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Authenticity, Personal Relationships and the Aura of Home:

The Case of the Chinese American Restaurant

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Restaurants, especially those with an ethnic theme, provide far more than an eating experience; they speak of culture, history, and relationships. As Lucy Long points out, ethnic restaurants are part of a culinary experience that "reflect complex networks of cultural, social, economic and aesthetic systems" (1998:181). This may be true of all restaurants, in that all restaurants attempt to create an atmosphere of one kind or another and have cultural and historical groundings, but an additional aspect of the ethnic restaurant is their creation of the Other. Ethnic restaurants are "representative of the other" and provide a "negotiated" view of cultures via "culinary tourism" for the clientele (Long 2004:21). Whether the existence of such restaurants are driven by economic survival of immigrants (Barbas 2003), business practicality (Rosdahl 1995), or the desire for safe adventures into other cultures (Long 1998, 2004) could be debated, but one of the most intriguing aspects of such endeavors is the discursive creation of and reliance on authenticity, particularly the clientele's "search for authenticity" as "a fundamentally emotional and moral quest" (Bendix 1997:7).

Authenticity for ethnic restaurants generally has been defined by western standards as supplying traditional food and ambience, but the meaning of authenticity may be more complex (Appadurai 1985; Barbas 2003; Bendix 1997; Gaytán 2010; Girardelli 2004; Lu & Fine 1995; MacCannell 1973; Molz 2004), especially given the evolving clientele in a globalized and postcolonial world. With transnational travel and immigration at record highs, clientele may range in their connection to the ethnic restaurant or in their experience of other cultures.

Many scholars have focused on the survival of the ethnic restaurant, especially with regard to how the food should be tailored for customers. For instance, Rosdahl suggests that ethnic restaurants exist in an ever more competitive market and have focused on specializing food without much

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consideration to other aspects of authenticity. Writing of ethnic restaurants in the heartland, he noted the changing nature of competitiveness:

Now, however, our market has plenty of 'Chinese' and 'Mexican' places. I put these words in quotes because these terms have gotten to be generic when it comes to food. So, to carve out a niche ethnic restaurants have to specialize in foods from certain parts of Asia or certain states of Mexico (1995: n.p.).

This may be true, but authenticity depends on more than food; ambience, music, serving style and more come into play (Lu & Fine 1995; Molz 2004). It is equally important to consider how authenticity unfolds for various participants and what its meanings are for them.

For varying reasons, several scholars (e.g. Barbas 2003; Lu & Fine 1995; Rosdahl 1995) have focused on Chinese-American restaurants to explore the complex and changing constructions of authenticity in the United States (Barbas 2003). Rising immigration is one reason. Recent statistics suggest:

Approximately 3.79 million Chinese are living in the United States, 2.2 million of whom were born in China, according to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA). This number has doubled since 2000, and is mainly attributed to China's growing middle and upper classes, who have left in droves to pursue education and business opportunities abroad (US Immigration Fund 2015: n.p.).

The growing number of Chinese immigrants may mean increased competition for Chinese restaurant owners but also more opportunities for them to capture a growing Chinese clientele.

Originally, Chinese restaurants in America catered to Chinese immigrants, but over time as they served varying ethnic populations within the U.S., they eventually began catering to a western palate (Barbas 2003). Today, with the growing number of international students and Chinese immigrants coming to the United States, the pendulum may swing back, but because food is dynamic (that is "authentic" Chinese food as it is conceived in China is changing) so will the meanings of authenticity. Thus we discuss the philosophical background of the meaning of authenticity before proceeding to our study.

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Authenticity, Aura and the Desire for Closeness

Authenticity is a concept that has come under increased discussion in the postmodern and postcolonial era (see Bendix 1997 for an overview). Drawing from Benjamin's (1970) classic work on art in an era of the mechanical reproduction, postmodern scholars have explored reproduction as an attempt at re-creating authenticity dependent on the profound desire for origin or the original. According to Benjamin, not only can the reproduced never exist in time and space of the original, but the very notion attempts to claim permanent time and space for the original. The original is seen as "authorial" and that which holds "authority" (1970: 218). Thus the authentic has a sense of privilege. In addition, the replication "depreciates" the original or "detaches" from the authentic (Benjamin 1970: 219). Benjamin suggested that this thinking could/should be carried beyond "the realm of art" (1970: 219). And it has been applied quite widely. For instance, Bendix (1997) extended such theories to folklore, from poetry to politics. Others have applied them to restaurants as expressions of cultures and people (e.g., Lu & Fine 1995; Molz 2004).

Benjamin further proposed that the original holds an "aura" that is desired and the reproduction is an attempt to bring the aura "closer" to oneself. In past studies of ethnic restaurants, this concept generally has been associated with one set of cultural members attempting to hold the Other close and at times has been discussed as hegemonic and colonizing (see Barbas 2003); few have researched the desire for the authentic from the perspective of the insider culture, which of course depends on one's standpoint. For example, Gooch (2015) explained the history of the transplanted chile pepper from the West Indies to New Mexico and explored how the transplanted chile takes on its own "terroir," altered aspects based on its new surroundings (e.g., soil, climate). Gooch suggested the same metaphor can be applied to people. In other words, transplanted people may also develop altered identities that include new tastes. But they may also desire a sense of home. One might ask: when the authentic seems distant but is desired, how does the traveler far from home regain the aura of the original culture from which they came?

This notion problematizes both the definition of authenticity and the standpoint from which it can be discussed. Molz called authenticity a contentious term (2004: 227) and Bendix described its relation to diversity:

Cultural scholarship aware of the deceptive nature of authenticity concepts may

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turn its attention toward learning to tell the story of why humans search for authenticity and why this search is fraught with such agony. A vast gulf separates the negotiation of pluralist diversity and the legitimation of multicultural difference. Authenticity validates the latter; acknowledging the constructed and deceptive nature of authenticity leads to cultural scholarship committed to life on a planet characterized by inescapable transculturation. (1997: 227-228).

Both scholars are referring to the Self's search for authentic experiences regarding the Other; we believe it is equally important to apply this notion to the Self's search for Self. Although in this case, Self is flipped for Other. That is to say, ethnic restaurants and especially Chinese-American restaurants offer fertile ground for such studies with a growing Chinese population in America seeking experiences of home.

Authenticity as a Discursive Practice in Ethnic Restaurants

How restaurants create an "authentic" image of culture has been of paramount interest to researchers from various disciplines (e.g., Clair et al. 2011; Long 1998, 2004; Molz 2004; Robinson 2007; Wijaya, King, Nguyen, and Morrison 2013). As Long points out, this authentic image is a negotiated identity that is grounded in "interactive, communicative events [set] within a larger conceptual symbolic system" (2004: 32) and its construction is "dynamic" (2004: 33). According to Gaytán, investigating ethnic restaurants, especially for identity and authenticity, "provides the opportunity to determine and communicate one's place as an individual in an increasingly global marketplace" (2010: 314). Ethnic restaurants may provide a place for immigrants to feel at home, a place with which they can identify. However, with respect to Chinese-American restaurants, Lu and Fine (1995) pointed out that it is also possible the construction of "authenticity" is more of a persuasive strategy to lure non-Chinese customers and may give a false impression to the local non-Chinese community. We would add that at the same time such restaurants might be unattractive to the Chinese immigrant. In this sense, authenticity as a discursive practice or a rhetorical strategy becomes even more complicated.

According to Lu and Fine (1995), the idea of restaurants as rhetorical or discursive practices can be traced to Karnow's work which suggests that even the names of Chinese restaurants (e.g., Jade Lion, Pearl River) "are strategies designed to

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reinforce the desire of diners for exotic experience" (1995: 539). This is also known as a "naming" strategy meant to provide a sense of similarity for the participant (Long 2004: 38). Molz (2004) also highlighted the role of décor, menu, claims on the menu, and ingredients as part of the rhetorical staging. Such discursive strategies are counter to the very notion of authenticity defined as "reliable, trustworthy, of undisputed origin, genuine" (Oxford 1982). But as Bendix (1997) pointed out, the original is never within grasp and the reproduction is always artificial to some degree. A "disingenuous" name that sounds genuine may satisfy some customers, but the more knowledgeable diners are about a culture, the more difficult it may be for a restaurant to satisfy their demands for authenticity. In addition, in the current era of diversity and inclusion, authenticity is in a state of constant flux. Customers may not seek a "pure" authenticity but be looking for forms of hybridization and food fusion.

Authenticity, Hybridity, and Commoditization in Ethnic Restaurants

The following two studies examined intersections of authenticity, hybridity and commoditization. The first explored the role of hybridity and authenticity in Chinese-American restaurants and the second, and more recent, focused on hybridity and authenticity in five non-Chinese-American ethnic restaurants. Looking at these studies in more detail helps to position this current study of a Chinese-American restaurant.

First, in 1995, Lu and Fine conducted a study of four Chinese-American restaurants in a southern U.S. college town. The restaurants primarily served a non Chinese clientele and fit within one of two categories: consumption or connoisseur-oriented. Because the clientele were non Chinese-Americans, the owners Americanized the food. Even if they had not felt the need to cater to their clientele's tastes, they would have had to adapt the food to the American context due to the lack of Chinese vegetables: "bamboo shoots, hotbed chives, garlic bolt, waxgourd," and the need to substitute with local vegetables: "carrots, broccoli, snow peas, green peppers and mushrooms" (1995: 541). Even if these could be shipped to the restaurants, the costs would have been exorbitant. These modifications and others bring authenticity into question. Lu and Fine operationalized authenticity as the amount of deviation in food, recipes, décor and other relative features from what most believe to be authentic or original. The authors suggested that demands for authenticity come from Americans (non Chinese in this case) who are seeking the cultural experience

"really lived" by natives (Lu and Fine 1995: 539). However, because it is impossible for restaurant owners to create dishes and a dining experience identical to the homeland due to a number of factors including economic, geographic, and the dynamic nature of culture, they opt to create a "staged authenticity" (MacCannell 1973).

Lu and Fine discovered that the restaurants generally negotiate a middle ground by cooking traditional Chinese dishes and changing their flavorings to suit the mostly non Chinese- American clientele. They also found that the meal format is changed somewhat, at least in the fine dining experience. Whereas at a restaurant in China the food comes all at one time (much like the serving of an average family meal at home in the U.S.), in American fine dining restaurants the meal is brought in stages. The American-Chinese restaurants modified their approach to match fine dining practices in the U.S. (also see Long 2004).

The authors discussed these two main indicators of authenticity as cultural capital, a means for restaurant owners to draw clientele into four restaurants—two consumption-oriented (i.e., fast-food) and two connoisseur-oriented (i.e., fine dining) (Lu and Fine 1995). Of course, the clientele had varying levels of knowledge about culture and food and therefore had very different goals in mind. Consumption-oriented customers were especially attracted by low prices, fast service, and the Americanized Chinese food. The connoisseur-oriented clientele were more concerned with the authenticity of the food; they preferred dishes that were less sweet or salty as the more Americanized versions. They sought the "Chinese" experience.

Interestingly, the owner of one of the connoisseur-oriented restaurants was more concerned about consistency than anything else and subsequently drew from a "Coca Cola" model to ensure stability. That is to say, even if the cooks changed, the food would not. As Lu and Fine noted, the owner's "good reputation" depended on this consistency (1995: 546). The authors concluded that "the social construction of authentic ethnic food is bounded by social, cultural, and economic constraints" (Lu and Fine 1995: 547). They added that for diners to accept the negotiation of authenticity, the restaurant must balance what might be regarded as the "real" Chinese experience in China and what will be acceptable to American tastes. The clientele must feel as though they have had a cultural experience while not being turned off by flavors that are so foreign as to be distasteful. The authors supported the notion that modifying the cultural experience should not be denigrated but rather viewed as innovative; the ability to set one's self apart while fitting in is praiseworthy.

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Finally, Lu and Fine concluded that ethnic restaurants "carve out an economic niche by means of …a display of the ethnic culture that is simultaneously seen as 'authentic' and within the bounds of cultural expectations (1995: 535)." In short, the four Chinese restaurants constructed an authenticity characterized by adaptability and variability.

Fifteen years later, Clair et al (2011) undertook a study of five ethnic restaurants in a small college town. They defined authenticity in a similar fashion to Lu and Fine (1995), focusing mainly on food and décor. In addition, they explored how restaurant owners created identity for the respective ethnic groups and how they engaged the local culture. The authors framed their study according to postmodern practices. Accepting that cultures are dynamic and changing, they expected to find varying levels of "authenticity." They explored aspects of hybridity and addressed the commoditization of cultures after having noted such anomalies as Fazoli's restaurant, an Italian restaurant which is owned by a Japanese corporation. They highlighted that ethnic restaurants are discursive practices that speak of identity and to both ethnic and local cultures.

Clair et al. (2011) found that the restaurants' constructions of authenticity, hybridity, and commodification acted as discursive means to create different cultural identities, including Irish-American, Italian-American, Korean-American, Middle Eastern-American, and Mediterranean-American. The study noted that values and criterion related to authenticity varied across restaurants. For example, the Korean restaurant owner highlighted freshness of food as the key to healthy food and authentic Korean dining while the Irish-American restaurateur focused on "authentic" décor (e.g., tables and stools shipped from Ireland) and his family stories of Ireland. The Italian restauranteur did not attempt to "name" the food on the menu in a stereotypical Italian way, but rather named the dishes after the owner's children's names.

Hybridity existed in some restaurants. For example, the Korean-American restaurant also served Chinese food because the owner liked it. The Middle Eastern restaurant owner served Pepsi products in decorative tin cups. He decorated the restaurant in Middle Eastern décor (tapestries and colorful pillows) but also showed off local baseball trophies from teams that his restaurant sponsored, which is an American practice. Hybridity challenges stereotypes of what food is allowed to be served and how the appropriate décor for ethnic restaurants. For example, a Mediterranean restaurant was owned and operated by a Mexican-American couple and did a superior business to the same-themed restaurant that was owned and

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operated by a man of Middle Eastern origin. In addition, the owner of the Italian restaurant turned out to be of Spanish descent. Marketing also at times commodified ethnicity. The Irish restaurant owner marketed his ethnic identity by initiating the town's first St. Patrick's Day parade which just happened to start on one side of town and end at his restaurant door. Stereotypes and expectations were both reinforced in some cases and completely toppled in other cases (Clair et al. 2011).

The findings from the Clair et al. (2011) study supported a paradoxical post-postmodern narrative; hybridity was not always hidden, stereotypes were sometimes challenged, and occasionally the owners commodified their own heritage. In one restaurant the owner openly discussed using frozen Americanized versions of certain foods. Thus, restaurant owners' efforts to construct authenticity by reproducing a "pure," original or disguising any imperfections may be disappearing in an age of hybridization and food fusion, just as some stereotypes are disappearing. In short, restaurateurs have agency; they can redefine both reproduction and authenticity.

Past studies often have incorporated limited conceptualizations of authenticity, based primarily on food, food format, or décor. But other understandings of authenticity exist. For example, the minor notation in the Lu and Fine's (1995) study, that one owner was more concerned with his reputation than anything else, may speak volumes about cultural authenticity. This restaurateur established his reputation through consistency. Reputation may be just one of several cultural indicators or values of authenticity. Perhaps, for Chinese restaurant owners, reputation should be added to the characterization of authenticity. And as Clair et al (2011) indicated, strict rules governing constructions of authenticity seem to be giving way to other factors that determine new definitions and goals.

These studies suggest that additional research is necessary. In general past research has focused on perceptions of authenticity as constructed by an outsider culture while more recent work is indicating a dynamic change in what constitutes authenticity and the desire for authenticity by both the insider and outsider, Self and Other. Yet it is still unclear how the Self seeks authenticity, or creates authenticity, especially in and through the ethnic restaurant and how that search might be culturally defined.

Ethnography

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Focusing on ethnic restaurants, one finds establishments that not only have a rich history (Heldke 1997, 2000) but also a strong connection to cultural exchange and community development (Barbas 2003). Following in the footsteps of those who rely on anthropological methods to study and understand food and its connection to identity and authenticity (e.g., Brown and Sherry 2003; Clair et al. 2011; Diner 2001; Gaytán 2010; Girardelli 2004; Gvion & Trostler 2008; Liu and Lin 2009; Lockwood & Lockwood 2000; Lu & Fine 1995; Min 1984; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Ray 2006; Roden 2000; Zanger 2004; Zubaida and Tapper 2000), we conducted an ethnography of a Chinese-American restaurant. How we, the authors, came together as a team unfolded over time. Robin, the first author, initiated the study and conducted the majority of the fieldwork for the ethnography, but sought help from Kai, Ziyu, and Jasmine in terms of translation, perceptions, and cultural understanding and they began joining Robin on trips to the restaurant and later helped with writing the article. We, the authors, apologize for the awkward shift from first to third person in the following case narrative but with multiple authors this may provide the reader with further clarity as to how the study was conducted.

Rationale for Chinese Restaurant Focus in General

A Chinese-American restaurant was selected from the pool of ethnic restaurants to focus this study on for several reasons. First, as previously mentioned there is a growing Chinese immigrant population to the United States who will seek Chinese food (and ways to establish entrepreneurship or jobs) and which has led to expansion in the numbers of Chinese restaurants in the U.S. In 1995, there were approximately 30,000 Chinese restaurants in the U.S. (Lu & Fine 1995). By 2004 there were 36,000 (Luo 2004) and by 2007 there were approximately 40,000 Chinese-American restaurants (Adler 2007). Adler noted that by 2007 there were more Chinese restaurants in the U.S. "than the number of McDonald's and Taco Bells combined" (2007: n.p.). If this astounding number of restaurants is not enough in itself to support the choice, then it should be noted that Chinese-American restaurants have a history that dates back to the 1800s and which has received scant attention (for an exception see Barbas 2003)

More specifically, according to Luo, Chinese-American restaurants and their identity formation are understudied: "Excerpts from Mr. Spiller's collection [of Chinese-American restaurant menus dating as far back as the 1800s and including

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close to 1,000 menus] are the centerpiece of a new exhibit at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas in Chinatown about a rarely examined phenomenon: The Chinese restaurant in America" (2004: n.p.). In addition, noting that "authenticity" is one of the prime rhetorical strategies that ethnic restaurants use to establish an identity and maintain an economic base and durability within a community, Lu and Fine argued that Chinese restaurants should be studied for their unique feature of "primarily serving an external public" (1995: 536). However, with the burgeoning Chinese population in the U.S. today, this is no longer the case. Chinese restaurants today may need to provide "authenticity" that will be judged more and more by a knowledgeable Chinese market.

Asserting that the Chinese-American restaurant has come full circle, once again serving a Chinese population, requires a knowledge of this history as well as the contemporary situation. An extensive and detailed history has been provided by Barbas (2003) which noted that Chinese restaurants in America developed in the late 1800s to serve a Chinese immigrant population and that non-Chinese Americans sought these restaurants in search of an authentic experience. Barbas's work also pointed out the political and economic history of the Chinese immigrants and the role that the restaurant played. Specifically, Chinese laborers in the 1800s held jobs in every market segment in the U.S. but by the twentieth century racial discrimination, propelled at first by unions, forced Chinese workers to more and more constrained working choices (Barbas 2003). Restaurants became a refuge and a means to economic survival, but the Chinese needed to cater to the tastes of non-Chinese Americans in order to survive; that is, dishes became hybrid creations in the interest of economic survival. Barbas's historical overview is a detailed and scholarly work, worth the read; however other sources on Chinese-American restaurant history are also available. For instance, popular books include Coe's (2009) book, Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States, which provides an explanation for why the Jewish American population embraced eggrolls and chow mein, and Lee's (2008) book, The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food, which features a discussion of the history of the fortune cookie. Each of these histories are fascinating, but they do not take up the contemporary discussion of the complicated and shifting meaning of authenticity for the contemporary Chinese restaurant.

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Choosing and Entering Ru Jia (As if, like home □□)

The college town in the United States where this ethnography is set has roughly 30,000 permanent residents and an additional 40,000 students. Many of these students are international; the university is known for its large international student population, especially of Chinese students. There are approximately 25 Chinese restaurants located here and in a nearby sister city with a resident population of approximately 67,000. They serve a wide range of dishes from Americanized fast food and buffets to regional cuisines including Hunan, Szechuan and others.

Robin selected Ru Jia (a pseudonym) as the restaurant of study based on the recommendation of several Chinese college students who deemed it the most "authentic." What they meant by that was yet to be determined. Nevertheless, relying on the criteria for authenticity established by Lu and Fine (1995), the restaurant had markers of "authenticity": the name was Chinese, not Americanized and the owners relied on Chinese dishes, served the food all at one time, and are from China. Thus, Robin began the ethnographic case study with a phone call to the owner of Ru Jia.

The phone call was met with confusion at best. Robin explained to the voice on the other end that she would like to stop by to bring a letter explaining the study and asked the owner if it would be possible for herto come and observe and conduct interviews. She was told, in awkward English, by the woman who had answered the phone that the owner was not in. Robin asked when the owner might be in and after several missed meanings, the woman on the other end finally said, "He'll be back on Saturday. Come Saturday."

Robin arrived at the restaurant on Saturday. She sat in a booth while the woman behind the counter worked. Realizing that she would need a translator, Robin requested help from Jasmine Ee LingTan, a Singaporean graduate student fluent in Mandarin Chinese who later became the fourth author. Jasmine had been to the restaurant before and agreed to meet Robin there. While waiting Robin attempted to introduce herself to the woman behind the counter, but she soon realized that she would need to wait for her translator. When Jasmine arrived she explained to Robin that the woman behind the counter was one of the owners.

The woman is respectfully referred to as the "Lady Boss" or the "Lady in Charge" by the Chinese and Taiwanese students who frequent the restaurant.

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In Robin's attempt to introduce herself to the owner while waiting, she had explained that she had come to speak with the owner. The woman behind the counter informed her that he was not there. Robin felt like saying, "But you said he would be here on Saturday," but decided that was no way to begin a relationship, especially if there are cultural differences. At that moment Robin was also unaware of the Lady in Charge's status as part owner.

Jasmine and Robin studied the lunch menus—one menu was for Chinese clientele (hard cover and written in Chinese characters) and one menu was for both Chinese and non-Chinese customers, written with both Chinese characters and English translations. Jasmine described some of the dishes and Robin made mental notes. Robin chose an Americanized-Chinese lunch—broccoli, chicken and rice with a uniquely tasty sauce. Her food came first and the Lady in Charge, who Robin later learned goes by the American name of Jessie, placed a plastic fork and a set of chopsticks in the middle of the table. Robin opened the chopsticks and began to eat at Jasmine's insistence that she not wait for the rest of the food to arrive. Jasmine ordered a soup with noodles and meat. When her food arrived it came with a plastic spoon, but she also needed chopsticks. That is when they realized Jessie assumed that as a non-Asian Robin would use the fork and as a Singaporean graduate student, Jasmine, would use the chopsticks. Stereotypes go both ways. It took more than a month into the study for Jessie to provide Robin with chopsticks as if it were a natural thing to do.

By the end of lunch, they felt comfortable enough to approach Jessie about the study. Jasmine translated the letter of introduction as Robin stood by indicating her interest and occasionally filling in information. Jessie took the letter. She did not agree to the study, but she promised to consider it. She never mentioned the owner being away or when he would return. Robin and Jasmine learned later that the co-owner was in the kitchen cooking at the time. After visiting on a regular basis for a week, Robin was able to get Jessie to sign the agreement for the study. Robin completed the rest of the Human Subject paperwork and within a few more weeks she had permission to move ahead.

Ethnographic Observations, Interviews and Field Notes: A Tale of the Field

Observations of Ru Jia took place over a three month period and included lunches,

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dinners and afternoon visits to Ru Jia. Each of Robin's early visits lasted two to three hours and she noted her observations in field journal notes and typed them at the end of the day. The first set of observations focused on the physical place, the ambience created through decoration, the food, and Jessie and her interactions with the clientele. Backstage, as Goffman (1959) would describe it, was not under study, as the focus was on the restaurant's creation of authenticity for the clientele. Unrecorded interviews were conducted with customers on the premises.

Initial Observations

Ru Jia is a storefront restaurant which Robin eventually learned has been in operation since 2002. The business is owned by Jessie and her husband who cooks; her sister-in-law also assists. Jessie is from Fujian, north of Guandong and neither she nor her husband had operated a restaurant in China before coming to the U.S.

The booths in Ru Jia are salmon-colored and made of plastic. The table tops and chairs that are in the middle of the restaurant are bright red. And the floor tile is a rich terra-cotta. Matching lamps of a deep-red hue hang above the counter where food is ordered and prepared. Customers place their order at the counter and Jessie brings their meal to them. As mentioned earlier, the term "Lady Boss" was used by the students to address the female owner. When Robin directed Jasmine to ask her what she would like to be called, Robin also asked Jasmine to apologize for her initial mistake in not realizing that Jessie was one of the owners; Robin had thought she was too young. Jessie was flattered and told them to call her by her Americanized name that she likes (Jessie is a pseudonym for it). "I like it too," Robintold her and added "that is my niece's name." She smiled.

Jessie is an exquisitely beautiful Chinese woman. She is young (around 30-35 years old) and has hair that flows to her waist with contemporary soft side bangs. She handles the front region of the restaurant, taking orders, delivering food, clearing dishes and ringing sales. She laughs easily and talks, in Chinese, with customers. Jessie floats about from table to table delivering food and never looks frazzled even though at times the restaurant becomes quite busy. There are five booths — one has nothing on it in the way of condiments, one has pepper, one has soy sauce, one has a salt shaker, and one has red pepper. Jessie keeps these flowing from one customer to the next. There are three tables that seat two

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people and three tables for four people, plus the booths mentioned above, which seat approximately 20 people. The restaurant seats 38 people comfortably and on several occasions we have seen it completely full. The wall hangings include Chinese scrolls, Chinese paintings, and European impressionistic paintings. The Chinese do not often hang artwork and so to do might have been to make their non-Chinese American clientele more comfortable. The soft pastel impressionist prints seemed to my eye, the most out of place and yet they were subtle and pleasing. For the most part, the decorations are simple and reminiscent of China with "laughing, waving kitty" and a jade dragon statue on the counter.

Over the course of several visits Robin tried different foods and discovered that the restaurant serves both Americanized and Chinese dishes. The portions surprised her as they are extremely large even when they are Chinese dishes. For example, a favorite or at least a commonly ordered dish by Chinese students is the soup with noodles and meat. The students are often sent home with at least a quart or more in a container when they leave. On one visit Robin took four other people with her and ordered enough crab Rangoon (an Americanized novelty) for everyone to try as the Chinese students had never had crab Rangoon (nor have most of them ever had a fortune cookie). When she asked Jessie how many crab Rangoons are in an order because she would like to feed the group, Jessie made extra, increasing the size of the dish so that everyone could try one. The very notion that crab Rangoon was on the menu speaks to an adapted form of authenticity since crab Rangoon was "likely invented in the United States" (History Crab Rangoon, 2016, n. p.).

On another occasion when Robin went to the restaurant with Kai and Ziyu, who were graduate students at the time. Robin ordered spring rolls (not commonly served in the regions of China where Kai and Ziyu are from). That day Robin only ordered one spring roll as the other two had ordered large dishes of food for themselves. Jessie changed Robin's order so that three spring rolls arrived at the table, enough for everyone. At another time, Robin was struck by a story Kai and Ziyu shared. They had invited American students home to dinner and were surprised that after they placed the dishes of food on the table, the American students lifted them and began passing them around. This was supposed to be a Chinese dinner and the Chinese practice is to share by placing the platters of food in the middle of the table. The American students' behavior seemed inappropriate until the hosts reconsidered that this was their way of sharing. And of course sharing was the point, even if the

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Chinese cultural practice was lost on the American students. The American students, unlike the Chinese students, had never taken an international etiquette class.

Interviews

Over Robin's first visits to the restaurant, she tried to build a relationship with Jessie. For example, on her fourth visit she brought her husband and introduced him to Jessie. They had practiced how to say, "Hello" and "thank you" in Chinese and when they greeted Jessie with a buoyant, "Ni hao," she smiled generously at their attempts. On Robin's next visit she could not help but to tell Jessie how beautiful she looked, dressed in a long, black, print skirt and black, spangled top. She smiled shyly, accepting the compliment with some embarrassment.

On other occasions Kai and Ziyu came with Robin to the restaurant. They allowed Robin to interview them for the study and later she asked them if they would like to be coauthors. Before being offered a coauthor position, here are some of there responses to Robin's interviews with them. Kai, the second author, told Robin that on her first day in town she registered for classes, obtained her I.D. and ate at Ru Jia. Ziyu agreed that this was the first restaurant where she ate. And Ziyu told Robin that when Jessie the Lady in Charge served her a meal, she said, "You're new here, aren't you?" Ziyu nodded. Jessie added comfortingly, "You'll get used to the food." When Robin asked what she meant by that, Ziyu explained that even though Jessie and her husband try to offer the students food from "home" that they would have grown up with in China, and advertise it on the menu cover as "authentic," it is impossible to replicate exactly. This is due to many reasons, including the fact that Jessie and her husband are not from the same region of China as many of the students and because American vegetables are not the same as those grown in China. "Cucumbers in China are slender with small seeds and the celery is different, many things are different," Kai explained. This points to the challenges Chinese restaurant owners face when trying to make food that is familiar or palatable to the local consumer (Long 2004). Here the owner apologizes for her inability to manipulate the food to make it taste more like the original because the local produce constrains her (see also Molz 2004; Lu & Fine 1995). Nevertheless, Ru Jia is the most home-like of the restaurants in the local area and Jessie helps to welcome and comfort newcomers. The Ru Jia restaurant is advertised in the

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"Chinese Student" orientation packet and Jessie has developed a relationship with the president of the student organization. While other Chinese restaurants target Americans with Americanized names and food, Ru Jia targets the international Chinese, Singaporean, and Taiwanese students. Their efforts have been successful because international students clearly make up a significant percentage of their clientele; for example during the interview with Kai and Ziyu, Robin noticed a group of about eight Taiwanese students arrive and pull tables together to enjoy lunch.

When Robin asked Kai and Ziyu, "What about non-Americanized Chinese restaurants?," they both explained that one of the other Chinese restaurants in town with a very good reputation for serving delicious and "authentic" food had become "too popular." That restaurant had grown to be in such demand that the owners hired Mexican servers. Now Kai and Ziyu no longer wanted to go there. They explained that the Mexican or Mexican-American servers could not speak to them and that they served "without emotional attachment to the culture." This was in keeping with Molz's observation that customers are looking for ethnically consistent servers (Molz 2004). However, this comment goes further, suggesting that Kai and Ziyu re not only looking for ethnically consistent servers, but servers who could make an emotional connection. So Kai and Ziyu no longer went there. They found Ru Jia "more intimate" in contrast to some of the other restaurants that seemed "more business-like." They valued this over other aspects, such as the décor, which they did not experience as completely authentic at Ru Jia. For example, Chinese restaurants do not usually hang framed works but Kai and Ziyu did not find this practice at Ru Jia too distracting. Instead they referred positively to the "waving cat. " The statue of a cat that is waving, whose origin seems to be Japanese, beckons one to come in and is considered a symbol of good luck (see Maneki-Neko, 2016). Like other Chinese students they knew, Kai and Ziyu found the waving cat cute and it made them smile. In contrast to the décor, they mentioned that the way the food is served contributed to their sense of authenticity. Diners at a table all draw from the same plate rather than pass the food as Americans do. Other elements combine the familiar and unfamiliar. For example, Kai and Ziyu reported that while Coca Cola is common in China, the Coke machine, a self-dispensing unit, is not and Ru Jia has a self-dispensing Coke machine next to the counter where orders are placed near the cash register. At the time of the fieldwork, Ru Jia was Kai and Ziyu's first choice in local Chinese restaurants even if it did not entirely eliminate their feelings of homesickness. They appreciated Jessie's easy manner and obvious concern for them and feel that all of the students respect

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her. Finally, Ru Jia offers discounts to the students making it an even more affordable option and they can count on the restaurant being healthy, safe, and friendly. All of these aspects—décor, food and serving methods, and feelings of hospitality and warmth--reflect Erving Goffman's (1963) concept of "framing" which Long (2004) identified as significant in culinary tourism. And perhaps more notably, it speaks of particular constructions of authenticity, identity and home (see Gooch 2015).

During an interview Jessie indicated that she begins her day at 10:30 am. The number of customers whom she serves varies during the day and evening hours. They close the doors to the restaurant at 10:00 pm on week nights and stay open until 11:00 pm on weekends. They are open seven days a week. She enjoys helping newcomers to the area and giving them directions, advice, and introductions to others. The staff is too small to allow them to participate in community food festivals, but they do engage with students as much as possible. For instance, they interact with students from various countries and areas including the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. The restaurant sells Spring Festival Gala (a small festival held at the university to celebrate the Spring Festival, which is also known as the Lunar New Year) tickets for the students and the students, in turn, via word of mouth and orientation packets, spread the word about Ru Jia. This quiet form of publicity (Xuanchuan) is in contrast to the strategies of some of the other Chinese-American restaurants in the area that have recently resorted to hiring students to pass out fliers to all the professors on campus.

During Robin's visit to the restaurant with Kai and Ziyu, they witnessed Jessie chatting amiably with a man at one of the booths. Kai explained that he was the president of the Chinese Student Organization at the university and that Jessie told her he has been helping the restaurant owners negotiate their contract with their landlord since his English is so much better than their English. Jessie speaks a dialect common to Fujian (also spoken by Taiwanese, according to Kai and Ziyu. And thus students from very different cultural backgrounds and disparate political persepctives, sit easily in Jessie's restaurant and chat amiably with her. Ru Jia has survived an increase of Chinese restaurants in the area and has created a niche based not only on food, but relationships. It offers the clientele far more than a specific cuisine or an exotic ambience; it offers an authenticity that is based on concern, care, cultural connection and more.

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Authenticity and the Allure and Aura of Home

The construction of authenticity can go well beyond the ingredients, cooking, food format and décor which have been highlighted in many past studies. For example, Lu and Fine mention reputation as being important to one restaurant owner's understanding of authenticity; he uses the strategy of consistency to maintain his reputation (Lu and Fine 1995). Kuang argues that publicity, reputation and relationship are key concepts for the Chinese in terms of public relations (2010). These concepts are intertwined with Ru Jia's construction of authenticity and are integral to its success. In this study, relationship (guanxi) surfaces as a key expression of what makes a culinary experience authentic. To neglect the relational part of sitting down to a meal with people is to forget the soul of the situation. Even if one dines alone, which was not uncommon to see in Ru Jia, Jessie makes welcoming conversation with the solo customer. The reputation of Ru Jia then is linked not only to the "authentic" food, but also to the sense of "authentic" relationships. When international students like Kai and Ziyu found that the Mexican wait staff in the other Chinese restaurant were unable to emotionally engage with them, that is to say, they could not relate to their experiences, the reputation of that restaurant began to decline through word of mouth. In short, the other restaurant may provide "authentic" food, but because they have grown too large, or too popular, their ability to maintain "authentic" relationships with the clientele (guanxi) has been compromised. In contrast, Ru Jia maintains strong and healthy relations with its target clientele and even though it must apologize for its food not being identical to what a student would eat at home in China, it comes close. More importantly, Jessie shares the students' longings for food from particular regions of mainland China and sympathizes with their homesickness. And the clientele return that relational care. The president of the Chinese student association has made strong enough ties with the owners of Ru Jia that they trust him to negotiate their lease with the landlord.

Relationship is further exemplified through sharing. In American dining, couples, especially married couples, often share meals but the dining experience is not designed around this concept. The American version of dining out is generally conceived of as an individual culinary experience with shared conversation. Of course, there are exceptions—for example, appetizers are sometimes designed to be shared and pizza is often shared. But in fine dining even these conventions are broken as when small oven-roasted pizzas are served for one person. The

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importance of sharing became clear after the day Robin told Jessie that she wanted to share the crab Rangoon with everyone at the table. After that she always brought enough for everyone. Sharing is not confined to Chinese culture but Americans share differently: they may buy for everyone, pass plates, and offer a taste of their food to friends to try. But Americans also view reaching across platters as impolite while the Chinese see taking from various platters as sharing. Arguably, sharing is crucial to the construction of authentic relationships (guanxi).

The ethnic restaurant might be considered a fractal of the larger culture from which it comes. Relationship, reputation and image are at stake, and all are negotiated through presentational discourses. Jessie acts as the ambassador of relationship (guanxi) for the restaurant. She is always smiling, poised, and welcoming to her clientele. She creates relationships and presents an image of the restaurant that adds to its reputation for authenticity. The relationships that she fosters with the clientele and within the international student community are central to the restaurant's success; they allow the business's reputation to expand. Jessie does not allow Ru Jia's popularity to interfere with her commitment to those relationships which are the core of the restaurant's construction of authenticity.

Jessie's belief that relationship should be at the heart of both Ru Jia as an enterprise and as an experience of authenticity offered to customers is not shared by everyone in the restaurant industry. For example, the Italian restaurant association is calling for a certification process in order for restaurants in other countries to claim that they are authentic Italian restaurants. The requirements include using a certain portion of Italian ingredients and wines and hiring Italians to cook and serve (Clair et al. 2011). If this proceeds, the association will have to keep in mind that while ingredients, cooks, and servers are important, there are other aspects that define culture, including relationship.

There are also important messages here for researchers. Authenticity needs to be carefully conceptualized in future studies of ethnic restaurants. Relying on food, food format and décor as the determinants of authenticity misses the richness of the culture behind the ethnic restaurant. Researchers may begin with the obvious (the goal is economic; the product is food and ambiance, even image, the cultural experience as others have said), but they should explore the less obvious as well—the cultural expressions of ethnic essence. Authenticity has been commoditized and co-opted by eating establishments who use a cultural image to create a food

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product and service simply to make a profit (Clair et al, 2011), but sometimes authenticity also has been reduced to its simplest elements by researchers. It is a complex phenomenon and should be studied in future scholarly endeavors as such.

Furthermore, past studies have most often focused on the ethnic restaurant as an experience of the exotic with the guest culture being addressed as the ones who are in search of authenticity, that is, from the "tourist's" point of view. Yet, in this globalized world we must recognize the "post-tourist" perspective which suggests that the "self" may be aware of the strategies of authentication and may not care; they may have more "liberal …boundaries" (Molz 2004: 72). Increased ease of global travel and extended stays in other countries means that the Other quickly takes on the face of "Self," reducing the emphasis on "tourism" and highlighting the "search for home" and the nostalgic lure of the distant and desired. Some diners are reaching out a sense of belonging and attempting to create aspects of "home" through "authentic" culinary experiences.

Conclusion

The ethnic restaurant is an orchestration of the practical as well as the aesthetic, political, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of dining. In the case of the Chinese-American restaurant, it has come full circle in America. In the past, Chinese-American restaurants served primarily Chinese immigrants and were tucked away in Chinatowns across America. They expanded to cities, suburbs, and rural areas over the years and targeted non-Chinese populations (Barbas 2003). Today, Chinese immigrants can once again find Chinese restaurants in America meant to cater to them and with the goal of providing an authentic experience that consists of more than food, format and décor. Here authenticity is conceived of in terms of reputation (shengyu), image (xingxiang), publicity (xuanchuan) and, most importantly, relationship (guanxi).

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The phrase Chinese-American restaurant may be less accurate than Chinese restaurant in the U.S., but it may also reflect the idea that the Chinese restaurant by sheer global positioning is already altered in some ways that may be different from Chinese restaurants in China or any other country (e.g., Chinese restaurants in Korea or Italy.) Occasionally, I shorten the expression to Chinese restaurant but I am still referring to restaurants in the U.S. unless otherwise noted.

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