Chinese Cooks and Mexican Tastes:  
The Encounter of Two Culinary Practices in Mexico’s Chinese Restaurants  

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Introduction

One of the preoccupations of history as a social science is bestowing the daily experiences of individuals with a new transcendence. Food preparation and foodways, together with their historical circumstances, thus provide historians with a vast field of research, an almost endless scope of “food for thought,” so to speak. Within the process of self-identification and communication identified by Mintz (2003: 35) as part of food preparation and consumption, the passing of time induces change not only in the foods themselves, but also affects associated artifacts, practices, and standards, subjecting them all to the ebb and tide of tradition and innovation. This is to say that the symbolic connotations of every culinary choice are to be understood as falling within the subtle but pervasive influences of their historical context.

This report is part of a more general inquiry into the ways in which the production of food and foodways are reproduced within the space of the foreign cuisine restaurant. Mexican and Chinese cuisines are both steeped in history and characterized by their complexity, two circumstances that make the encounter between these two gastronomic traditions particularly interesting and revealing. Mexico’s Chinese restaurants provide a unique space where we can observe the confrontation, recognition, and negotiation between these two distinct culinary cultures, but where the similarities and contrasts, much to the skepticism of the social scientist, yield results that lure and satisfy the culinary exigencies of both parties involved.

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© JOURNAL OF CHINESE OVERSEAS 1, 1 (MAY 2005): 121–129
Throughout the course of my research, the menus of Mexico’s Chinese restaurants have proved to be invaluable historical documents. In a way, these menus are not so different from other forms of historical documentation, such as judicial proceedings or official regulations. At first glance, these menus seem to convey a uniform discourse, free of contradictions or resisting voices, yet they are in fact born out of the confrontation between two opposing forces.

Menus are therefore particularly appealing sources for the historian, since they give rise to an endless list of questions and speculation regarding foods and foodways: Who created the menu? What “audience” did they have in mind? Who will decipher the cultural codes embodied by the menu? What is the relationship between what the restaurant offers and what the customers want to eat? How far does this menu transgress the limits of tradition? Or innovation? How do different socio-historical demographic sectors (generations and genders) interpret the menu? How, why, and from where is each of the dishes chosen? Though perhaps it is what is missing from the menu that is most revealing: What is absent? When? Why? The categories into which the menu is divided, the variety of dishes offered, the names of the dishes, as well as their prices, are all indicators of this cultural negotiation and adaptation process.

**Chinese Restaurants in Guadalajara**

The observations and conclusions included in this report are based on detailed perusal of the menus and interviews with the head cooks of 20 Chinese restaurants in the city of Guadalajara, Mexico. Chinese cookbooks edited and written in Mexico and China, reports of surveys, and official statistics from the local Chamber of Commerce have also been used as source materials.

Guadalajara is a city of approximately five million people and Mexico’s second most important urban center after Mexico City, the nation’s capital. Guadalajara’s geographic and cultural characteristics make it a fitting case study for this topic: Guadalajara’s Chinese community is not as numerous or well established as those in northern Mexican cities, where Chinese immigrants and their cuisines are integrated into the fabric of Mexican society (Ramírez 1975). At the same time, Guadalajara lacks the cosmopolitan sophistication of Mexico City, where a curiosity and openness for sampling international cuisines is coupled with greater gastronomic savoir faire. Guadalajara, however, offers research conditions that allow us to examine that first stage of a truly reciprocal adaptation process that results from the encounter of these two complex and highly dissimilar culinary traditions.

Chinese restaurants are quite popular in Guadalajara. Unlike other establishments, Chinese restaurants open every day of the year, including Christmas and national holidays, and offer some of the few available take-away options. Rich in vegetables,