

Exploring Chinese Restaurants in Atlanta's diverse neighborhoods
探索亚特兰大的中餐馆

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Introduction: Why is there a Chinese restaurant here?

It seems that I can find a Chinese restaurant in any part of the world. In a small rural city in France, on a corner in Lima, in the center of Nairobi, by the tourist traps of Istanbul. Maybe it's because I'm Chinese, but they always stand out; I notice them immediately because I have not seen another Chinese person, or even another Asian, in a radius of 100 miles. The menus are usually unrecognizable as they're mostly dishes adapted to fit local taste. Yet behind the counter is always a Chinese person. I always wondered how they ended up here? What is their story?

For this project, I wanted to explore that question closer to home by visiting Chinese restaurants within the city of Atlanta, where the Asian population is only 5% and the Chinese population is even lower. Most Chinese in Atlanta live in the suburbs. Through interviews, observations, and mapping, I set out to learn about the journeys these restaurant owners have taken, how they've adapted to their neighborhoods, and what their experiences reveal about culture, community, and entrepreneurship using a series of visualizations.

Hypothesis

Coming into this research project, my hypothesis is that there is a correlation between how long the owner has immigrated, the location of the restaurant, and how authentic the restaurant is. New immigrants and older immigrant owners will have very different stories regarding opening a restaurant in Atlanta and adapting to local community.

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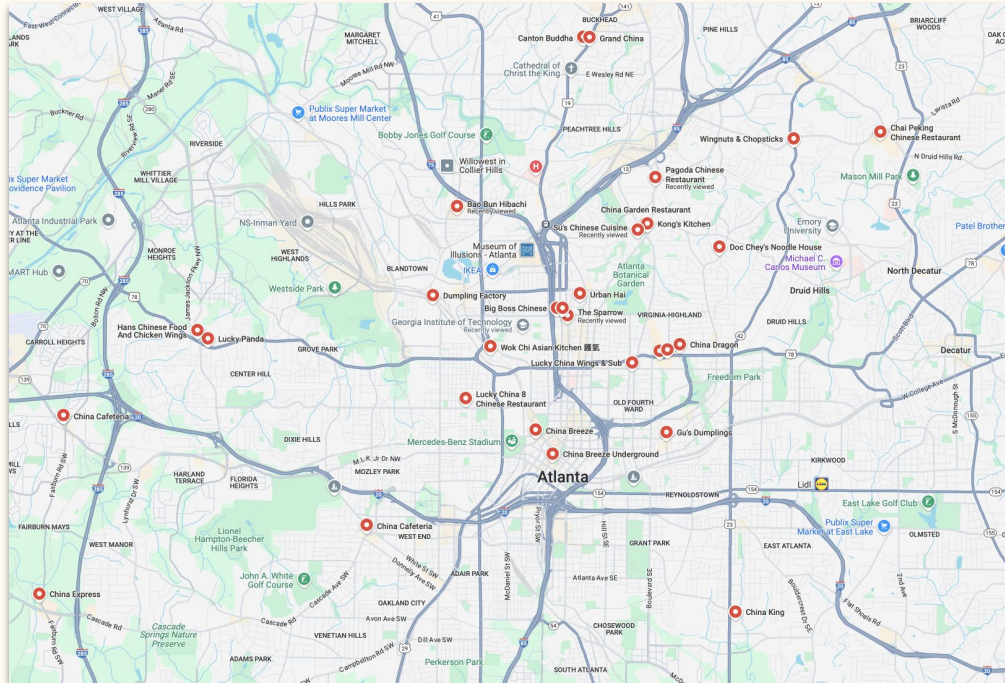
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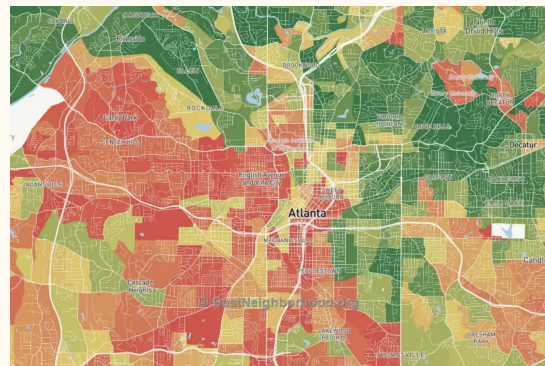
Methodology

The options

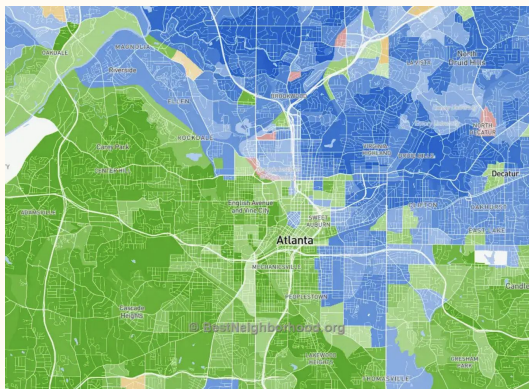


This is a map of all Chinese restaurants I found within Atlanta with Google Maps. They are all either classified as a Chinese restaurant by Google or it is implied in the name of the restaurant. The hope is that all these owner should be Chinese. For this reason, I did not include Asian fusion restaurants as many owners are not Chinese. Each restaurant should have a minimum of around 30-40 Google reviews to indicate the restaurant has some impact on the community.

2 Narrowing down



Household Income Key



Majority Race Key



This is data collected from BestNeighborhood.org showing a visualization of Atlanta by household income and race. The purpose of this is to ensure the restaurants I survey are diverse in their location. Looking at these maps, I broke down the restaurant locations into 3 categories.

Category 1: Downtown, South Atlanta, West Atlanta

These areas are mostly low income and black.

Category 2: North Atlanta, East Atlanta

These areas are mostly high income and white.

Category 3: Georgia Tech, Midtown
This is the most diverse area. This area is mostly white/asian, but the income varies from low to high as there is a mix of professionals and students.

My aim was to survey around 3-6 restaurants in each category.

3

Survey structure + challenges

Interview Questions:

- Where in China is owner from?
- How long has immigrated?
- How long has restaurant been open?
- Why did the owner open a Chinese restaurant in this location where are few Chinese people?
- What does your main customer base look like?
- How have you adapted business based on your customer base?

During the actual interview process, I faced a lot of challenges. The biggest was that the owners were almost never present. All my interviews were with employees who knew enough about the owner, but many times I could not interview because either no employees were willing to answer my questions, or the employee knew nothing about the owner. Thus, I did not collect detailed anecdotal evidence about owner journeys for most the restaurants.

Another challenge is that I did not have a car to commute to the restaurants. The benefit is that by scootering to the restaurants, I get a better understanding of the surrounding area. You miss the nuances of the area around you while you are in a car. The problem with scootering is that I can not go to far places. For round trips, my scooter's range is 4 miles. Another issue is that scootering through neighborhoods with higher crime rates pose a safety risk. Therefore, I could only scooter to these areas when the sun was up. However, many of the take out restaurants are open from evening to 3-5 AM to serve late night customers, so scootering to these restaurants was not possible.

Results

Data Explanation

Location Category: which one the 3 groups that I created

- Downtown, South Atlanta, West Atlanta
- North Atlanta, East Atlanta
- Georgia Tech, Midtown

Neighborhood: What Atlanta neighborhood the restaurant falls in

Neighborhood Demographics: The race percentage and median household income for each neighborhood according to Niche.com [2]

Name: English and Chinese if they have one

Owner origin: what province owner is from. I could not get this information for many restaurants so I assume people feel very private about this information.

How long restaurant has been open: I either asked or I found it online

How long owner immigrated: When owner immigrated from US to China. I could not get this information for many restaurants so I assume people feel very private about this information.

Customer base: a combination of me asking the owner and my own observations looking around

Why this location: Asking the owner why this chose this location to open a restaurant

Adapted vs authentic: a combination of me asking the owner and my own gauge of the menu. Takeout style menus (Fried chicken, spring rolls, only stir fried dishes, etc) would be considered adapted menus. Authentic menus also usually have Chinese along with English. Adapted menus would only have English.

Pricing: my own gauge of the menu

Employee type: my own observations of the race of the employees I can see

Google Map ratings: I look at the number of reviews and ratings out of 5 on Google Maps

Take out vs sit down: a combination of me asking the owner and my own observations looking around

Midtown/Gatech part 1

Location Category	Neighborhood	Neighborhood Demographics [2]	Name (English)	Name (Chinese)	Owner Origins	How long restaurant opened	How long owner immigrated	Customer base	Why this location	Adapted vs authentic	Pricing	Employees	Google Map Ratings (Reviews)	Take out vs sit down
Midtown & Georgia Tech	Midtown	White: 62% Black: 13% Asian: 10%, Hispanic: 9% Median household income: \$114,152	大老板	Big Boss	广东	20 years	42 years	Midtown natives, students, minimal Chinese	Before Chinese community was established	Adapted	\$10-20	No Chinese	4.3 (226)	Mostly takeout
Midtown & Georgia Tech	Midtown	White: 62% Black: 13% Asian: 10%, Hispanic: 9% Median household income: \$114,152	西安饭庄	Xi'an Gourmet House	陕西	2.5 years	10 years	Midtown natives, students, more Chinese	Great location to attract students	Authentic	\$10-20	All Chinese	4.5 (451)	Both
Midtown & Georgia Tech	Midtown	White: 62% Black: 13% Asian: 10%, Hispanic: 9% Median household income: \$114,152	麻将	The Sparrow	??	1 year	5 years	Midtown natives, midtown white collar workers, 50-50 Chinese	Lots of offices = wealthy customers, customers with braver palette	Authentic	\$20-30	Mostly Chinese	4.5 (86)	Mostly sit down

Midtown/Gatech part 2

Location Category	Neighborhood	Neighborhood Demographics [2]	Name (English)	Name (Chinese)	Owner Origins	How long restaurant opened	How long owner immigrated	Customer base	Why this location	Adapted vs authentic	Pricing	Employees	Google Map Ratings (Reviews)	Take out vs sit down
Midtown & Georgia Tech	Midtown	White: 62% Black: 13% Asian: 10%, Hispanic: 9% Median household income: \$114,152	都海	Urban Hai	辽宁	2 years	6 years	Midtown natives, 50-50 Chinese	First authentic in Midtown at their scale	Authentic	\$20-30	Some Chinese	4.6 (600)	Mostly sit down
Midtown & Georgia Tech	Marietta Street Artery	White: 43% Asian: 31%, Hispanic: 11% Black: 9% Median household income: \$54,375	镬气	Wokchi	NO INTERVIEW	4 years	NO INTERVIEW	Locals, students, few Chinese people	NO INTERVIEW	Authentic	\$20-30	Mostly Chinese	4.4 (564)	Mostly takeout
Midtown & Georgia Tech	Knight Park/Howell Station	Black: 56% White: 30% Hispanic: 8% Asian: 2% Median household income: \$147,045	京津	Dumpling Factory	天津	1 year	20+ years	Locals, few Chinese people	Wanted non-Chinese clients, too competitive in Doraville	Authentic	\$20-30	Some Chinese	4.3 (158)	Mostly takeout

Downtown & South/East Atlanta

Location Category	Neighborhood	Neighborhood Demographics [2]	Name (English)	Name (Chinese)	Owner Origins	How long restaurant opened	How long owner immigrated	Customer base	Why this location	Adapted vs authentic	Pricing	Employees	Google Map Ratings (Reviews)	Take out vs sit down
Downtown & South/West Atlanta	Downtown	Black: 48% White: 31% Asian: 11% Hispanic: 6% Median household income: \$65,626	N/A	China Breeze	Malaysian Chinese 马来西亚华人	22 years	N/A	White collar workers from CNN tower, all kinds, no Chinese people	No Chinese community before, chose most populated area	Adapted	\$10-20	Some Chinese	3.9 (40)	Mostly takeout
Downtown & South/West Atlanta	Downtown	Black: 48% White: 31% Asian: 11% Hispanic: 6% Median household income: \$65,626	N/A	China Breeze (Underground)	Malaysian Chinese 马来西亚华人	6 years	N/A	No Chinese people	Opened by sons of original China Breeze owner	Adapted	\$10-20	No Chinese	4.0 (306)	Mostly takeout
Downtown & South/West Atlanta	English Avenue	Black: 78% White: 16% Hispanic: 1% Asian: 0% Median household income: \$68,672	N/A	Lucky Chinese 8	山东	20+ years	NO INTERVIEW	NO INTERVIEW	NO INTERVIEW	Adapted	\$10-20	No Chinese	1.7 (458)	Mostly takeout

North/East Atlanta part 1

Location Category	Neighborhood	Neighborhood Demographics [2]	Name (English)	Name (Chinese)	Owner Origins	How long restaurant opened	How long owner immigrated	Customer base	Why this location	Adapted vs authentic	Pricing	Employees	Google Map Ratings (Reviews)	Take out vs sit down
North/East Atlanta	Piedmont Heights	White: 65% Black: 25%, Hispanic: 6% Asian: 2% Household median income: \$118,414	N/A	Su's Chinese Cuisine	NO INTERVIEW	NO INTERVIEW	NO INTERVIEW	NO INTERVIEW	NO INTERVIEW	Adapted	\$10-20	NO INTERVIEW	3.5 (206)	NO INTERVIEW
North/East Atlanta	Virginia-Highland	White: 78% Hispanic: 11% Black: 5% Asian: 5% Household median income: \$121,237	N/A	China Dragon	福建	10 years	20 years	60% white, 40% black	Owner chose location as best place for family, so family can be close	Adapted	\$10-20	All Chinese	3.8 (56)	Only takeout
North/East Atlanta	Poncey-Highland	White: 71%, Black: 12%, Asian: 8% Hispanic: 3% Household median income: \$117,821	N/A	Chin Chin 2	NO INTERVIEW	20+ years	NO INTERVIEW	Midtown locals, almost all foreigners	NO INTERVIEW	Adapted	\$10-20	Mostly Chinese	4.0 (518)	Mostly takeout

North/East Atlanta part 2

Location Category	Neighborhood	Neighborhood Demographics [2]	Name (English)	Name (Chinese)	Owner Origins	How long restaurant opened	How long owner immigrated	Customer base	Why this location	Adapted vs authentic	Pricing	Employees	Google Map Ratings (Reviews)	Take out vs sit down
North/East Atlanta	Old Fourth Ward	White: 53% Black: 33%, Hispanic: 5% Asian: 4% Household median income: \$94,785	川娃儿	Jia Szechuan Food and Bar	黑龙江	11 years	??	Mostly foreigners, tourists	Hotbed for tourism	Authentic	\$20-30	Mostly Chinese	3.7 (881)	Mostly sit down
North/East Atlanta	Inman Park	White: 72% Asian: 9%, Hispanic: 7% Black: 5% Household median income: \$155,297	古	Gu's Dumplings	四川	12 years	25 years	Midtowners who work, tourists	Hotbed for tourism	Authentic	\$20-30	Some Chinese	3.7 (600)	Mostly takeout
North/East Atlanta	Old Fourth Ward	White: 53% Black: 33%, Hispanic: 5% Asian: 4% Household median income: \$94,785	N/A	Lucky China Wings & Subs	NO INTERVIEW	NO INTERVIEW	NO INTERVIEW	Black, non Chinese	Moved for family	Adapted	\$10-20	Mostly Chinese	3.0 (73)	Only takeout



Photos (with annotations)

Photos part 1



Big Boss (大老板), Midtown staple for 20+ years. The Cantonese owner spoke poor Mandarin and English, making communication difficult.



Xian Gourmet House (西安饭庄), the only student-affordable, authentic restaurant in Midtown



The Sparrow (麻将), the newest Chinese restaurant in Midtown



Urban Hai (都海), the first large scale authentic Chinese restaurant to come to Midtown



Wokchi (镬气), for a long time the go to spot for authentic Chinese food on GT's West Campus

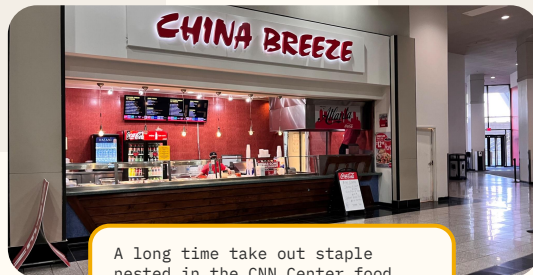


Dumpling Factory (京津), a recently opened restaurant specializing in Northern Chinese food

Photos part 2



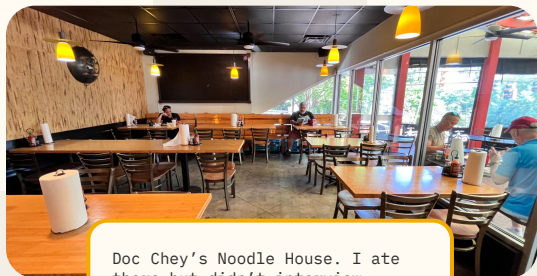
China Dragon, a small, unassuming building by Ponce City Market, only serving take out



A long time take out staple nestled in the CNN Center food court. Opened by a Malaysian Chinese immigrant



The 2nd Chinese Breeze by the Atlanta Underground, opened by the sons of the original China Breeze owner.



Doc Chey's Noodle House. I ate there but didn't interview because the owner was Korean.



Chin Chin 2 underneath Ponce City Market. The original Chin Chin is an Atlanta staple in Brookhaven.



Jia Szechuan Food & Bar (川娃儿), an authentic Sichuan restaurant inside Ponce City Market. Serves mainly tourists

Photos part 3



Gu's Dumplings (古), another authentic Sichuan restaurant inside Krog Street Market. Serves mainly tourists



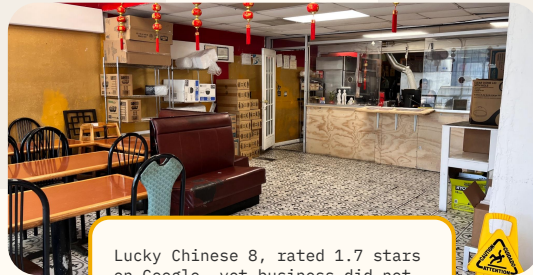
Lucky China Wing & Subs: despite its unassuming appearance, business never stopped flowing when I went. Owner had no time to interview me.



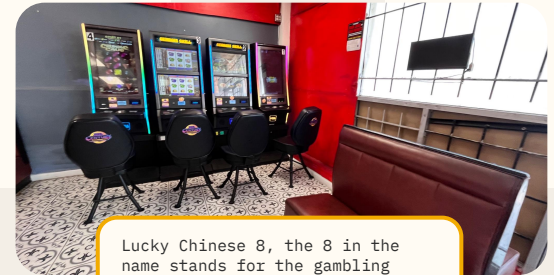
Lucky China Wing & Subs, one wouldn't even know it's a Chinese restaurant on the outside. No sit down, only take out as there were no tables



Lucky Chinese 8, my favorite restaurant (and my oral history project). Bars on the windows, boarded up businesses besides it, only sign is a poster



Lucky Chinese 8, rated 1.7 stars on Google, yet business did not seem to suffer

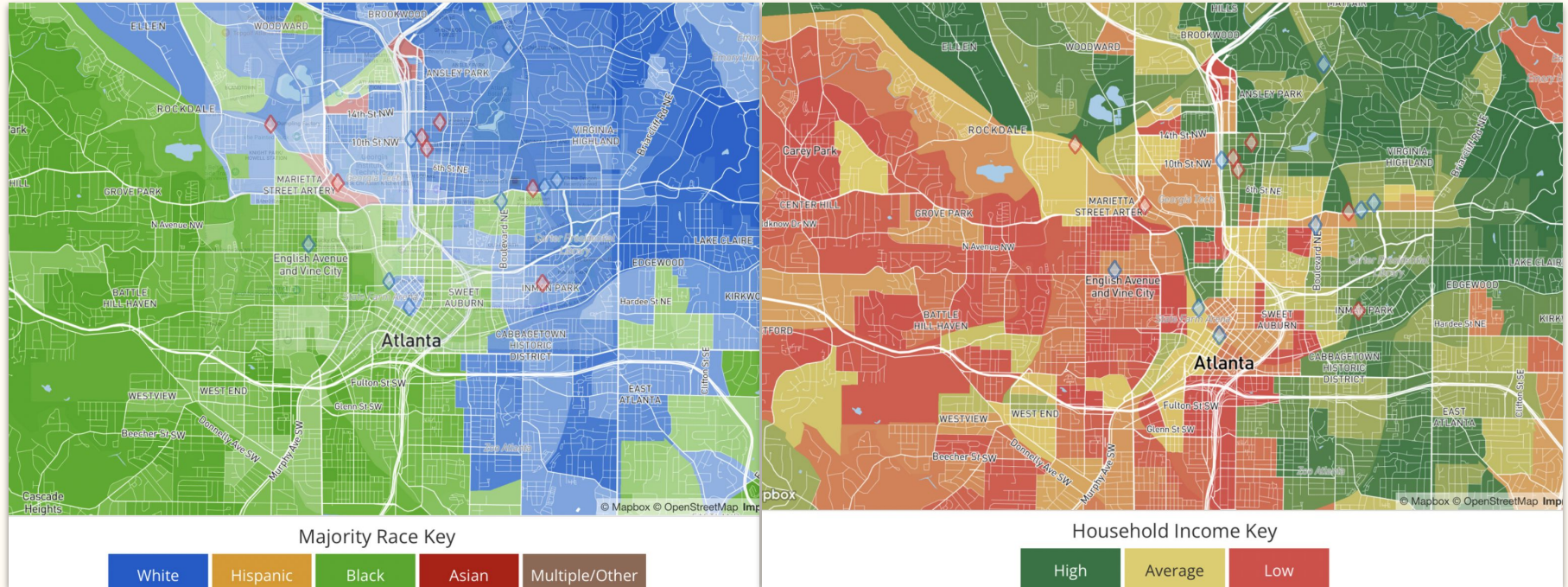


Lucky Chinese 8, the 8 in the name stands for the gambling corner of the restaurant. I've never seen this before

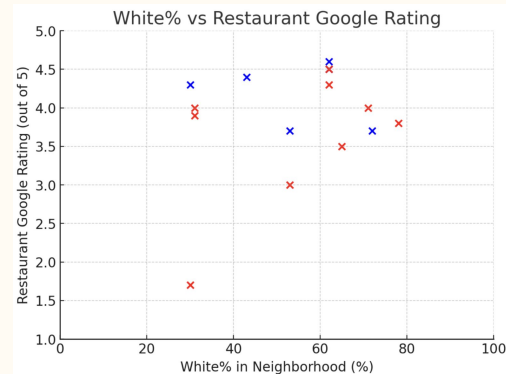
Visualizations

Authentic vs Adapted

Blue is restaurants with adapted menus. Red is authentic. Authentic restaurants seem to mostly be in white areas while authentic areas are mostly in non-black areas. Income though is a different story. There is far less correlation between household income and whether a restaurant is adapted or authentic. **This may imply that owners cater to culture more than class.**

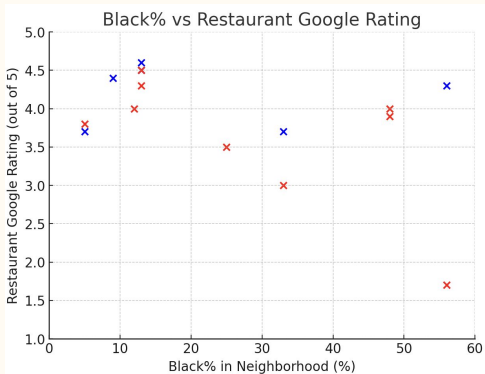


Rating vs Race (White & Black)



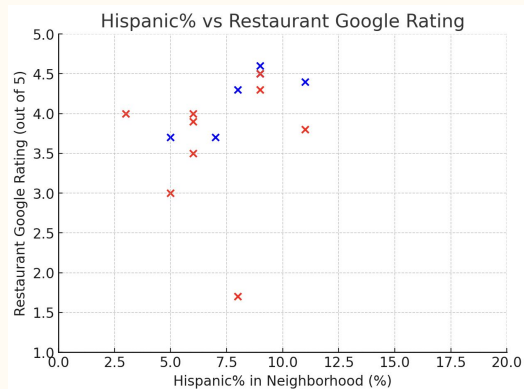
This is another way of correlating the restaurant's location with demographics. For the 4 major races in Atlanta, I made a scatterplot comparing percentage of that race in the restaurant's neighborhood to the restaurant's rating. Blue is authentic, red is adapted. The x-axis is adjusted for each race to better identify any patterns.

There does not seem to be any correlation for areas with more White people. Adapted and authentic restaurants are rated just as well. This may imply that white people are more open to trying a variety of foods.



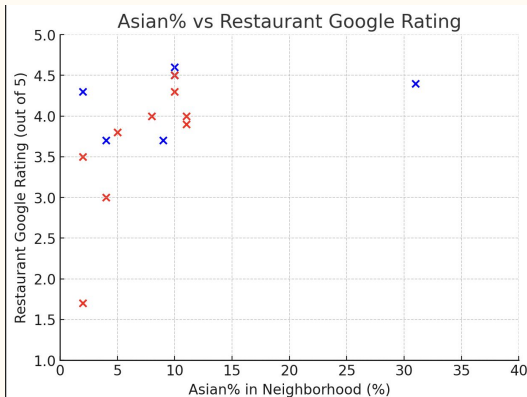
Areas with more Black people have a high variability of ratings among adapted restaurants. Authentic restaurants hold steadier. According to the Phillip Mlynar, author of *How "Hood" Chinese Food Became an NYC Staple*, "Early Chinese entrepreneurs wanted to show off the best of their culture, but often their African-American customers were asking for things that were more similar to soul food...the taste of the dishes leans more towards the fast-food or soul-food palette, so it's got to be stuff that's got more fat in it, and it's got to be sweeter." [3] Therefore, a possible reason for this correlation is that some adapted restaurants may not be adapting in ways that match what Black customers expect. If a Chinese restaurant can not master this, black populations will not find it appealing.

Rating vs Race (Asian & Hispanic)



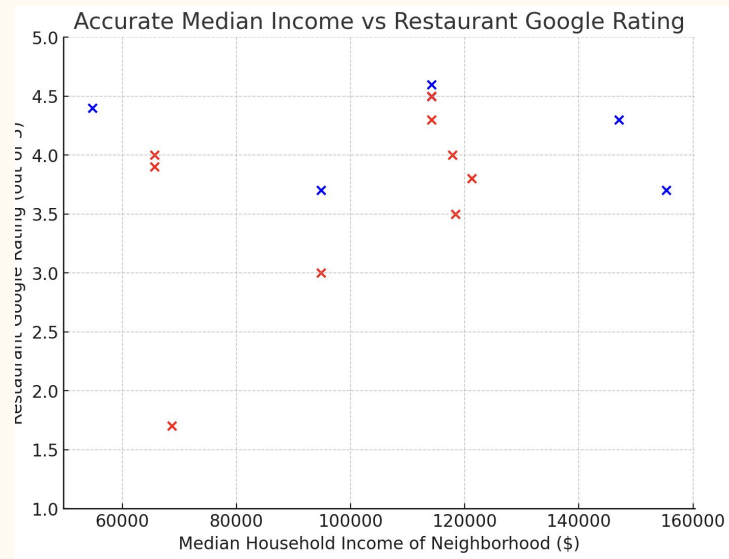
It must be noted that the population of Hispanics and Asians are very low in Atlanta compared to Whites and Blacks. Therefore, any correlations for Hispanics and Asians seen are probably not that indicative. With that said, here are some observations and possible reasons I can think of:

Areas with more Hispanics seem to favor more authentic restaurants over adapted menus. One possible explanation is the strong overlap in culinary traditions and flavor preferences between Hispanic and authentic Chinese cuisines. Both cultures emphasize bold flavors, rich seasoning, and freshly prepared meals, making authentic Chinese dishes more appealing and relatable to Hispanic customers compared to heavily Americanized adaptations.



There does not seem to be any correlation for areas with more Asians. A possible reason is that Asians have high standards when going out to eat authentic Asian food as they can cook authentic food at home. Therefore, if Asians want to go to an authentic restaurant, they might be willing to commute to the suburbs, where the restaurants are more authentic than what is considered "authentic" in the city. Therefore, the lack of Asians going to these restaurants might inhibit any correlation.

Rating vs Median Household Income



In this graph, the blue is still authentic and red is adapted. Now I compared the neighborhood's median household income to rating.

From the poorest neighborhood to the richest, **my data shows that authentic restaurants seem relatively well-liked across all income levels.**

However, **adapted restaurants seem to have a wealth maximum for the type of neighborhood they can succeed in.** There's a group of adapted restaurants that do fine at around \$120,000 (median Atlanta income is around \$80,000), but none exist any higher. A possible reason is that though the upper middle class can still enjoy adapted menus, at a level of wealth too high, adapted menus just don't serve in demand. At a certain wealth level, the greasy, thick, sweet/salty nature of Chinese takeout-style food might not be appealing. The large portions and efficient meal preparation also are not worthwhile for wealthy people.

Among lower income areas, adapted restaurants see far more variability in rating. This may be caused by restaurants in poorer areas cutting corners on quality and cleanliness. From my observations, take-out restaurants in poorer neighborhoods felt far dirtier. I have no proof, but it is possible they were not following health-code regulations.

Why this location?

According to owners of adapted restaurants

- Opened before any Asian community was established in Atlanta, did not bother targeting certain areas
- Chose most populated areas (closer to Downtown) to maximize general customer base, irrespective of area demographics
- Prioritized location for wellness of family

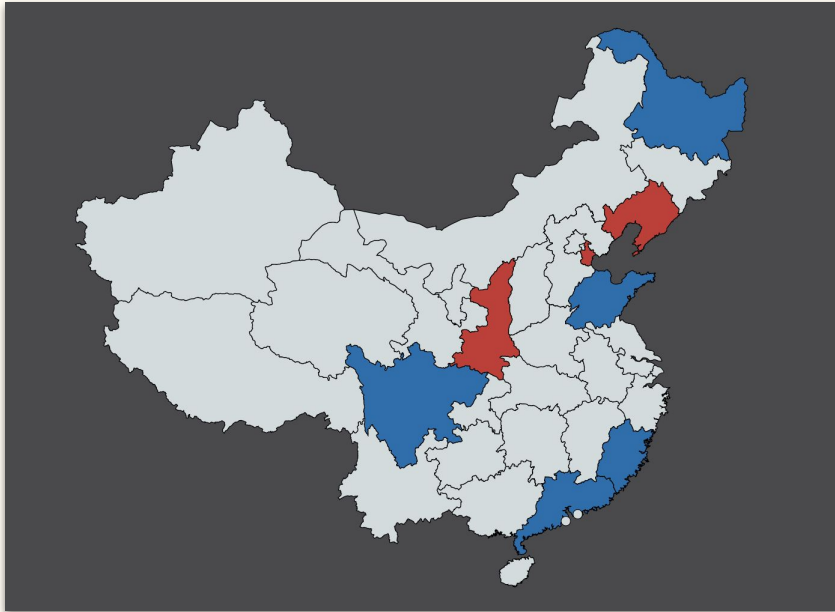
According to owners of authentic restaurants

- Saw opportunity to be first authentic restaurant at scale in Midtown
- Wanted to attract large student body nearby
- Targeted areas with lots of offices and wealthier customers
- Emphasized non-Chinese customers with palette for authentic food
- Found suburbs too competitive to open authentic restaurant
- Chose tourist heavy areas to capitalize on higher traffic flow with more spending power

This shows that **owners of adapted restaurants, who immigrated and opened their restaurants earlier, just wanted to operate at a populated location where they can get any kind of business from any customer base.** The main goal was not to create a thriving business but more to establish roots for their family after immigrating.

On the other hand, **owners of authentic restaurants were far more strategic business-wise with the location they chose.** Many of these owners are restaurateurs who have opened many restaurants. Their goal is more to maximize profit instead of establishing a future for their families. Many modern day Chinese restaurateurs live in other cities and many do not even live in the United States.

Owner Origins vs Restaurant Age

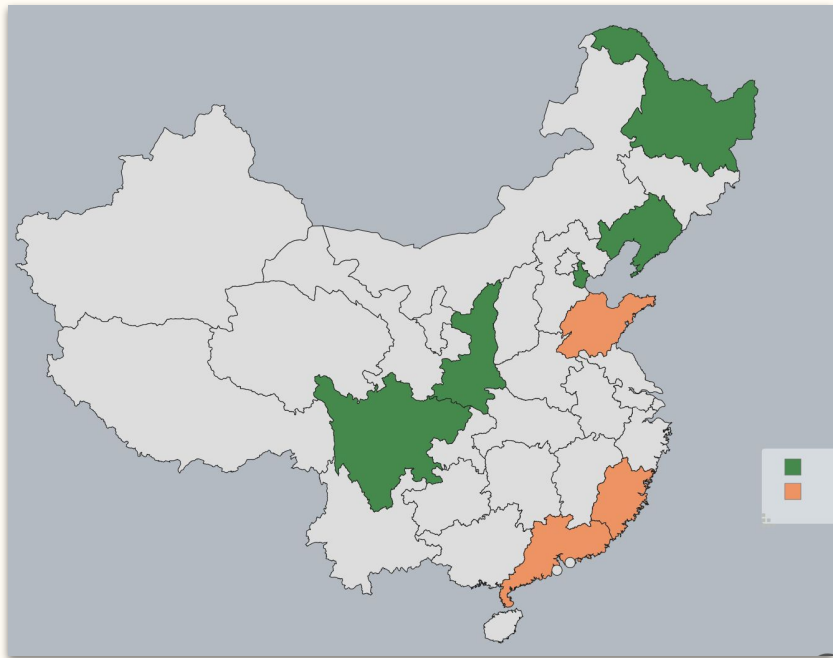


Colored provinces show where owners I surveyed are from (out of owners I have origin data for, excluding the Malaysian Chinese owner).

On the left map, blue provinces are for owners who have opened their restaurants for more than 10 years. Red provinces are less than 10 years. **There is no correlation at all between the owner's region (North/South, Coast/Inland) and how old their restaurants is.**

To be honest, this is not what I expected. My hypothesis was that older restaurant owners would trend towards South China (Fujian, Guangdong), where the history of Chinese immigration is older. Maybe this is true in the larger Chinatowns throughout the United States with strong communities, but there is no such correlation in the fragmented Chinese restaurants throughout Atlanta.

Owner Origins vs Authenticity



In this map, I color the provinces based on authenticity. Orange provinces are for owners of restaurants with adapted menus. Green restaurants are for owners with authentic menus. **A correlation is that owners of adapted restaurants are from the South East, coastal areas of China with long histories of migration, trade, and exposure to international influences.** A possible hypothesis is that as these regions are known for cuisines that are already more adaptable and mild in flavor, it is easier for restaurant owners to modify dishes to fit local American tastes when they settle in non-Chinese areas like inner Atlanta. This pattern would follow for the Malaysian-Chinese family of owners as well.

On the other hand, the owners of authentic menus come from more inland or northern regions where culinary traditions are stronger, spicier, and less modified by outside influences. These owners may feel a stronger attachment to preserving their authentic cooking styles, even when their customer base is not majority Chinese.

One must keep in mind that the sample size of this map is very small (8), so these may be far fetched assumptions to explain these correlations.



Insights & Conclusion

Reflection

At the start of the project, my hypothesis was that how long the owner has immigrated, the location of the restaurant, and how authentic the restaurant is are all tied together. In part this was true. Older immigrants who opened their restaurants early on did not care where they were located as long as they could have a sustainable business to raise a family here. In the article *American Dreams in a Chinese Takeout* by Kate Salisbury, she says this of Chinese immigrants who work in Chinese take out restaurants: "The economic reality of their situation, the fact that they must work nonstop under these immense financial pressures, is accepted as a given, often without complaint. Have to pay the harvest...many of the young men I spoke to see America as a place they might build a life for themselves. The question is how to go about building that life." [4] In this context, "Have to pay the harvest" is the translation of a Chinese idiom that means "No Pain No Gain". These immigrants will do anything it takes to survive. This meant opening in areas with almost no Asians and adapting the menu to whatever the local customer base demanded. Factors like how dangerous an area is, being the only Chinese person in the community, cooking food nothing alike to their hometown cuisine, and poor ratings on Google are trivial issues that come with pursuing the "American Dream".

On the other hand, new restaurant owners, many of which have no interest of raising a family in the United States, are seasoned businessmen in the restaurant business. Many have opened multiple Chinese restaurants throughout Atlanta or the United States. They are strategic and choose locations in areas where they maximize their profit. These areas tend to have locals who have a palette for authentic Chinese food.

However, my research shows that though the correlations do suggest this, the truth also may be more nuanced as there are more metrics that may play a hand. Within an area, different demographics tell different stories. Income and the percentage of each race all shape how the owners make their decisions. The owner's origins may be influential too. At the same time, the conclusions I have made here might make no sense. The data sample size is far too small to have concrete evidence to prove assumptions. However, I believe I showed that on-the-ground field research has the potential to give deeper insights into complicated questions. I am sure with more restaurant data, the stories and explanations that can be derived are more telling.

CLOSING

Thoughts

After completing this project, **I have gained a deeper appreciation for every Chinese restaurant I encountered**, whether adapted or authentic, whether struggling or thriving, whether opened last year or 20 years ago.

Every restaurant represents a different version of the American dream: stories of grit, hard work, adaption, strategy, and ambition. Behind every plate of fried rice or hand-pulled noodles is a dream to do something bigger than if they stayed in their Chinese hometown

Through my journey visiting Chinese restaurants across Atlanta, I realize that every place has meaning. **These restaurants each form part of the Chinese-American identity**, and I am grateful to have been able to learn from them.

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*Thank
you*