Recreating the Chinese American Home through Cookbook Writing

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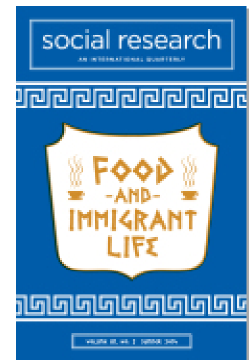

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Recreating the Chinese American Home through Cookbook Writing

HOME IS ONE OF THE CONCEPTS MOST ESSENTIAL TO THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE, intimately related to our sense of identity and even our existence. As Václav Havel wrote in his *Summer Meditations*, "Deprived of all the aspects of his home, man would be deprived of himself, of his humanity" (1992, 31). For immigrants and oppressed minorities in particular, home and its remembrance are a perennial motif. And food is a centerpiece of home. In a book about the importance of food in African-American women's lives, Psyche A. Williams-Forson reminds us of "how the intersection of gender, race, class, and food converge to make the home a culinary battleground and a site of female empowerment" (2006, 105). During the first eight decades of the twentieth century, Chinese Americans, especially Chinese-American women, used cookbook writing as a vehicle to search for and create a place—in both the American economy and culture— that they could call home.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COOKBOOKS AS HISTORICAL SOURCES

In order to understand the importance of cookbook writing for Chinese Americans, let us first take a look at the significance of cookbooks as a special genre of historical documents. They offer fascinating insights into both the private and public spheres and help us understand the connection between the two. This is because cookbook writing and read-

ing are extremely personal endeavors that at the same time reflect ideas and trends in society.

Cookbooks are more than the culinary equivalent of laboratory manuals. This is not because historians or literary scholars, using their academic tools and occupational idiosyncrasies, can dig out traces of the past or decipher aesthetic value between the lines of a culinary text. Rather, as we will see below, cookbook writers do not merely offer technical tips on cooking; they often relay their individual experiences, sentiments, and opinions about vital social and political issues in the world around them.

In reading cookbooks, furthermore, readers are not merely looking for cooking advice. In fact, ample evidence suggests that there is no direct correlation between buying or reading cookbooks and home cooking. Cookbook writers F. Volant and J. R. Warren wrote in 1860 that it "may be said that the world is inundated with cookery books" (iv). There were already so many cookbooks available in 1866 that when Jane Cunningham Croly published her *Jennie June's American Cookery Book*, she felt compelled to confront the question, "Why another cook-book, when there are already so many?" (Croly 1866). Yet it was also during this period that dining out noticeably emerged as a recreational activity.

Such a highly nonsymbiotic relationship between the volume of cookbook sales and home cooking became more pronounced over time. During the late twentieth century, Americans cooked less and less than ever, a fact confirmed by both the numerous focus groups I have conducted and the continued expansion of the restaurant industry. By 1999, dining out had grown to be the top leisure activity for adults (US Census Bureau 2001, 752), who spent about half of each food dollar away from home. At the same time, cookbook sales skyrocketed. In the United States, the world's leading market for cookbooks, about 530 million books on cooking and wine were sold in 2000, representing a 9 percent annual increase from 1996 (Edouard 2001).

American consumers' craving for cookbooks has not subsided. "Cookbooks are the second largest category for adult nonfiction," a

senior executive of a leading book research company reported at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Finz 2001). This is because the cookbook has been "much more than a collection of recipes," as proclaimed by Favorite Recipes Press (FRP).

The personal nature of cookbooks is apparent. Individual users feel a deep attachment to their cookbooks. Families often have their own cherished books, and many people—ranging from my own mother all the way back to Victorian Americans—love to compile recipe scrapbooks, sometimes including recipes passed on for generations. Readers also use cookbooks in their private spaces: some follow the instructions in the family kitchen while others find cookbooks "a favorite bedtime reading" (Cowherd 2011, 15).

Similarly, for many authors, writing about food is a critical medium for expressing the self. Traci Marie Kelly identifies three kinds of food writing as "culinary autobiographies": culinary memoirs, autobiographical cookbooks, and autoethnographic cookbooks (2001, 255). In the early years, such writings created precious opportunities for women to share and record their feelings and experiences. Along with diaries and journals, Janet Theophano argues, cookbooks are a vehicle for women "to recount and enrich their lives" (2002, 122). The autobiographical nature of cookbooks has also been noted by other scholars (Ireland 1981).

Finally, cookbooks are personal because food itself is so essential to each human being. Cookbooks, therefore, often directly address important individual issues, such as health, which was a prominent theme in historical food writings in both China and the United States, as I show in chapter 8 of *Chop Suey, USA* (Chen 2014).

Cookbooks are social texts as well. First, the knowledge in a cookbook reflects the collective wisdom and experiences of communities more than the individual ingenuity of the author. In fact, the very word "recipe," which means to "take" or "receive" in Latin, has connotations of exchange. Cookbooks are repositories of private know-how in cooking, making that knowledge available to the public. Second, cookbook writing is closely tied to social conditions and trends. In an

article about American cookbooks, David Belman (1996), a journalist with the *Restaurants USA* magazine, characterizes them as "historical treasures, commercial phenomena and some of the most accurate gauges of the culinary state of the country." They also mirror the socio-economic and cultural state of society.

Early American cookbooks, for example, reflected prevailing social currents, including Protestant and Victorian notions about family life and gender roles, and the cult of scientific perspectives. The famous novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe and her sister Catherine Beecher praised and promoted Protestant Victorian values and virtues such as frugality and domesticity in their influential *The American Woman's Home*, calling for "a Christian house; that is, a house contrived for the express purpose of enabling every member of a family to labor with the hands for the common good, and by modes at once healthful, economical, and tasteful" (1869, 24).

America's early cookbook writers conformed to and reinforced the longtime historical reality and idea that home cooking was mainly the responsibility of women. Many were deliberately intended for women. These include Amelia Simmons's *American Cookery*. Heralded as "the first truly American-written cookbook" (Fisher 2006, 12), the 1796 cookbook was written for female orphans who, like the author herself, were forced by "unfortunate circumstances" into work as domestics (Simmons 1796, preface). In time, married women and young brides would become another targeted audience. Simon Kander's famous *Settlement Cookbook* has a telling subtitle: *The Way to a Man's Heart.* In 1918 the *Boston Globe* published the *Boston Globe's Cookbook for Brides*, and its opening chapter is entitled "How to Cook for a Man." "It takes love," the editor noted (Ahern 1918, 1).

Cookbooks are not just reflections of existing trends and conditions but have also been used to effect social change and forge communities. Kander published her 1901 cookbook in order to raise funds to aid Jewish immigrants, and royalties from its sales supported various activities of the settlement house she founded in Milwaukee. The book exemplified fundraising efforts by groups such as women's clubs,

religious and political organizations, and ethnic associations, intended to promote their causes and build a sense of community, as numerous scholars have discussed (Bower 1997).

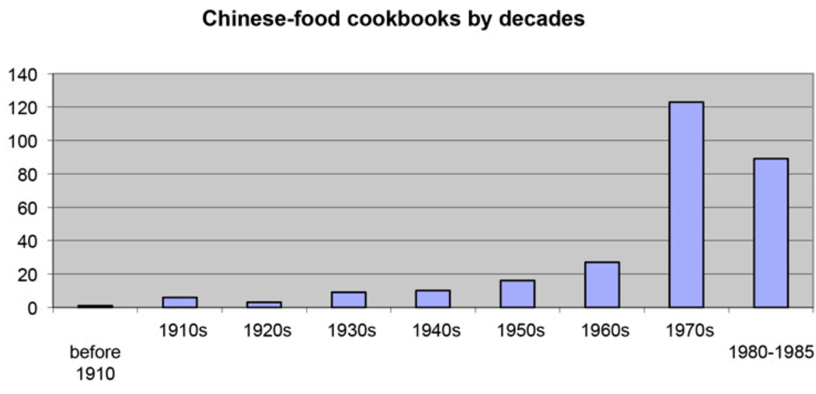
The community that Kander tried to build with her cookbook was local and ethnic. Similar efforts to create national communities have been made throughout history and around the world. Scholars such as Benedict Anderson (1983) have noted the critical role that the printing press played in fashioning modern national consciousness. First appearing in the fifteenth century, cookbooks were among the earliest printed books in Europe. In postcolonial India, Arjun Appadurai writes, the proliferation of cookbooks as "structural devices for organizing a national cuisine is accompanied by the development of a sometimes fairly explicitly nationalist and integrationist ideology" (*1998, 20).* Similarly, Mexican cookbook writers frequently resorted to "blatant nationalist language" in an effort to "foment patriotism at home." (Pilcher 1998, 48).

PROMOTING CHINESE FOOD: THE IMPORTANCE OF CHINESE FOOD COOKBOOKS

Chinese-food cookbooks played an important role in promoting Chinese food, thereby helping to create a source of livelihood for Chinese Americans during the decades when they were kept out of most occupations, except for a few in the service industry. In so doing, they also gave Chinese Americans an effective tool for carving out a cultural space in the New World.

The proliferation of Chinese-food cookbook writing constituted a significant chapter in the saga of Chinese food in the United States. For much of the twentieth century, the Chinese restaurant business evolved and remained one of the two primary lines of livelihood for the Chinese community in America (the other is the laundry business). By the late 1980s, Chinese food had become the most popular ethnic cuisine in America's restaurant market. It would not have reached this level of popularity without the voluminous cookbooks.

If we do not count the two US Department of Agriculture pamphlets on soybeans and Chinese vegetables published at the end of the nineteenth century, Jessie Louise Nolton's 1911 *Chinese Cookery in the Home Kitchen* is America's first Chinese-food cookbook. By 1985, more than 280 such cookbooks had been published in the United States.



Sources: Jacqueline M. Newman, *Chinese Cookbooks: An Annotated English Language Compendium/Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987) and Yong Chen's Chinese-food cookbook collection.

In introducing Chinese cooking to non-Chinese audiences, cookbooks played different roles than Chinese restaurants did. First, cookbooks appeared after restaurants, and second, while the motivation for opening restaurants was largely economic and served both Chinese and non-Chinese clienteles, the cookbooks' function was primarily cultural.

Third, while the restaurants' clientele always included Chinese diners, the cookbooks' audience in the early decades existed entirely outside the Chinese community, which remained small and mostly foreign-born. In 1930, for example, immigrants accounted for more than half of the Chinese population in the United States, which totaled less than 80,000. Chinese-American authors in particular made a conscious attempt to address non-Chinese readers. In a later edition of her famous 1945 cookbook, *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese*, Buwei Yang Chao

remarked: "If you live far from Chinese restaurants, roasting your own Peking duck can be very rewarding" (1968, 142). Fourth, while the Chinese restaurant is found largely in the public urban areas, cookbooks promised to bring Chinese food to private spaces of readers and remote areas without Chinese restaurants.

Fifth, the cookbooks presented a more systematic and comprehensive knowledge of Chinese cooking than the restaurants did. Restaurants, for the most part, had to accommodate the preferences of their consumers, especially the repeat customers. As restaurant menus clearly show, those establishments located outside metropolitan areas served primarily simple and inexpensive dishes. Cookbook writers, by comparison, had more autonomy over the content of their work, with the freedom to elaborate on a wide range of dishes. In addition, their work dwelled not just on cooking but also eating Chinese food. They "have treated the arts of eating and cooking as a single subject, each supporting the other," (Lin and Lin 1972, 9–10), as two Chinese cookbooks authors put it. And cookbook writers usually provided broader historical contexts of Chinese cuisine. Finally, cookbook writing was dominated by women (in terms of both its authors and readers). By comparison, the Chinese restaurant remained largely a male-dominated space in the early decades.

CULTURAL AMBASSADORS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CHINESE-FOOD COOKBOOKS BY CHINESE AMERICANS

During this period, about 70 percent of Chinese-food cookbook authors were Chinese Americans, many of whom were immigrants. The Chinese-American cookbook writers were cultural ambassadors, operating in cross-cultural terrains. Indeed, their writing signified a cultural dialogue. First, their sources of inspiration and authority were China's long and rich culinary traditions. They were influenced in particular by cookbook writers in ancient China, especially those in the Qing Dynasty. One of the most frequently mentioned names in Chinese-American food writing is Yuan Mei, author of *Sui Yua Shi Dan* (*Food Menu of the Sui Yuan Garden*), published in 1792.

At the same time, Chinese-American cookbook writers were also influenced by modern Anglo-American conventions in cookbook writing. Cookbooks translated into Chinese from English texts provided a model for Chinese-food cook writing. America's first Chinese-language cookbook, for example, which was also the first cookbook published by Chinese Americans, contained only recipes translated from English-language sources; and they were all for Western food rather than Chinese (Cui 1910). Moreover, the first Chinese-food cookbook in America was written by a non-Chinese author, Jessie Louise Nolton, who worked for the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*.

Chinese-American cookbook authors were keenly aware that their writing was influenced by Western conventions. In 1936, M. Sing Au noted that Chinese chefs' expertise had to be rendered understandable for non-Chinese readers: "Chinese chefs rely on judgment for their measurements. They have no thermometer to tell degrees of heat, no cup or spoon to measure quantity by, no clock to tell time. Their directions, translated as accurately as possible, are herein set down simply enough for anybody to follow, it is hoped" (Au 1936, introduction). As a genre of cookbook writing, therefore, the English-language Chinese-food cookbook was a product made in the United States.

Indeed, Chinese-American cookbook writers were not merely translating or introducing China's cuisine to American audiences. In fact, during this period, no Chinese-food cookbook was a direct translation from Chinese. Rather, they represented an unprecedented effort to define and articulate Chinese food, and they did so because they knew they were speaking to non-Chinese audiences. Moreover, a comprehensive definition of what constitutes Chinese food had never been given before. Numerous Chinese-American cookbook writers consciously took up the task of articulating Chinese cooking. An example is Buwei Yang Chao's 1945 cookbook, in which she listed and explained in detail 20 different ways of cooking: boil, steam, roast, red-cook, clear-simmer, pot-stew, stir-fry, deep-fry, shallow-fry, meet, splash, plunge, rinse, cold-mix, sizzle, salt, pickle, steep, dry, and smoke (Chao 1945, 39–47).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHINESE COOKBOOK WRITING BEYOND GASTRONOMY

Cookbook writing was not simply about food. It also gave Chinese Americans the first consistently high-profile platform to speak to non-Chinese audiences. It was a platform under their own control. They spoke not as marginalized minorities but as experts with authority, which came from their Chinese-ness. In advancing Chinese food, therefore, they also promoted Chinese culture and affirmed their ethnic identity, frequently invoking Chinese historical figures. For example, Lee Su Jan and his wife, May Lee, who taught Chinese cooking lessons in Seattle, mentioned Fu Xi Shi (a legendary ancestor of the Chinese) in their 1962 cookbook and acknowledged the impact of Daoism on Chinese cooking, but they traced Chinese food's origin to Confucius. "It was Confucius," they wrote, "who set the standard of culinary correctness and who regulated the customs and etiquette of the table" (1962, 15).

With apparent pride, they discussed Chinese food as representing the sophistication and richness of Chinese culture. Wallace Yee Hong wrote in the introduction to his 1952 cookbook: "For thousands of years cooking has been regarded as a fine art in China—almost a science." They were also the first to use the word "art" in characterizing Chinese-food writing as a venue for self-expression, talking about themselves, their family, and the community. Buwei Yang Chao wrote about how she learned to cook with "an open mind and an open mouth" (1945, xiii). She also discussed her family's involvement in the production of her book, mentioning her daughter's contribution in rendering the text into English and, in a humorous tone, her husband's role as a taster and critic. For Hsiang-ju Lin and Tsuifeng Lin, writing a cookbook was also a family affair—it was a mother-daughter collaboration. As husband and father, Lin Yutang wrote an engaging forward to the book and also served as a food tester.

Finally, writing Chinese-food cookbooks was an affirmation of cultural identity. For instance, Mai Leung wrote in the acknowledgements of her 1976 cookbook: "To the people and culture of China, I

acknowledge my enduring indebtedness. The collective experience of my people has been my teacher and my benefactor. I had the good fortune to be born among them, to participate in their learning and experience" (1976, ix).

Clearly, Chinese-food cookbooks embodied a desire and attempt by Chinese Americans to search for and to create a home for themselves in an alien society. While others turned Chinese food into a steady source of income for the Chinese community, Chinese-American authors used cookbook writing as a way to systematically introduce China's cooking to non-Chinese audiences. In so doing, they also promoted Chinese culture and proclaimed their cultural identity as Chinese in defiance of racial prejudice. The home they strived and helped to create in the New World, however, is not a replica of the "homeland" but contained elements from both China and the United States.

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