

## **Constructing Korean American Identities through Koreanized Chinese Food**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines constructions of Korean American identities in Koreatown, Los Angeles through eating practices in three Koreanized Chinese restaurants. I address the three restaurants as sites of Korean American practices; culturally acquiring a Korean palate; and multiple ways of experiencing and practicing Korean American identities with the emphasis on the aspect of performance of ethnic identity. Eating is viewed as vital to the consciousness of ethnic identity.

### **Introduction**

This study focuses on constructions of Korean American identities and experiences through eating practices in three “Koreanized” Chinese restaurants in Koreatown, Los Angeles. These restaurants are sites that reinforce a sense of Korean identity through eating with other Korean Americans. I examine the role of taste for Koreanized Chinese food that is acquired as a marker of Korean American identity. Next, I address dining practices in Koreanized Chinese restaurants that reflect shifting definitions of Korean American identity with examples of multiple actors’ views and perspectives as performances in a constant process of continuity and change, emanating out of memories of historical and personal past as well as to the present that draw upon Korea.

Time is essential in the understanding of continuity and change for Korean Americans, who produce and practice aspects of culturally constructed notions of “Koreanness” in various ways of experiencing Koreanized Chinese food. Social markers such as age, gender, and socio-economic class are also key components influencing cultural practices that define Korean American identity.

### **Methods**

My methods were framed within ethnographic research in three Koreanized Chinese restaurants through participant observation and interviews with customers, chefs, employees, and owners during 5 weeks in the summer of 2004. Further interviews were conducted at a Korean American church. In all, 34 structured interviews ranging from 15 minutes to 2 and a half hours and dozens of unstructured interviews were conducted. Newspaper articles, menus, and a Museum exhibit also provide background data.

#### **Theoretical Stance**

In the broadest sense, my research fits in a major theme in foodways literature addressing identity issues, but directly launches from anthropologist Kim Kwang-ok’s (2001) study on the adoption of Koreanized Chinese food that has become a symbol of national identity. He argues that “people’s

historical consciousness can be experienced through food” and that for Koreans abroad “Koreanized Chinese restaurants serve as a symbolic space of homeland culture which they have left behind in Korea” (2001:211). Similarly, other studies have shown relationships between food and ethnic identity in situations of continuity and change. Salcik (1984) emphasizes the performance aspect of ethnic identity in illustrating how Vietnamese Americans were able to maintain a sense of ethnic identity by eating at Vietnamese restaurants. Raspa (1984) showed that preparation and consumption of distinct Italian dishes were a “nostalgic enactment of ethnic identity” (1984: 186). Among Hong Kong immigrants in Australia, eating dim sum with tea, symbolic of Hong Kong identity, helped alleviate social anxieties of immigrant life (Tam 2002). Drawing upon these ideas, I look at the foodways in an immigrant situation of Korean Americans in Koreatown, Los Angeles, and how they derive a sense of Korean identity through Koreanized Chinese food.

The performances of different dispositions of Korean American identity could be understood through Bourdieu’s practice theory that views social life to be produced by actions of embodied dispositions in terms of *field*, *symbolic capital*, and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). The *field* is an account of the multidimensional space of positions in which actors struggle to maximizing their *symbolic capital* given their relational position within a field. *Symbolic capital* is a form of power that is differentially distributed within a society asserted by a social actor in the *field*. And, *habitus* is an embodiment into the self, thought to be natural but actually it is acquired, through which a social actor practices and reproduces culture. In addition, I emphasize performance in the construction of social reality that is generated through action rather than being (Schieffelin, 1985; Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Morris, 1995).

## **Historical Context**

The initial context of eating Koreanized Chinese food begins in Korea. In 1882 itinerant Chinese merchants moved into the Korean peninsula by pressure of the Chinese government for Korea to open its ports for trade. From this point on, I use *hwagyo* to refer to ethnic Chinese who have migrated to Korea as well as those who reside in the United States. The term is believed to have been first used by a school for overseas Chinese, called the *Hwagyo* School in Yokohama 1898 (Park 1981).

By the 1960s many Koreans frequented local neighborhood Chinese restaurants that served modified Chinese dishes for the Korean population. The most popular dish was and still is *chachiangmyun*, originally a peasant black bean noodle dish from the Shandong province of China that was adapted with the addition of extra chilies and onions and potatoes. The other popular dish is *champong*, spicy soup noodles with lots of chilies. In this way, noodle dishes were served at low cost and were accessible to a significant large Korean population.

In Koreatown Korean Americans eat the same dishes initially enjoyed in the homeland. This is made possible by the *hwagyo*, who have established Chinese restaurants in Korean American neighborhoods. Several of these restaurants are currently run by *hwagyo* in Koreatown, though in the last few years, increasing numbers of franchised Koreanized Chinese restaurants have emerged under Korean American ownership. As a recent immigrant population, most of who arrived in the last 25 years, Korean Americans reproduce certain aspects of Korean culture in Koreatown, Los Angeles. I emphasize the continuation of food habits as especially meaningful in the production of Korean identity.

### *Three Restaurants*

Restaurant A is a middle class family style restaurant with a dominant male clientele especially during lunchtime. Restaurant A has one private room for slightly larger gatherings.

Restaurant B is another family style with nicer décor and known for booking banquets in its private rooms. It is considered the standard Chinese restaurant in Koreatown because of all the various

Korean American events that take place in these private banquet rooms. Restaurant B's clientele is more diverse, attracting a wider range of mostly Korean Americans families.

Restaurant X is spacious and contemporary or "modern" in ambience and also hosts banquet parties and dinners. Younger Korean Americans in their later 20s and 30s frequent this restaurant more than Restaurants A and B. Unlike Restaurant A and B, the owners and the head chef are Korean Americans.

*Sites for Korean American Practices*

In these Koreanized Chinese restaurants, A, X, and B, Korean Americans maintain eating practices from their homeland. The maintenance of Korean Americans as consumers and the *hwagyo* as producers reinforces each of their respective roles in creating continuity for "Korean" cultural practices. The *hwagyo* restaurateurs cater specifically for Korean Americans in that they provide food and a setting that is "Korean." Anne, a second-generation female, describes her experience of eating in Restaurant A:

[At Restaurant A], the waiters, everyone, they're all Chinese and speak Korean and the food is made for Koreans. The menu is in Korean, the waiters and waitresses they're all Chinese, but they speak Korean. Everyone in there's pretty much all Korean except for the Mexicans in the back cooking.

She clearly identifies the experience as one that is "Korean."

The fixed notion of "Korean" must be eschewed and instead should be viewed as culturally constructed in time and space by different actors. Rather than defining what is "Korean" I stress the importance of what Anne perceives as "Korean" through the practice of eating, a kind of performance of her Korean self in the United States. In these three restaurants all kinds of Korean Americans construct their own experiences through eating practices of what is Korean.

Korean American events are frequently held at these Koreanized Chinese restaurants. First and second generation Korean Americans associate eating at Chinese restaurants with celebrations, family, and large gatherings. A second-generation informant in her early 20s asserted: "When you have big groups, it's always at Chinese restaurants not at a Korean place." An informant, who came to Restaurant A for a gathering of people from his hometown in Korea commented: "I don't come here because I like Chinese food. I don't like Chinese food because it's so greasy, but I come here for a meeting." This is a common response to questions on motivation and reasons for frequenting Chinese restaurants, both at Restaurant A and B. Nevertheless, large eating events with other Korean Americans in larger groups reenact social relations and foster ethnic identity (Douglas 1997, Meigs 1997, Salcik 1984, Tam 2002).

These food events continue to be indelible in the development of a sense of Koreanness by second generation Korean Americans. It is through these repeated eating practices with families and other Korean Americans that second generation Korean Americans develop a palate for Koreanized Chinese food that is acted upon and given meaning to these Koreanized Chinese restaurants as Korean locations, where Koreans go to eat food made for Koreans. The taste for Koreanized Chinese food, if seen as a shared characteristic among Korean Americans, can then, be a marker of Korean identity

*Preference and the Cultural Construction of the Korean Palate*

The Korean palate is a socially conditioned feature, acquired from an early age defining group identity. The response to the question, "why do you eat at "Koreanized" Chinese restaurants and not at other Chinese restaurants," was often the following: "because it fits my palate" and "because I am Korean" from first and second generation Korean Americans. Many second generation Korean Americans spoke of their preference for Koreanized Chinese food over "authentic" or Americanized Chinese foods because

it fit their “Korean” palate. David, a second generation in his mid 20s said, “I prefer Chinese food in Koreatown because it is more catered to my taste.” First generation Korean Americans often responded in some way as this informant states: “because the food is made to better suit the Korean *chaegil* [disposition, physical constitution]”. Many told me something to the extent of this informant’s statement: “the *hwagyo* when they came to Korea, they developed this food to fit Koreans.”

These notions that the food is “fit” and “suited” for the Korean palate is heavily rooted in the dispositions of many Korean Americans who strongly identify with their homeland’s foodways. Preference for Koreanized Chinese food by referring to one’s Korean palate reflects affinities to ethnic identity that is disarticulated from place and the act of immigration.

### *Continuity and Change in Korean Chinese Dining*

Performances of Korean American identity vary in the experience and meaning projected onto the food and place that relate to the personal and historical memory as well as current practices of dining.

Older first generation Korean Americans maintain their connection to Korea in their foodways as they reflect upon their life from the past to the present. During in-depth interviews, many first generation Korean Americans discussed food in relation to economic conditions in Korea. After several questions on preference for different kinds of foods, an elderly first generation man, who is now a retired pastor in his 80s, replied:

We were poor, we couldn’t even eat rice. If you ate rice, you’d eat it maybe a few months out of the year. This you need to know. You could ask your grandparents. People ate brown rice, wheat rice. Any vegetables, roots, barks, weeds, we ate it all. In the past, there was nothing. That is Korea. It was so poor. Today, we could eat Chinese, Japanese, but back then, eating out was out of the question...There was no such preference for Chinese or Japanese. There were Chinese restaurants and when you did go you went on very special days. Through all the suffering, we had built our country. Nowadays the young people do not know this.

Through food, he relates his past and the poor conditions in contrast to the present industrialized state. Past experiences are critical to one’s association with Chinese food. Because Chinese food was a feast item for poor Koreans to enjoy on very special days, Chinese food is still associated among first generation Korean Americans as poor people’s feast food. One particular first generation Korean American male in his 50s, who has lived in Los Angeles for over 20 years expressed to me at Restaurant B: “I would not have my 60th birthday celebration at a Chinese restaurant.” I asked why. He answered: “Chinese food is low class.”

Many Korean Americans, who arrived before the 1970s reflect upon their life through their experience with Chinese food not only in Korea but also in their life in the United States. For many Restaurant B used to be an important location for meeting other Koreans and eating *chachiangmyun* to alleviate difficulties of immigrant life. This is where according to an informant, who proclaims himself an “old timer” they come to eat *yetnal chachiangmyun* (literal meaning: long time ago noodles) and run into “old timers,” Korean Americans who had settled in the 60s and early 70s before Koreatown developed. Precisely for this reason, there are many loyal customers of Restaurant B, who had immigrated before Koreatown had emerged. Some of these “old timers” will not eat in any other Chinese restaurant in Koreatown.

For these “old timers,” eating *chachiangmyun*, a practice begun in Korea, became even more “Korean” in a foreign place that provided comfort and belonging, reenacting their Korean identity. An “old timer” told me that when he first arrived to Los Angeles in 1966, he did not have the option of eating in a Korean restaurant, but there was Chinatown. So, he would go to Chinatown to buy ingredients for *chachiangmyun* and improvise at home. As immigrants in a host society, when there were few Koreans, eating *chachiangmyun* was an enactment of “symbolic homeland culture,” in constructing experiences that

become hyper “Korean” in an unfamiliar and new environment (Kim 2001). In such a displaced context, eating *chachiangmyun* is the ultimate Korean practice, a kind of performance of Korean identity.

Many second generation Korean Americans expressed familial attitudes and derived comfort from Koreanized Chinese food and restaurants without homeland memories. Their identity formation derives from experiences of eating with other Korean Americans at restaurant B. One woman notes:

I thought *chachiangmyun* was Korean. It wasn't until I got older that I realized that it was a Chinese Korean restaurant... I don't remember eating in any restaurant but [restaurant B]...I remember the people who spoke Korean had a bit of an accent, and I wasn't aware that it was a Chinese Korean accent.” but I still eat at [Restaurant B] because it feels like eating at my mom's house even though they changed the décor and they upgraded a bit, ... every time I go it feels like eating at home.

It is important to note that she did not realize it was a Chinese restaurant but rather a Korean one, for early childhood experiences provide the basis for later adult comprehension of identity and heritage (Graburn, 2001). Because of these constructed experiences of eating at Restaurant B with other Korean Americans that are familial, she adopted eating *chachiangmyun* as Korean cultural practice as she even introduced Korean Chinese food to non-Koreans:

I tried to expose my non-Korean friends to my culture through food 'cause it's the easiest way. And sometimes Korean food is a little harsh and overwhelming, so I'll take them to Restaurant B... but I have to tell them it's not Korean food. It's Korean Chinese and that you could only get this at Korean Chinese restaurants... I actually felt happy about promoting Restaurant B as my restaurant because it was like promoting a family member's business.

Inherent in the concept of heritage is a sense of ownership and responsibility that this informant consciously acts upon (Graburn, 2001).

Recently in Koreatown, a new kind of Chinese dining that emulates restaurant trends now popular in Korea has been introduced by Restaurant X. Concerned more with food than the ambience a second generation in his 20s asserted: “the food's watered down...it doesn't have that “Korean taste” (watered down in this context means more Americanized). A first generation in his 50s, who has lived in Los Angeles over 20 years also agreed the food at Restaurant X did not fit her taste. I asked her if she had not even enjoyed the atmosphere. She responded:

I am not concerned with what is fashionable in Korea... I don't care about these things. The people in Korea when something gets popular, everyone follows it... It's convenient for me here, you just do what you want.

She distinguishes herself from other Korean Americans, who are concerned with fashion and trends popular in Korea now. Other Korean Americans, who frequent Restaurant X are defining themselves as modern Koreans.

Restaurant X provides Korean Americans a connection to the homeland through “modern” dining and décor of current fashionable Korea. This emulation of Korean trends is part of a larger discourse in Korean popular culture, where dining takes a form. The manager of X asserts that:

In Koreatown, fashion wise, everything they're always behind Korea you know? When Korea gets something popular it comes here a year after so. ... with fashion it goes to Europe first and then it goes to New York, then Korea, then here. It's always behind in everything, food wise, too. People in Koreatown compared to the people in Korea with Chinese food, they are about 10 years behind. This restaurant might be a little too early for Koreatown, maybe five years early. So, they aren't ready for this type of restaurant yet.

The manager of X views Koreatown Chinese dining as outdated and that Restaurant X is at the forefront of modern cuisine. These fashionable Korean Americans eat Chinese food for completely different cultural reasons. Clearly, this is not a restaurant for eating *yetnal chachiangmyun*. For these Korean Americans, to eat at X is a performance of their fashionable selves that also functions to maintain social distinction from the other Korean Americans, who do not identify with this new culture.

## **Discussion**

I have presented the dynamics of the maintenance and modification of several Korean identities through Koreanized Chinese food. These are constructed as well as in relation to past Korean experiences and the present.

It is in the Koreanized Chinese restaurants, as the *field* where cultural production of Korean American identity occurs, where social actors struggle to create and maintain a sense of Koreanness. The restaurants are sites where Korean Americans shape their realities by performing their different identities. Manager X asserts himself in the field of Korean American identity production. He maximizes his symbolic capital by stating that his restaurant is at the forefront of what is fashionable and contemporary compared to other unchanging Chinese restaurants in Koreatown. By contrast, there are “old timers”, who only eat at Restaurant B, where they draw their source of symbolic capital. For example, some of these “old timers” would never eat at X.

Each actor performs themselves in the construction of Korean American identity, each asserting his sense of what is Korean in a multi-dimensional field of the production of Korean American identity. For the second generation who were aware of their socially constructed Korean palate, they act upon their *habitus*, which was acquired through practice. Culture is reproduced through regular habituated performance. But at times, especially in a fluid changing society which now includes recent immigrants as well as non-Koreans, there are those who perform Koreanness consciously, such as the second generation woman who wanted to share her culture with a sense of ownership of Koreanized Chinese food. By sharing culture, the second generation Korean American performs Korean identity within the US.

## **Conclusion**

I have discussed the ways the same genre of food in all three restaurants is experienced and practiced, and in turn, illustrate the rationale for the performance of multiple dispositions of Korean American identity. Thus, Korean Americans are performing continuity and change in Koreanized Chinese restaurants. Early immigrants eased social anxieties and feelings of alienation upon immediate arrival through *chachiangmyun*. The recent, fashionable first generation Korean American performs his part at Restaurant X. Through family celebrations and gatherings, second generation Korean Americans develop a palate for Koreanized Chinese food. The significance is in the actual practice understood in the context of immigrants in a fluid society of Los Angeles. Korean Americans in their everyday life do things such as eating both consciously and unconsciously in the process of Korean identity maintenance.

In examining Koreanized Chinese food as a marker of Korean American identity, I have argued that the “field” of Korean American identity production is multi-dimensional in which different actors position themselves differently and assert their sense of Koreanness in diverse ways. Conscious practices of Korean American identity in the form of Koreanized Chinese food eating have surfaced as central in Los Angeles Korean identity formation.

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