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Chinese American ‘Food Heritage’ Restaurants and Grocery Stores in “Greater Providence”

Introduction

The new generation want “to get away from the restaurant,” said Charlie Chin in the middle of one of my interviews. “But I feel that is... not good.” This was one of the few moments while interviewing former and current Chinese American restaurant and grocery store owners in Rhode Island that I saw hints about the deeper meanings and contestations over Chinese restaurants and grocery stores. Other interviewees also consistently mentioned demographic changes and geographic dispersal as key factors impacting the Chinese community in Greater Providence and changing the Chinese food industry significantly from its past. As the Chinese restaurants of the past close down and new ones open up, there is a general feeling of loss and change, both generationally and geographically, among the long-time restaurant and grocery store owners I interviewed. Exploring food heritage allowed me to learn far more about the Rhode Island Chinese community, and helped me understand the challenges that it faces moving forward.

Narrative

For the narrative portion, I compiled the main text in my online virtual tour below, and added footnote citations to indicate which interview or secondary source from which I got the information:

In the 1940s to the 1970s, three major Chinese families ran the bulk of the key dining establishments—"anchor restaurants", as one person put them¹—that defined the landscape of Providence's second Chinatown. These were the Tows, the Lukes and the Chins, who each had a restaurant to call their own. The Tows had Ming Garden, the Lukes had Luke's Chinese Restaurant, and the Chins had Mee Hong Restaurant. Hon Hong, another popular restaurant, was jointly owned and operated by several members of these three families. These were large restaurants capable of accommodating banquets and large functions.²

"Anchor restaurants" run by one of these prominent families usually found their start when these families, while still in China, pooled their resources internally and decided to give money and resources to the son of the family they deemed most capable of succeeding in America. In the case of Mee Hong restaurant, for example, Danny Chin was chosen to travel to America and start a business, eventually allowing more relatives to make the journey and join Danny in running the restaurant. Oftentimes, laundries—another key business for Chinese immigrants during this period—were also opened by relatives who joined later on.³

The majority of Chinese people who immigrated to Rhode Island during this period were from the southern Chinese town of Taishan or the surrounding region, and people came to be identified more with the "Taishanese" label than "Chinese" within the Chinese immigrant community. Chinese people from other regions of China were called by their region of origin; a person from Shanghai would be known as a "Shanghai guy", and so forth. This greatly influenced how restaurants worked, as Taishanese-owned restaurants often only hired other Taishanese, or at the very least those who could speak Taishanese fluently. Restaurants often then became mostly staffed by numerous relatives, who lived in the same house and didn't speak

¹ Peter Kwong, interview by Quinton Huang, December 16, 2018.

² Charlie Chin and Edward Moy, interview by Quinton Huang, December 10, 2018.

³ Chin and Moy.

much English nor have any means of transport other than walking. Life revolved around the restaurant business, as restaurant workers had to work 12-13 hours, six days a week (with the day off being staggered across all the employees).⁴

These restaurants became popular with Euro-American clientele (often just called "American" by restaurant owners), serving mostly "American Chinese food" such as chop suey and chow mein that pleased Western palates. All the menus of the Chinese restaurants were similar, save for a few rotating specials. Many customers became regulars, bringing their whole families to one of the Chinese restaurants each Sunday (when nothing else but the restaurants and movie theaters were open for business). Some regulars came at consistent times each week, so consistently that Charlie Chin, one of the members of the Chin family, recalls that he would know the day of the week based on which customers came to the restaurant that day.⁵

For those who were children at the time, in the present day they recall the community and the camaraderie created by the anchor restaurants. Charlie Chin remembers that, after choir practice at the nearby Beneficent Church (known for being a hub of Chinese American life then), he would join other Chinese children and run downtown to the restaurants looking for quick day work or to see relatives and friends. At the end of the day, whatever food was still left over on the steam table would be packed into #10 cans and brought home for hungry children and neighbors to enjoy. Every Chinese New Year, based on a tradition that Charlie Chin says was launched by Mee Hong, the five or six main restaurants would invite each other's families to their restaurants for Chinese New Year parties, despite their business competition. Though life was tough and work was hard, people who still remember this era maintain that the mutual help

⁴ Chin and Moy.

⁵ Chin and Moy.

of the community and the strong ties between Chinese folks in Providence made the restaurant community strong and relationships happy.⁶

Though business for Chinese restaurants in downtown Providence was so good in the 1940s to 1960s that one member of the Chin family would recall that "there was not one Chinese restaurant that failed" during that time, by the 1960s and especially the 1970s their prospects began to look bleak for a number of factors. When the Mee Hong finally closed on February 24, 1979, Danny Chin, the restaurant's owner, blamed the construction of the Interstate for sparking "an exodus to the suburbs". Another restaurant owner who remembers the 1960s pointed out another factor was a change in the law that prohibited businesses from operating on Sundays. Before the ban was lifted, only restaurants and theaters were open for business, meaning that most people spent Sundays at the movies or at a restaurant like the Chinese "anchor restaurants" downtown. But after stores of all kinds were allowed to open on Sundays, restaurant traffic dwindled on what used to be the busiest day of the week. Coupled with a boom in shopping malls throughout the state and the move to the suburbs, Chinese restaurants began struggling to keep afloat. Eventually, the "anchor restaurants" folded one by one. Luke's was the first to go in 1978, then Mee Hong in 1979. Ming Garden would survive until 1986 when it, too, shut down and removed the existence of Providence's Chinatown from the downtown landscape.⁷ The anchor restaurants, as one interviewee put it, "became history".⁸

New restaurants began popping up in the smaller towns surrounding Providence as they grew larger in size. Many of the new restaurant owners were younger members of the original families of the "anchor restaurants", but many were also immigrants moving from another field of work into the restaurant business. These businesses settled into new communities, carrying

⁶ Chin and Moy.

⁷ "AIR Historical: Downtown Chinese Restaurants," Art in Ruins, accessed December 21, 2018, <http://www.artinruins.com/arch/?id=historical&pr=chineserestaurants#top1>.

⁸ Kwong, interview.

with them similar menus of "American Chinese food" and building deep relationships with local residents. The stories of the relationships between restaurant owners and regulars echo with those from the "anchor restaurants", including tales of customers coming in at the same time every day.

Chinese Americans did not often go to these restaurants, because of the Americanized Chinese food served which drew in more "American" (usually meaning Euro-American) customers than Chinese ones. But this time period also saw the opening or re-branding of restaurants that now served more authentic food, such as Cantonese dishes or dim sum, for both Chinese Americans and adventurous patrons of other ethnicities.⁹

No matter which restaurant or grocery store owner I interview, a similar story reappears when I ask about the history of Chinese Americans in Providence. First, there were the Taishanese families who arrived in Rhode Island from the late 1800s onward from their town and plots in southern China, and started restaurant and laundry businesses and built the first Chinese community in Rhode Island. Next, Cantonese immigrants from Guangzhou and Hong Kong started arriving by the mid-20th century, integrating quickly into the old Taishanese community because of the similarities between Cantonese and the Taishanese dialect, among other factors. A few arrivals from Taiwan also trickled in during this time. But from the late 1980s (depending on who you ask) onward to the present day, the majority of new immigrants have come from other parts of China, particularly Fujian Province. Unlike previous waves of Chinese immigrants, the standard dialect of modern Chinese that most of these new immigrants, Mandarin, is mutually unintelligible with Southern Chinese dialects, and the food that they are accustomed to involves different spices and styles of cooking compared to the Southern dishes cooked by the Taishanese and Cantonese. For these factors and perhaps several others, the sense

⁹ Kwong; Daisy, interview by Quinton Huang, November 29, 2018.

that you get from long-time residents is that this new wave of immigrants represents a break from the past and a demographic shift within the Rhode Island Chinese American community.¹⁰

At the same time as this overall demographic shift was occurring, similar changes were happening in the Chinese restaurant industry of Rhode Island. As the long-time owners of Chinese restaurants began to retire, their children and grandchildren, often college educated and keen on pursuing other fields of work and the professions, did not take up the mantle of their parents' restaurant work, leaving many iconic Chinese restaurants to close. Sometimes these restaurants were bought up by newer immigrants, under either the same or a different name. But in any case, many of the new immigrants, especially those who did not have an existing profession or degree before arriving in Rhode Island, also took up the restaurant trade by working in existing restaurants, with some opening brand new businesses. Not only did the community as a whole change in makeup, but so did the makeup of the food industry too.¹¹

Chinese associations played an important role in the Chinese restaurant and grocery store industry of Rhode Island since the early part of the 20th century. Two of them in particular, the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association of Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Association of Chinese Americans, were mentioned prominently in my interviews.

The On Leong Chinese Merchants Association, or On Leong association, was founded in Providence in 1911, and provided support for those who wanted to start a business, especially restaurants. They helped new restaurant owners get equipment and capital for their fledgling business, but also played a role in preventing inter-Chinese competition by persuading new restaurant owners to choose locations far enough away from existing Chinese businesses in order to prevent disputes. The On Leong association also hosted an annual Chinese New Year's party

¹⁰ Mr. and Mrs. Lien, interview by Quinton Huang, November 30, 2018; Chin and Moy, interview; Kwong, interview.

¹¹ Kwong, interview; Chin and Moy, interview.

and a summer picnic while it was based in downtown Providence; it continues to do the former from its current base on Pontiac Avenue in southern Providence. One interviewee described these events as the only times each year when the Chinese American community (or at least the business community) would get together as a group, rather than just within families.¹²

As new immigrants came to Rhode Island, and more new restaurant owners appeared, the On Leong association provided support through mentorship and existing data on the "relative strengths" of different locations and different cuisines based on traffic counts and the availability of certain cooks. New immigrants sometimes joined the On Leong association as members, and one interviewee who arrived in Providence in the 1980s eventually became an executive of the association. Furthermore, another interviewee who took over a restaurant in the late 2000s also commented that they had received advice from members of the On Leong association.¹³

However, an executive of the association also noted that the On Leong association was becoming less and less effective at providing support for new immigrants because of a lack of personnel, and that it was increasingly becoming more like a private club for the older generation of Chinese businesspeople to play mahjong and see friends.¹⁴

The Rhode Island Association of Chinese Americans, or RIACA for short, was founded later in the 20th century, and initially involved On Leong association members as part of their executive board. They have since taken on the mantle of the annual summer picnic, and also provide food safety certification courses in Mandarin as well as a host of other newcomer services. The food safety certification courses allow many new immigrants who do not have strong English skills to become certified and be legally able to open a restaurant. A central aspect

¹² Kwong, interview.

¹³ Daisy, interview.

¹⁴ Kwong, interview.

of RIACA's work is the RIACA scholarship granted to graduating high school students of Chinese heritage who are also RIACA members.¹⁵

Sources and Data Collection

In order to learn more about Chinese American food establishments in Rhode Island, I conducted a series of interviews with current and former restaurant and grocery store owners, mostly with individuals who are based outside of Providence.¹⁶ The interviews were as follows (I identify them how they wished to be identified for the paper):

- Daisy. King's Garden (Cranston, RI). November 29, 2018.
- Mr. and Mrs. Lien. Chinese American Mini Market (Cranston, RI). November 30, 2018.
- Charlie Chin and Edward Moy. Asia Grille (Lincoln, RI). December 10, 2018.
- Peter Kwong (anonymous for the online tour). On Leong association (Providence, RI). December 16, 2018.

As can be observed by this list, the sources that I have interviewed are necessarily a small and very biased sample size. The list does not contain recent immigrants from places other than southern China, and my ability to contact some of these interviewees was heavily predicated on the help of organizations such as the On Leong Association, a body which has an agenda of its own and a self-selective membership.

Additionally, the choice to limit my research and tour to Chinese American establishments, though necessary to restrict the scope of the project, is problematic for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it is clear that Chinese American restaurants and grocery stores are in fact frequented by non-Chinese Americans, sometimes much more than by Chinese Americans. This

¹⁵ Kwong; "Home Page," Rhode Island Association of Chinese Americans, accessed December 21, 2018, http://riaca.us/Home_Page.html.

¹⁶ I attempted to contact some restaurants and grocery stores in the Providence area – in particular Yan's Cuisine and Good Fortune Supermarket – but none agreed to my interview request.

does not just include Euro-Americans, but also increasingly other ethnicities considered Asian, such as Filipino Americans and Korean Americans. The same applies to restaurants and grocery stores run by Asians of other ethnicities, as oftentimes these restaurants and grocery stores frequently cater to Chinese Americans. Indeed, some Asian grocery stores are more pan-Asian than single ethnicity, meaning that important places of Chinese American community could in fact be located at the intersections between different Asian ethnicities rather than at purely Chinese American spaces. Thus, arbitrarily confining this research to “Chinese American” spaces, which I determined arbitrarily through aspects like appearance and name, could be a false research premise to begin with.

Why ‘food heritage’, why restaurants and grocery stores? Not only did my interviews confirm for me the central place that food-related businesses had in the formation of the Chinese American community of Rhode Island, but it also opened my eyes to the ways in which narratives about restaurants and grocery stores around food, hard work and the nature of ‘being Chinese’ were being mobilized today, and the ways in which the Chinese food industry has been a site of change and contestation among different groups of Chinese Americans.

The significance and diversity of interpretations of food heritage in Greater Providence matches similar findings made by researchers in other contexts. Li Li’s article on the “cultural and intercultural functions” of Chinese restaurants in the American West, for example, points us toward understanding Chinese restaurants as serving two simultaneous functions: the first is to carry on cultural traditions originating from the homeland by performing culinary practices and the meanings behind certain homeland foods, and the second is to facilitate intercultural engagement between Chinese people and non-Chinese people (mostly Euro-Americans) in the

United States.¹⁷ Purnima Mankekar's ethnographic observations of Indian-American grocery stores in the Bay Area echo Li's observations about the function of ethnic food businesses in passing on homeland food heritage, as she notes that the grocery store can provide a sensorial experience which is reminiscent of the homeland. But Mankekar expands on this two-pronged understanding of the function of food heritage by adding a third: mediation between different generation of immigrants through the transnational knowledge of the grocery store owner who stocks imported goods.¹⁸ Finally, in Ting Shi's study of Chinese restaurants in a Tennessee college town, Shi adds a fourth dimension to our understanding of food heritage by pointing out how ethnic restaurants in college towns can serve as social hubs and second homes for Chinese international students, while creating opportunities for connection between the Chinese American community and Chinese international students.¹⁹

Though I do not explicitly make any scholarly connection between the text of my virtual online tour and the framework for understanding food heritage that the scholarly works above provide (because it would be too formal), I want to briefly mention here how my interview with the owners of Chinese American Mini Market in Cranston echoes this framework.²⁰ Chinese American Mini Market serves many Chinese Americans from southern China who want to buy produce and spices not available elsewhere in order to cook family recipes. But the Liens also find themselves explaining and teaching many non-Chinese American customers about what different goods are and how to use them for cooking. The Liens also found themselves with more customers from northern China, and had to interact with them to learn their needs and find out

¹⁷ Li Li, "Cultural and Intercultural Functions of Chinese Restaurants in the Mountain West: 'An Insider's Perspective,'" *Western Folklore* 61, no. 3/4 (2002): 329–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1500426>.

¹⁸ Purnima Mankekar, "'India Shopping': Indian Grocery Stores and Transnational Configurations of Belonging," *Ethnos* 67, no. 1 (January 2002): 75–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141840220122968>.

¹⁹ Ting Shi, "Acculturation and Ethnic-Identification of American Chinese Restaurant" (East Tennessee State University, 2017), <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd/3212>.

²⁰ Mr. and Mrs. Lien, interview.

what they ought to stock in order to attract more northern Chinese customers. Finally, as one of the few explicitly Chinese grocery stores in Rhode Island, they have welcomed many Chinese international students from local universities, and have even sponsored the Brown international Chinese students' soccer team in the inter-Ivy championship among Chinese international students associations.

Interpretative Element

To present the stories of Chinese American restaurant and grocery store businesses in Rhode Island that I collected, I chose to create a virtual, online tour of Chinese American food businesses and heritage in Greater Providence using Scalar and Google Maps. The link to the project is <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/chinese-american-food-heritage-restaurants-and-grocery-stores-in-greater-providence/index>.

The introduction to the online tour is as follows:

“Inspired by the Providence's Chinatown project, this virtual, online tour of Chinese American food heritage in "Greater Providence" goes beyond the Providence's Chinatown project's timeline and explores the history of Chinese Americans in northern Rhode Island from the 1950s to the present day through the lens of food businesses. The first step of the tour examines the changing geography of Chinese American restaurants and grocery stores. The second step of the tour looks at "anchor restaurants" which formed the core of Providence's second Chinatown and no longer exist today. The third step of the tour explores restaurants opened when these "anchor restaurants" were closing, often run by the children of these restaurants' owners. The fourth step of the tour draws from the stories of more recent Chinese immigrants in the food business, and how they make meaning of their businesses and their places in the Chinese community of Rhode Island. The final step of the tour visits two key Chinese American associations in Rhode Island and their role in fostering and supporting the Chinese food business community.”

The format of the interpretative element is an online virtual tour that focuses on close profiles of specific restaurants and grocery stores driven by statements from interviewees during my interviews. This project explicitly engages with the Providence's Chinatown project, which seeks to “bring these memories [of old Chinatown] back into view” and “focus on people as opposed to

physical locations”.²¹ Consequently, the primary way through which the project engaged the public was constructing informational panels about different aspects of Chinatown’s social history and placing them around the former location of Chinatown in downtown Providence. The public can either encounter the panels by using the self-guided walking tour pamphlet and following along, or they can stumble upon the panels as they walk through downtown, thus coming into realization of a lost, erased history based on where they are standing. This approach to public history strikes me as similar to the techniques used by the Stumbling Stones Project in Berlin, albeit for a history whose traces are far more tragic. In this sense, as opposed to the plaques and memorials in downtown Providence informing the public about the provenance of buildings still extant, the Providence’s Chinatown walking tour panels serve, in the words of Mary Rachel Gould and Rachel Silverman, as a form of “countermemorial” which “refuses the form of spatial separation that is often the centerpiece of the monumental memorial”, rather “exist[ing] within and among the ‘thick and thins’ of the city.”²² This form of memorializing “formaliz[es] impermanence and celebrat[es] the changing form”, thus “refut[ing] the self-defeating promise of losing memories with time.”²³ Through these panels, the memories of Chinatown past are rekindled and re-performed through discovery and the realization of impermanence, reinvigorating the urban landscape as what Dolores Hayden calls a “storehouse[e] for...social memories” of “families, neighbors, fellow workers and ethnic communities.”²⁴ But it goes beyond Dolores Hayden’s call for the preservation of vernacular

²¹ Kevin Andrade, “Exhibit, Walking Tour Open a Door on Providence’s Chinatown,” *Providence Journal*, April 22, 2018, <http://bridgewaterwest.wickedlocal.com/entertainment/20180422/exhibit-walking-tour-open-door-on-providences-chinatown>. See also <http://richinesehistory.com/>.

²² Mary Rachel Gould and Rachel E. Silverman, “Stumbling upon History: Collective Memory and the Urban Landscape,” *GeoJournal*, no. 5 (2013): 793, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-012-9466-6>.

²³ Mary Rachel Gould and Rachel E. Silverman, 798.

²⁴ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place : Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 9.

architecture and extant scenes of vernacular life by reconstructing traces that have already long been erased.

But the reality I have discovered through conducting oral history interviews is that the significance of Providence's Chinatown no longer belongs in the places that once held the "anchor restaurants" that centered the Chinese American community in Rhode Island, but rather in the continuing networks of old family friends, business partners and mentorships that keep the significance of the old Chinatown community relevant as the Chinese American community undergoes significant demographic changes. I would argue, in fact, that it seems that the old locations, though still emotionally significant to many as repositories of memory, no longer carry the same emotional attachment for many of the second generation, whose relationship with these old restaurants can be classified by David Berliner's term "endo-nostalgia" (meaning that they have experienced the place first-hand), let alone for their children whose feelings for those places of history, even if they are longing, can only be described as "endo-nostalgic".²⁵ Furthermore, the history of Chinatown stops in the late 1970s or early 1980s, but the stories of the Chinese American community spreading out throughout the state, through markers that include restaurants and grocery stores, still continue today. Though it ably fulfills its stated mission of "focus[ing] on people as opposed to physical locations" with regard to the history of Chinatown, the fact that the Providence's Chinatown project focuses on Providence's Chinatown alone blinds it from the processes of placemaking and "interanimation" (as termed by Keith Basso) that are creating places of attachment elsewhere throughout the state.²⁶ Given the transient, ever-changing nature of the Chinese American food industry, it is difficult to imagine any place being a repository for Chinese American collective memory for more than one generation if the

²⁵ October 10 lecture.

²⁶ September 10 lecture.

processes of becoming attached to place lack the physical interactions between subject and place which is necessary for “interanimation”. Unlike examples such as District Six and Sophiatown, where a displaced community has successfully returned and reclaimed their heritage, the Chinese American community at Providence have moved on off their own accord and begun establishing places elsewhere which are just as meaningful. A heritage project engaging this community thus must be able to encapsulate this fact and represent these new stories.

Ultimately, therefore I chose the format of the virtual online tour because it allows us to get at the dispersal by presenting it visually and then collapsing the history of dispersal onto one web platform, allowing people to read stories and view images connecting business owners from different eras and different parts of the state and be able to read a single narrative of a community through time. The message that I want to get across in this virtual tour is a sense of the changes that have happened in this community since the end of the Second World War, and the importance of the Chinese restaurant and grocery store as being one of the sites where this change is most visible. I also wanted to highlight individual stories about these restaurants and the connections between these stories so that people can understand the diversity of experiences and opinions about how the Chinese restaurant and grocery store in Providence has evolved since the concept moved out of the downtown core. My hope is that there will be two audiences that could benefit directly from viewing this project. The first would be the Chinese American community of Greater Providence itself, who would hopefully be able to learn more about the history of restaurants and grocery stores in their community and be able to recognize it as an ongoing, living piece of heritage, rather than part of history. The second would be the Chinese American and international students who attend college in Providence, and frequent many of the establishments represented on the Google Map featured at the beginning of the tour. My hope is that, while the online virtual tour will cease to act as a countermemorial in the sense that

“stumbling upon history” through the Providence’s Chinatown projects allows the public to become conscious of erased history, university students who are just ‘passing by’ Providence will be able to get a larger sense of appreciation for the restaurants and grocery stores we all love to go to but know nearly nothing about.

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