HAPPY NEW YEAR — CHINESE YEAR OF THE PIG!

Handout comprised of a sampling of the Powerpoints used in the presentation
Chinese Food in America – A Food/Family Memoir; and a tribute to my Father

Paul Leung, Ph.D.
OLLI, February 5, 2019
Robeson Ranch, TX

My Father – Chiu Sang Leung

My Mother – Rose Chan Leung
A Few Definitions

Chinese Food
Chinese Cuisine
Chinese American
American Chinese

What is authentic?
Today, a brief journey into history of Chinese food in America – a personal memoir, influence of my parents/father, role of socioeconomic status, geography, cultural influences, miscellaneous facts (trivia).....

The U.S. passed the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882 to 1943). It is the only law in U.S. history to exclude a people based solely on race.

Effect of Exclusion Act on Chinese Food in America -
Fewer immigrants from China meant that Chinese food in America basically didn’t change much beyond chop suey for many years. Though the Act was repealed in 1943, it wasn’t until 1965 when laws became more lenient, and a new wave of immigrants brought the food that became known as Szechuan (now Sichuan) and Hunan.
Many Chinese immigrants first came to America during the gold rush. Nearly all of them were from one part of the country: the rural districts of Toishan outside of the city of Guangdong (known as Canton; hence, Cantonese food). Nearly all of them were men. And nearly none of them knew how to cook. With only a basic grasp of cooking and plenty of missing ingredients from China, the new cooks-by-necessity found themselves basically throwing together whatever they had and chop suey was born out of some combination of a lack of ingredients from home, a lack of kitchen skills and a need to provide thousands of new immigrants with a meal somewhat similar to home.

Opportunities to make a living were few – often limited to self-employment

Chinese Laundries, Restaurants, Truck Farms, Grocery Stores

Even these options were eventually excluded as “merchants” in subsequent amendments
My Father worked in two restaurants during his career – the Fairy Garden Restaurant in Jackson, MI and the Limehouse Restaurant in Los Angeles, CA.

There are now more Chinese restaurants in the United States than the number of McDonald’s, Burger Kings, Wendy’s, Domino’s, and Pizza Huts combined. Early Chinese restaurants in America were largely successful due to their ability to blend their own flavors, ingredients, and cooking methods to the tastes and preferences of local American communities. It was always interesting to me that during road trips regardless of region, you could come across a Chinese American eatery.
Jackson, Michigan (population 1940 about 50,000) in 2016 just over 32,000 Ralph Lum opened Fairy Garden Restaurant, 101 S. Jackson St., in 1928.

Los Angeles, CA - Immigration quotas then allowed just 105 Chinese into the country each year, and only 8,067 Chinese lived in Los Angeles in 1950 — less than half a percent of L.A.'s population at the time.
Site and building of the Limehouse Restaurant, Los Angeles, Ca which became ABC Seafood Restaurant in late 1960's or early 1970's

Date ??? Around 1950's
The majority of Chinese American restaurants offered some form of “chop suey” as part of their menu – true for both the Fairy Garden and the Limehouse.

According to some accounts, chop suey is a mispronunciation of “chopped sewage,” an angered Chinese cook having mixed together the day’s garbage in a bit of broth and presented it to San Francisco restaurant patrons who’d earned his ire. Not knowing any better, those being insulted loved the dish, and much to the amused bewilderment of their tormentors, returned time and again to order it.

Fried Rice (Chow Fan)

While the exact origins of fried rice are lost to history, it’s believed that it was invented sometime during the Sui dynasty (A.D. 589–618), in the city of Yangzhou in eastern Jiangsu province.
It is Chinese but perhaps in different form

The egg foo young origin story is said to go back to the southern Chinese coastal province of Guangdong, formerly known as Canton. The dish can now be found as a Cantonese hybrid not only in this country, but across Asia too.

One story about the origin of the fortune cookie was that David Jung, a Chinese immigrant living in Los Angeles and founder of the Hong Kong Noodle Company, invented the cookie in 1918. Concerned about the poor he saw wandering near his shop, he created the cookie and passed them out free on the streets. Each cookie contained a strip of paper with an inspirational Bible scripture on it, written for Jung by a Presbyterian minister.
These takeout containers are an American invention. In 1894, a Chicago inventor, Frederick Weeks Wilcox patented his "paper pail." Taking inspiration in part from Japanese origami, the paper pail consisted of a single piece of folded material intended to prevent leakage, with a small wire handle attached to the top for carrying.
Dim Sum (Yum Cha)

Dim sum (small hearts) is a style of Cantonese food that has grown increasingly popular in the Western world in recent years. It is inextricably linked with yum cha - the act of drinking tea - so much so that the two phrases are often used interchangeably.

Special Occasions

Banquets (often weddings)

Family Gatherings – associations/clan church potlucks

New Baby
New Baby – Month Old Celebration

Vinegar Pig Feet Stew
Red Eggs
Whiskey Ginger Chicken Soup

Resources and Further Reading:


Chen, Yong (2014) Chop Suey, USA The Story of Chinese Food in America, Columbia University Press

Friends and Members of Desert Jade Junior Women’s Club (1966) Favorite Recipes


Miller, Gloria (1974) The Thousand Recipe Chinese Cookbook, Grosset and Dunlap