The Taste of Home

by Ray Wang

Being an introverted kid with pockets full of niche hobbies and musical tastes, I knew that none of the common 'difficulties' of coming to New York—loneliness, homesickness, and a busy metropolitan lifestyle—would get to me. Like many others, though, I anticipated being overwhelmed by the diverse choice of food that New York offers, in particular Chinese food.

I had always had concerns about American Chinese food. Watching "The Hunt for General Tso," a TED Talk given by Jennifer 8. Lee, brought me anxiety over the kinds of Chinese food I would find in New York. Watching a plate of General Tso's chicken appear on the screen, with Lee narrating, "He is sweet, he is fried, he is chicken—all things that Americans love," I became afraid (00:03:33-00:03:37). Would there be actual Chinese food in Chinese restaurants? "There are more Chinese restaurants in this country than McDonald's, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Wendy's combined," says Lee, "40,000, actually"—and that number was taken in 2008 (00:00:04-00:00:13). Would any of these Chinese restaurants serve real Chinese food?

Arriving in New York, I found the multitude and diversity of Chinese food to be well-represented. There are a variety of Chinese restaurants in Greenwich Village that do not serve stereotypically American Chinese food, like chop suey or General Tso's chicken, but food I could have had back home in northern China. Tipsy Shanghai, as its name suggests, serves food from the southern coastal regions of China, including a wide selection of steamed baos and dumplings, Yang Chun noodles, and Geng soup dishes. Chow House, on the other hand, offers up breath-taking Sichuan dishes including boiled fish, chili blood curd, and Mapo tofu. The Dolar Shop is where a wide selection of Doulao, hot pot ingredients, and soup finally fulfilled my inextinguishable desire for hot pot. Of course, numerous tea shops are scattered across the neighborhood serving bubble tea and other tea beverages. The list goes on.

I call this actual Chinese food, but is it truly authentic? A 'fundamentalist' could go on a day-long rant about the dishes I've mentioned, and I can see why. The Chow House obviously uses far less spice and peppers compared with the Sichuan restaurants one would find in northern China. The Dolar Shop uses processed beef tripe to deodorize and tenderize it, but without its repelling smell and rubbery chewiness, how am I to enjoy it? Peanut butter is also added to their sesame sauce for texture—an innovation I

find intolerable (though it's actually popular back home), as it abandons the sauce's rough texture and natural fragrance and converts it to a creamy, sweet mess. Or take the Chinese food truck opposite the Stern School of Business, which seems keen on serving dumplings with soy sauce. Though dumpling dipping sauce is a highly debated topic even among Chinese foodies, a traditional Northern Chinese like me knows the only logical answer is vinegar. Every time I visit one of these restaurants, there is always some aspect of the food that dissatisfies me, be it ingredients, techniques, or even the plating. But I wonder, is it really the food itself that disappoints me, or is it something else? It's clear I am prejudiced about Chinese food in America. I doubt its authenticity despite its being the closest replica to home that I have. After futile attempts of searching for actual authentic Chinese dining experiences, I now start to question the validity of my search. When I say that I want authentic Chinese food, what do I mean? What do I really want?

In his article "The Case For Contamination," Kwame Anthony Appiah wonders to what extent a cultural artifact can be judged 'authentic' to a culture. Appiah clarifies that "preserving culture—in the sense of . . . cultural artifacts—is different from preserving cultures." The 'authenticity' of a culture lies in aspects beyond these tangible traits like artifacts, traditions, or festivals.

Appiah reminds us that every culture is constantly changing, which means its 'authenticity' is changing too. Therefore, it makes no sense to say that "[cultures] evolve from purity into contamination." Changes are more like "transformation[s] from one mixture to a new mixture." This means that authenticity is never the definition of a culture, only a social norm. "A good deal of what we intuitively take to be right, we take to be right just because it is what we are used to," Appiah clarifies. "That does not mean, however, that we cannot become accustomed to doing things differently." So when I am accusing Chinese food in Greenwich Village of being inauthentic, I am really addressing my sense of its betrayal, to a certain degree, of the culinary norms that I have been following. It does not necessarily make American Chinese food less representative of the culture that produced the food I've been eating for nineteen years. It is still, in Appiah's sense, authentic Chinese food—just not the authenticity that I am used to.

Appiah's insights bring me to reconsider my own repulsion toward these newly encountered Chinese foods and to accept them as a flavor from 'home,' yet they also raise new concerns. Should my fixation on authentic Chinese food, on the taste of *my* home, make way for the new environment I am in? Should I accept the 'flaws' in the food and call this a new authentic? If authenticity is merely a habit, would these new flavors become new memories of 'home' years later? I am now at a crossroads, and I am tentative about which step to take next: to continue walking down memory lane,

holding onto cherished memories of what I used to call Chinese food, or to take a brave new step into a new world of different tastes.

It appears that I am not the only one caught in between worlds. In his essay "The Few, The Proud, The Chosen," Sam Jacobson, a Jewish Marine, describes the challenges his military life brings to his religious upbringing. Jacobson "grew up with a cut-and-paste Upper West Side-style Judaism" and followed many Jewish traditions. He "never ate swine, sometimes ate shellfish, occasionally filtered [his] tap water to rid it of treyf crustaceans, and [is] still an on-again-off-again vegetarian." Upon joining the military, he found maintaining this lifestyle difficult: "My history in the Marines is a story of missed Fridays, and Saturdays, and holier days." When requesting kosher food "seems almost extravagant," the strict discipline and the uniformity of the military made maintaining "one's public religiosity" difficult. Difficult, but not impossible. Throughout his military life, Jacobson was provided with a number of religious accommodations, including kosher food and a 'Prayer and Praise' room, but, to my surprise, Jacobson did not fully utilize such accommodations. In fact, he thought that he was "[taking] advantage of the generous mood of religious accommodation," and even feared that he was "[feigning] orthodox observance to win special favor." He did not insist on receiving kosher meals, though they were apparently available.

What made him step away from his traditions? It comes down to an important question: "How much ritual does a man need?" (Jacobson). In his military lifestyle, the "cardinal Marine virtue" is described as "a sweeping selflessness, more akin to self-denial." Especially in combat units, religious accommodations are not only "less possible," but "less desired." It is against such a military ethic for individuals to remain fully compliant with their religious traditions, for when the main focus of a Marine is his gun, "there is little room for other deities." A religious lifestyle is impractical, and more importantly, not needed, in a military life. As a result, Jacobson eats MREs ('Meals Ready to Eat') instead of kosher food, falls asleep in the prayer room, and breaks his Yom Kippur fast early to drink chai with desert Bedouins. But he doesn't abandon all of his traditions. He still "stay[s] away from the MREs that contain pig," trades away bacon, and "remove[s] ham from ham-and-cheese sandwich[es]." By sacrificing some but not all of his rituals, he is able to be a Marine just like the other Marines who keep their religion "literally . . . under their shirts," that is on their dog tags.

Jacobson's example propels me to ask: how many of my rituals do *I* need?
How authentic does my Chinese food need to be—or rather, as Appiah helps me restate it, how *familiar* does my Chinese food need to be? The answer seems obvious: a lot, as much as possible. Then again, maybe just enough for me to remember what home tastes like. Maybe some details of my memories can give way to new flavors as they occupy my tastes, building up a new flavor of a new home.

I have always been an enthusiast for hot pot, a food centered around reunion and the gathering of people. When I found The Dolar Shop, a hot pot restaurant within walking distance, I overcame my introversion and took my roommate there. I ranted to him about hot pot sauce as we feasted. There was a table of a dozen Chinese students sitting behind us, eating, shouting, laughing, and referencing Chinese pop culture, and their noise, mixed with Chinese pop songs and the Chinese waiters talking over each other in the background, turned the restaurant into a noisy mess. For a moment, my perceptions were blurred. When I looked up, I was at home, in my go-to spot for hot pot, listening to people laughing and eating. Through the misted windows, I could see traffic up on Beixin Avenue in Tangshan. Except it was not Beixin Avenue, it was merely Third Avenue in downtown Manhattan. I am still a long way from home.

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