autumn Festival, an event that allows customers to make moon cakes can be launched. With the spread of Chinese culture around the world, traditional Chinese opera dramas and comic dialogues have gradually become known to foreigners. For example, Deyun, a famous professional comic dialogue society in China, has performed in New Zealand. Therefore, American Chinese restaurants can launch comic dialogue or Peking Opera in the Spring Festival to attract more customers. Only by expressing the unique Chinese culture can Chinese restaurants be different from other ethnic restaurants and get the attention of American customers.

A plate of Chinese food contains five flavors of sour, sweet, bitter and salty. A plate of Chinese food also contains extensive and profound Chinese culture. The Chinese food culture has gradually penetrated into the mainstream American society. The Japanese

said that there must be a Toyota car in the place where there is a road. The Chinese said that there must be Chinese restaurants in places where people live. Chinese restaurants need to form their own characteristics and pass on the attractive Chinese traditional culture to American customers. On this basis, Chinese restaurants should also adapt to the tastes of American customers. Only in this way can we better realize the idea that wherever people live, there are Chinese restaurants.

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