Stir-Fry Urbanism: Geography of Chinese Restaurants and the Spatial Politics of Race and Identity in Boston’s Urban Development 1880 – 2020

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STIR-FRY URBANISM

GEOGRAPHY OF CHINESE RESTAURANTS AND THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF RACE AND IDENTITY IN BOSTON’S URBAN DEVELOPMENT 1880 – 2020

RAN MEI

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I examine the changing geography of Chinese restaurants in Boston from 1890 to 2020 because Chinese American restaurants are the quintessential example of how diasporic identity is expressed, produced and transformed in the built environment through constant negotiations and interactions across the color line. In order to show that Chinese restaurants have not only functioned as essential means of economic survival but also key spaces of cultural production and political mobilization that enabled the Chinese diaspora to negotiate their belonging and carving out spaces of living and livelihood in Boston which in turn shaped the city into the multiethnic and multicultural metropolis that we know today.
**Introduction**

What would you say when somebody asked you to name the most American of American foods? Cheeseburger? Hotdog? French fries? Most would say McDonald’s since the fast-food giant has become a universal symbol of American culture with franchises in 117 countries across continents.1 If you think McDonald’s and fast food are the best representatives of American food, in fact, America tastes more like General Tso Chicken than the Cheeseburger. There are currently over 45,000 Chinese restaurants in the U.S., more than all the McDonald’s, KFC, Wendy’s, and Taco Bells combined.5 (Figure 1) However, if you look at the demographics, the Chinese population comprises less than 1.6% of the total U.S. population according to the latest census data, even though the Chinese have been present in this country from as early as the 1850s.1 (Figure 3)

The fact that the size of the Chinese population has remained marginal compared to other ethnic groups who migrated to the United States around the same time is no surprise to those familiar with the history of U.S. immigration laws. Before the Civil Rights Movement helped enact the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, U.S. immigration laws famously discriminated against non-white, non-Western-Europeans with specific laws against the Chinese, working-class migrants. Chinese people, as defined by ancestry instead of nationality, were extremely restricted or outright barred from entering the United States from the mid-1870s to the mid-1960s by the cumulative effects of the Nationality Act of 1917, the Asian Exclusion Act of 1875, and the Chinese Exclusion Acts in 1882 that together discriminated against the Chinese for more than sixty years until those laws were repealed by the Magnuson Act of 1943. The repeal allowed the Chinese already residing in the U.S. to become naturalized citizens. However, it did not open America’s door to migrants from China or other Asian countries.6 The Magnuson Act simply replaced total exclusion with a quota of 105 ethnic Chinese men, which was negligible compared with the 780,719 Irish immigrants and 114,058 German immigrants who arrived in the U.S. during the 1840s and 1850s.4 (Figure 2) Another distinct feature

As a result, the Chinese population in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, where Boston, the site of this thesis research, is located, was constantly kept under 1% of the total population until 1990. In contrast, Chinese restaurants grew from only seven in 1900 to sixty-two in 1980 and quadrupled to 285 in 1990, taking more than 12% of Boston’s restaurant industry.1 (Figure 3) If you think that Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks are everywhere, there are on average five Chinese restaurants for every Dunkin Donut or Starbucks location in the Boston area as of 2020.7 Besides its ubiquity, Chinese food has also grown to be the most popular “ethnic” cuisine in twenty-two states, according to a 2020 report by Chef’s Pencil based on Google Trend data.8 (Figure 2) Another distinct feature of Chinese restaurants in America is that they can not be mistaken for any other

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type of restaurants. As Jennifer 8 Lee notes in her book *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles*, Chinese restaurants have achieved an incredible level of standardization in terms of menus, decors, and experiences without a central nervous system and across vastly different landscapes.¹⁹

So, what explains the ubiquity and popularity of Chinese restaurants despite the minimal size of the Chinese population in the United States? How do these establishments maintain such consistent branding of “Chineseness” across time and geographies, and why? Where are these restaurants located exactly? What kind of spaces do they create? What kind of food do they serve? What kind of people do they serve? What is their relationship with the neighborhoods in which they are located? How have these establishments, and the people behind them, changed over time? And more importantly, how have Chinese restaurants been shaped by and, in turn, shaped Boston?

In this project, I examine the changing geography of Chinese restaurants in Boston from 1880 to 2020 because Chinese restaurants in America represent the quintessential example of how ethnic/racial identities are expressed, produced, and transformed in the built environment. Through mapping Chinese restaurants and their changes and movements in the Boston area along with the Boston’s demographic transition and economic development over the span of 140 years, I show that Chinese restaurants and the Chinese Bostonian communities began to disperse across the city as early as the 1910s, only three decades after the first Chinese group appeared on Boston’s Census records. These maps provide spatial evidence that disproves the common belief that the Chinese were always concentrated and segregated in Chinatown (or South Cove) until mounting pressures of urban renewal in the 1950s and ‘70s drove them out to outer suburban and cities like Quincy and Malden. By connecting these maps with archival materials such as photographs, postcards, newspapers articles, menus, archeological reports, and historical literature of Chinese restaurants and of Chinese settlements in Boston, I show that Chinese restaurants have functioned as key sites of cultural production and political mobilization that enabled the Chinese community to assert a unified ethnic identity, negotiate their belonging and carve out spaces of living and livelihood in the dominant white Bostonian society against the patterns of institutionalized racism and exclusion, waves of anti-immigrant and anti-Chinese movements. These looming pressures have caused Chinese citizens to have to choose between assimilation and segregation, and later against threats of erasure and displacement caused by urban renewal and later the gentrification of Boston’s urban neighborhoods. Their efforts are not always successful, as witnessed in the long-lasting shadow of the Chinese Exclusion Act on the social and economic status of the Chinese American community or the century-long and still ongoing battle of keeping Boston’s Chinatown in place.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE RESTAURANTS AND ETHNIC GROUPS IN BOSTON 1890 - 2020

![Figure 3. Trendline Showing the Changes in the Percentage of Chinese Restaurants /All Restaurants, the Percentage of Irish, Italian, Chinese, Foreign-Born Chinese and Total Foreign-Born Population/The Total Population of Boston from 1890 - 2020](created by Author using demographic data from U.S. Federal Census Suffolk County, MA and restaurant data from Boston’s City Directory (1890 - 1980) and Boston’s Yellow Pages (1980 - 2020). Before 1960, the Irish, Chinese and Italian Population were categorized in the Census by “Place of Birth” under “Foreign-Born” Population; From 1960 onwards, they are categorized by “Place of Origin” under “Ancestry” except for 1970 which lists them under “Foreign Stock”).
However, the changing geography of Chinese restaurants in Boston provides spatial evidence to support the argument made by many Asian American historians that the Chinese have been actively fighting for their rights and exerting their agency in the city-making process by connecting with both the dominant society and their working-class ethnic counterparts through the most palatable medium, Chinese food. Contrary to the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese as a passive and insular community, mappings of Chinese restaurants and close reading of their histories reveal a different story—one that showcases a distinct Chinese American style of political engagement and cultural production that contributed to the shaping of Boston as a multicultural metropolis we know today.

METHOD

For this research, I have used mapping as a critical tool to examine the hidden but essential role that Chinese restaurants have played in shaping Boston’s urban identity. As James Corner states in his canonical piece in critical cartography, the agency of mapping, as a “word-enriching agent,” “lies in neither reproduction nor imposition, but rather in uncovering realities previously unseen or unimagined.” Following his caution against the imperialist and technocratic power of mapping, as seen in the devastating consequences of numerous colonial projects, I hope that these maps will function as a productive and liberating instrument to bring a more diverse and granular reading of Boston—one that recognizes and enables agency of the Chinese diasporic and migrant communities in their search for plural identities, the many ways of belonging on foreign land, and the willful and playful exercises of what Feminist philosopher Maria Lugones describes as “world-traveling during a time when the world remains, and increasingly so, split into “us” versus “them.” As I later show in the cultural reading of the famous Ruby Foo’s Den restaurant that catered to Boston’s adventurous elites in the 1940s and the transformations of Hong Far Low, one of Boston’s first Chinese restaurants, from the 1930s to 1950s, and Bob Lee’s restaurant from the 1930s to 1940s, the creation of a distinct Chinese American style of political engagement and cultural production can be read as a tactic to survive in a hostile environment but also a playful and cunning twist on Orientalism by the Orientals themselves.

signify “otherness” or “being separated from the so-called mainstream or what is - a particular cultural group despite their place of birth. As Filipino anthropolo as important as the history itself.22 In this thesis, I use the word “ethnic Chinese”
trends in studies of Chinese American restaurants from both historical and theo-
tical perspectives, especially on the discussions about authenticity vs. fabrica tion of “Chineseness,” assimilation vs. institutionalized exclusion of Chinese in America. Orientation and the myth of model minority19, diaspac agency and Chinese restaurants as sites of cultural production20 and the Chinese commu-
ity’s strenuous fight for space and place in Boston’s urban development. In order to understand Chinese American restaurants and Chinese American food culture in the larger discussion of global migration of people and commodities. I also have examined selected works that deal with ethnic and immigrant food cultures in the transnational/diasporic context.21 It is worth noting that I use “ethnic” as a comprehensive term that describes everyone who identifies with a particular cultural group despite their place of birth. As Filipino anthropologist Martin F. Manalansan IV points out, the word “ethnic” is used in the U.S. to signify “otherness” or “being separated from the so-called mainstream or what is constructed as all-American.”22 Following the philosophy of decolonial thinkers such as Argentine feminist and professor Walter Mignolo and American author, social activist, and professor bell hooks, I believe the writing of history is as important as the history itself.23 In this thesis, I use the word “ethnic Chinese” or “ethnic Italian” to identify groups with specific cultural affiliations beyond the border of nation-states in order to understand better the hidden dynamic of identity politics in shaping the built environment.

WHAT HAVE BEEN SAID?
The thesis is comprised of three sections. The first section reviews the growing body of literature on the history of Chinese migration to the United States and the development of Chinese businesses, particularly the restaurants, from the 1860s to the present. The goal of this chapter is to trace out major trends in studies of Chinese American restaurants from both historical and theo-

MAPPING
The second section maps the history of Chinese restaurants and the establishment and movement of Chinese restaurants and other ethnic groups in Boston from 1890 to 2020. I start by explaining my process and findings from these mappings by reading against the grain of U.S. Census data (1890 - 2000) and later American Community Survey (2010-2020). Because the U.S. Census did not provide tract-level data until 1940, I use recently digitalized U.S. Federal Census documents from 1890 to 1940 via Ancestry.com that detail information on every person registered as “Chinese” by race and was listed lived in Suffolk County, Massachusetts. I then used the Google map API service to geocode their addresses and create a set of maps that make visible the spatial distribution, occupation, and gender ratio of the Chinese population living in Suffolk County in each decade between 1890 to 1940. From 1940 on, I used tract-level Census data collected from Social Explorer to map the dominant ethnic groups (based on race, place of birth, and later place of origin listed under ancestry), percen-
tage of the foreign-born population over the total, the number of Asian/Other/ Chinese persons, and median rent in each of the 180 census tracts within the current city boundary of Boston. This set of maps is then overlaid with locations of every Chinese restaurant listed on the Boston City Directory from each decade between 1940 and 1980 and then Boston’s Yellow Pages from 1989 to 2019. (Figure 4) Using Boston as a case study, these maps show that the dispersion of Chinese restaurants and Chinese communities outside of Chinatown started as early as the 1910s, a much earlier date than the 1960s that most historians have argued.24
WHAT THE MAPS MEAN?

The final section brings the maps down to the ground by linking Boston’s Chinese restaurants’ changing geography with specific events that mark significant shifts in the Americans’ perception of their Chinese counterpart. Drawing on archival materials such as menus, photographs, restaurant reviews, and newspaper articles, I show that the earlier-than-expected spread of Chinese restaurants outside of Boston’s Chinatown, combined with their continuous reinvention of Chinese cuisine and dining experiences in response to the ever-changing political and economic climate, shows an incredible level of resilience, ingenuity, and progressiveness that defies the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese as members of a passive, insular and “introverted” community.

American taste for Chinese food is culturally constructed. Although Chinese food is often depicted as the cheap, readily available comfort food, it took some convincing to convert Americans living at the turn of the 20th century to accept the popularity of Chinese food and its indispensable role in defining American food culture and in popularizing the dining-out experience for the American middle-class. Paying special attention to the gendered and racialized power infused in the creation of Chinese American food, I have concentrated on how images of Chinese restaurants as exotic, foreign, and dangerous places for young middle-class white women aided in the promotion of Chinese restaurants as the place for experiencing bohemian counterculture during the era of Chinese exclusion and widespread anti-Chinese racism. These efforts not only failed to deter white women and men from patronizing Chinese restaurants with an adventurous spirit, but they also created opportunities for Chinese restaurateurs to capitalize on Americans’ orientalist fantasies and ignorance about Chinese culinary culture and, in turn, turned it into a century-long marketing campaign and a business model that supported the economic survival of thousands of immigrant families in a new and often hostile environment.

Besides functioning as the means of economic survival, Chinese restaurants have also provided key spaces for interethnic and intercultural encounters and connections between the Chinese and the larger Bostonian society that contributed to the political and cultural survival of the Chinese community in Boston. During the late 19th century height of the Chinese Exclusion Act and anti-Chinese sentiments across the U.S., politically astute Chinese merchants invited the Governor of Massachusetts and Boston’s business and political elites to their restaurants with a lavish banquet. They offered Bird’s Nest Soup and Lobster paired with a Roman punch and French champagne in the hope of building understanding and alliance with the dominantly white male society to ensure the wellbeing of their businesses and the larger Chinese community against discrimination.


For the Chinese themselves, Chinese restaurants were sites of gathering and celebration during Chinese New Year and other major events essential to maintain a sense of belonging and community among the Chinese despite times of crisis and hardship. During the Japanese invasion of China at the end of the 1930s, Chinese restaurateurs and business leaders organized silent demonstrations, collected funds for war refugees, and formed a unified front to mobilize resources and American support to help with China's war efforts. These events also act as a public display of a unique Chinese-American identity and community and drummed up curiosity and interest in Chinese food and restaurants from the larger American public by seeing it on the streets of Chinatown or reading it in newspapers. Chinese restaurants' proliferation and rising popularity also generated much-needed political leverage for Chinese community leaders to negotiate with city officials and urban planners against the demolition of Chinatown and displacement of Chinese businesses and residents resulting from a series of urban renewal programs from the 1950s to the 1980s.

By the turn of the 21st century, the reorientation of U.S. immigration laws from a preference for West Europeans to a preference for educated and skilled workers brought in a large influx of new immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and Africa. With the introduction of an increasingly diverse array of ethnic cuisines and a realization of the regional specificity of those already existed in the country, such as Chinese and Mexican food, American food connoisseurs and restaurant critics began to question the authenticity of the chop suey and chicken chow mein that the American public has been so familiarized with from popularization of Chinese food and restaurants since the 1920s. However, this rising quest for authenticity in ethnic foods and restaurants again underscores the social construction of race and class that undergirds American multiculturalism. Deeming Americanized Chinese food as inauthentic is to ignore and erase the labor and ingenuity of generations of Chinese restaurateurs and restaurant workers who had to convince the American public of the desirability of their foods through constant self-reinvention and adaptation - a process that “can be vital, even when it is, as often the case, demeaning.”

26. Chen Y, Chop Suey USA, 111

CHAPTER ONE

EXCLUSION AND EXCLUSIVE
The earliest record of Chinese restaurants appeared in The Boston City Directory of 1900. It listed a total of 657 restaurants. Out of these, seven appear to have Chinese names, and six of them were located in the South Cove area, today known as Chinatown. 31 At the same time, 136 Chinese persons were listed on Boston’s Census in 1880, with 100 of them working in laundries, six listed themselves as merchants, three as students, eight women, and 130 born outside of the United States. [Map 1] Since their arrival, their skin color, gender, and class were used as the basis of their exclusion from the right to citizenship. 32 If there is any doubt about who was considered “white,” the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 made it clear - the Chinese would never be white, hence ineligible for American citizenship or the right to legal immigration to the United States. (Figure 7) Before 1870, and the right to legal immigration to the United States. (Figure 7) Before 1870, many Chinese persons were identified under “race” instead of place of birth. This chart shows: 338 Chinese persons in Boston, 100 were working in laundries, 9 were listed as Merchants, 3 were in School, there were 8 Women, and 130 Foreign-born.


This chart shows: 338 Chinese persons in Boston, 100 were working in laundries, 9 were listed as Merchants, 3 were in School, there were 8 Women, and 130 Foreign-born.

Map 1. Residences and Occupations of the Chinese Persons in Boston in 1880. 


Figure 7. Timeline of U.S. Immigration Laws and Historical Events Related to U.S.-China Relations, 1790 - 1875, by Author.

32. The listed Chinese restaurants are Hong Fat Low, 38 Harrison avenue, Bun Fong Low & Co., 82 Harrison avenue, For King Low Co., 59 Harrison avenue; Ying Wei Low & Co., 19 Harrison avenue; Pacific Restaurant Co., 113 Washington; Luck Sin Low, 46 Beach street, Low Sin Yock & Co., 44 Beach street.
Ironically, it was the Immigration Act of 1864, also known as an "Act to Encourage Immigration," and the signing of the Burlingame Treaty in 1868 which established a "reciprocal relationship for the movement of people and goods" between the United States and China, that brought millions of Chinese workers into the United States in the first place. The Chinese were welcomed into this country for their labor in mines, railroads, and agricultural fields when the United States faced severe labor shortages due to the Civil War.

However, once the job was finished, the heretofore valued Chinese workers were chased away, driven out, threatened, excluded, and even murdered to make way for white workers who considered themselves the only ones worthy of being American.

Some fled from rampant anti-Chinese violence in California, and some were driven out by mass famine and warfare at home; in this context, the Chinese communities in Boston grew nearly tenfold from 1880 to 1900. They still remained as illegal aliens and thus were ineligible for citizenship under the effect of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and threatened with deportation without the right to due process under the Geary Law of 1892. (Figure 8) Until 1940, Massachusetts state laws prohibited the Chinese from entering more than twenty occupations, while their ineligibility to citizenship restricted them from municipal and state government employment. Boston unions barred the Chinese from memberships necessary for most of the skilled and professional employment opportunities.29 As a result, the Chinese were also excluded from professional opportunities other than working in laundries, restaurants, or Chinese-run stores. In 1900, 853 Chinese men were working in laundries, 69% of the total Chinese population, scattered in every neighborhood across Boston, while forty were working in restaurants and grocery stores concentrated in the South Cove area. (Map 2)
Under the environment of institutionalized exclusion and rampant anti-Chinese sentiment, the earliest Chinese restaurants opened business on Harrison Avenue, one of the oldest and the most improvised neighborhood of Boston but connected to South Station with the Boston Elevated Railway. These restaurants were owned and operated by Chinese merchants who enjoyed a special exemption from the Exclusion Acts because the U.S. Congress only wanted to ban "coolies" but not the rich and powerful Chinese merchants who sustained their trade with China. This nested system of gender-and-class-based exclusivity within the larger system of racial exclusion created an environment in which Chinese merchants and ethnic elites were able to amass a huge amount of profit and social capital on the back of their servants and cooks, whose survival was dependent on these merchants’ businesses and their protection. For example, a Chinese merchant named Sam Wah Kee, also known by every United States official in Boston as the “King of Chinatown” according to a report by the Boston Sunday Globe, was reported to possess an estimate of $75,000 in wealth, equivalent of two million dollars in today’s money. The owner of Hong Far Low, one of the first Chinese restaurants listed on the Boston City Directory of 1900, was described as “a very capable man of business, and a cook of no mean abilities,” but he was not the cook but employed four men for the kitchen and “devotes his time to keeping the books and also an eye on his six waiters.”

While the Chinese merchant class was able to travel between U.S. and China and bring their servants, wives, and children, the majority of the Chinese population in Boston from 1880 to 1940 were single working-class men who were separated from their families, threatened by forced deportation and harassment, unable to travel, nor start a family in the United States. The Page Act of 1874 banned the entry of almost all Chinese women, except for merchants’ wives, unable to travel, nor start a family in the United States. The Page Act of 1874 separated from their families, threatened by forced deportation and harassment, population in Boston from 1880 to 1940 were single working-class men who were connected to South Station with the Boston Elevated Railway. These restaurants listed on the Boston City Directory of 1900, was described as “a very capable man of business, and a cook of no mean abilities,” but he was not the cook but employed four men for the kitchen and “devotes his time to keeping the books and also an eye on his six waiters.”

![Figure 9. The 1900 Census Record of Sam Wah Kee, “King of Chinatown”, and his wife and servants of 10 Oxford St, Boston; newspaper clip of a 1893 report of Chinatown merchants by the Boston Sunday Globe; Photograph of a Chinese Merchant’s wife and children of 1920 in To, Wing-kit, 2008, Chineses in Boston 1870 - 1965, Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 29; Collage by Author.](image)


Figure 9. The 1900 Census Record of Sam Wah Kee, “King of Chinatown”, and His wife and servants of 10 Oxford St, Boston; newspaper clip of a 1893 report of Chinatown merchants by the Boston Sunday Globe; Photograph of a Chinese Merchant’s wife and children of 1920 in To, Wing-kit, 2008, Chineses in Boston 1870 - 1965, Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 29; Collage by Author.
Chinese restaurants of the early 1900s reflected this nested system of gender-and-class-based exclusivity within the larger structure of racial exclusion.

These were lavishly decorated spaces with a strict hierarchical layout. Owned by and catering to Chinese merchants, Hong Fong Low of 38 Harrison Avenue, a representative of Chinese restaurants at the time, was decorated with "polished, shining ebony tables," "elaborate ebony framed lanterns," and decorations that were "both tasty and costly" and "imported from China."40 Typically of two floors - the ground level was open to average Chinese merchants, while the top floor was reserved exclusively for special guests. (Figure 10)
While the special “merchant status” granted Chinese merchants exemptions from the Exclusion Acts, which allowed them to amass a significant amount of profit and social capital on the backs of their servants and cooks, Chinese merchants also used their power and their restaurants as keyspaces and essential means to establish their legitimacy and negotiate their place in American society through active political engagements. Recognizing their status as the racialized and marginalized Other, Chinese merchants invited governors, police chiefs, war doctors, Christian missionaries, poor American soldiers, and even the Cardinal to wine and dine in their restaurants.40 They hosted lavish banquets for Boston’s city officials and business elites with shark’s wings, birds nest soup, and “lobster, red dragon” paired with French champagne and German liquor. (Figure 6). They celebrated America’s victory at Manila Bay by raising a gigantic American flag “in front of the restaurants at 28 and 30 Harrison Ave” with a band playing “patriotic airs.” They created “a scene never to be forgotten” in the middle of Chinatown, attracting “fully 30,000 people from all over the city and suburbs.” They finished the historical event with a banquet at Hong Far Low. (Figure 11) As politically astute as they were, Chinese merchants assed the credit of their celebration to then Boston Mayor Quinney and his colleagues.41 Countering the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese as unable and unwilling to integrate into American society, Chinese restaurants of the early 19th-century showcase the Chinese communities’ proactive efforts to establish relationships and connections with Boston’s political elites as a source of protection against exclusionary policies and racist attacks against the Chinese that characterize the era.

Figure 11. Newspaper clippings of a Boston Globe report on an event hosted by Chinatown merchants in 1898 to celebrate American victory at Manila Bay. “Chinese Patriots: They Have a Rousing Flag Raising in Chinatown, Unfurled Old Glory in the Presence of Fully 30,000 People” May 18, 1898. 
CHAPTER TWO

SLUMMING WITH CHOP SUEY
### (1910) Residences and Occupations of the Chinese in Boston

Data source: the U.S. Federal Census accessed via Ancestry.com

![Map 3. Residences and Occupations of the Chinese Persons in Boston in 1910](image)

#### 1910 - 1930: Slumming with Chop Suey

The 1910s marks the transition of Chinese restaurants from serving the Chinese merchants class exclusively to opening their doors to the “adventurous” American elites with fantasies about the Orient. This transition is related to three key events in the political scene. The first was led by the Chinese boycotting American goods in protest of the Congress’s decision that made the Chinese Exclusion Acts permanent in 1902. The boycott resulted in a net loss of $14 million in the sale of American cotton goods alone—a loss so huge that it forced the House Committee on Foreign Affairs to consider modifying the Chinese Exclusion Laws by allowing entry for the “better class of Chinese” and “children of well-do-to Chinese parents coming here as students.” Facing opposition from California representatives in Congress who considered the new exclusion plan “not sufficiently drastic,” the chairman of the House committee, Representative Perkins of New York, explained his proposal by explaining, “it will bar all coolies from admission, but it is drawing on the theory that it is not necessary to slap the Chinese in the face.”

By emphasizing that Chinese Exclusion Laws apply only to the poor working-class Chinese, American law officials opened the doors for an influx of Chinese merchants and their capital into the United States, which laid the foundation for the later boom in the Chinese restaurant industry from the 1910s to the 1930s. As a result, the number of Chinese merchants in Boston grew more than six times, from 38 in 1900 to 240 in 1910. These merchants expanded their shops, laundries, and restaurants outside of Chinatown and into almost every neighborhood of Boston, stretching from Charlestown all the way south to Hyde Park. (Map 2&3) Contrary to the common depiction of the Chinese being trapped in isolated and segregated ethnic enclaves of Chinatown by exclusionary laws and racist practices, my maps based on the U.S. Federal Census data from 1880 to 1940 show that the Chinese communities in Boston were, in fact, actively integrating their businesses and presence into Boston’s urban fabric as early as 1900, decades before what historians have argued.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Fall of the Qing Empire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1913 | Alien Land Laws 
| 1914 | Restaurant owners could become “merchants” (Hibbert Court decision made an opening in Chinese Exclusion Acts) |
| 1917 | Asiatic Barred Zone 
| 1919 | End of WWI + Treaty of Versailles |

![Timeline of U.S. Immigration Laws and Historical Events Relating to U.S.-China Relations, 1911 - 1919](image)
The second factor contributing to the opening of Chinese restaurants to Americans was the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 which marked the breakage of China from the old dynasty into a century-long battle for modernization. Chinese merchants in Boston, many of whom came from privileged families of the Qing Empire, cut off their queues and discarded their traditional attire, officially renouncing their allegiance to the “Son of Heaven” - a reference to the Emperor of Qing China. The new year of 1911 marked the end of imperial China and an epoch in the history of the Chinese diaspora. If not “the beginning of a general Americanization of all Chinoons”, as the 1911 Boston Globe article claimed, it certainly made the Chinese who were already living in the United States realize that there might not be a home to return. While China was facing mounting internal unrest and external threats, the Chinese merchants of Boston were confronted with the fact that the U.S.-China trade would be severely damaged by the rise of warfare, and they had to look inside the United States and find ways to maintain their social and economic privilege by turning their businesses and restaurants to meet the demand of American customers.

The third and the most important factor that opened Chinese restaurants to Americans was led by a 1915 court ruling that gave Chinese restaurant owners the eligibility to apply for the special “merchant status” that exempted them from the Exclusion Acts. According to Chinese American history professor Heather Lee, this court decision motivated entrepreneurs in China and the United States to open restaurants to bypass restrictions in U.S. immigration laws. As the only legal avenue for the Chinese to migrate into the U.S. during the exclusionary era, Chinese merchants quickly turned this loophole into a business strategy that enabled them to bring in as many business partners and “families” as possible into their restaurant business. As a result, the Chinese restaurant industry in Boston boomed. The number of Chinese restaurants in Boston more than doubled from 1910 to 1920 and doubled again in the next decade while dramatically increasing their territory, stretching from North End down to Mattapan. (Map 3-5) The population of Chinese restaurant workers quadrupled from 1920 to 1930, surpassing laundry workers as the dominant occupation for the Chinese in Boston. (Map 5-6)

1920 Occupation

- Laundry
- Restaurant
- Crafts and Sales
- Laborer, Work
- Grocery
- Domestic Work
- Physician, Health
- Professional
- Student
- Merchants
- Other


This map shows: 12215 Chinese persons in Boston, 352 were working in Laundries, 185 were working in Restaurants, 57 were listed as Merchants, 1 was in School, there were 147 Women, and 751 Foreign-born


44. Lee HK, “The Untold Story”

45. Lee HK, “The Untold Story”

Figure 13. Trendline showing significant increase in % of Chinese Restaurants / All Restaurants in Boston from 1920 - 1930, while the size of Chinese population continued to remain extremely small compared to the Irish and the Italian and stayed marginal in the total pool of Foreign-born population in Boston. Graph created by Author, data source see Fig. 3.
(1930) Residences and Occupations of the Chinese in Boston
data source: the U.S. Federal Census accessed via Ancestry.com

This map shows:
1714 Chinese persons in Boston,
401 were working in Laundries,
410 were working in Restaurants,
68 were listed as Merchants,
20 were in School; there were
281 Women, and 1020 Foreign-born

(1940) Residences and Occupations of the Chinese in Boston
data source: the U.S. Federal Census accessed via Ancestry.com

This map shows:
2612 Chinese persons in Boston,
527 were working in Laundries,
355 were working in Restaurants,
94 were listed as Merchants,
9 were in School; there were
712 Women, and 1097 Foreign-born
Ironically, the Chinese Exclusion Laws triggered the first boom of Chinese restaurants in Boston, setting the stage for the rise of the Chop Suey Craze of the 1910s-'30s.

The loophole-turned-business model not only contributed to the proliferation of Chinese restaurants in Boston but also forced these restaurants to maintain a high standard of luxury because the U.S. immigration office would assign "merchant status" only to the major investor in a "high grade" restaurant. Molding their restaurants to fit the strict U.S. immigration guidelines, Chinese entrepreneurs partnered up and opened luxury eateries known as "chop suey palaces" catering to American upper and middle-class elites. (Figure 14)
However, the Chinese restaurant boom in Boston quickly raised the eyebrows of conservative Irish working-class men who controlled most of Boston’s labor unions at the time. For an entire year from 1910 to 1911, two Massachusetts House Representatives, one represented Chinatown, and the other represented the neighboring South Boston, fought fiercely for A Bill that Banned White Women from Entering Chinese Restaurants Unless Accompanied by a Male Escort.

The bill, also known as the “Chinese restaurant bill,” was passed twice in the House. (Figure 15) The first was led by Representative John L. Donovan of Chinatown, a teamster and Ireland-born immigrant who “fought hard for it” and won the House by “a big vote” on March 22, 1910, only to be rejected a month later. 46 However, in less than a year, Representative William L. V. Newton of South Boston, son of an English and an Irish immigrant, reintroduced the bill to the House based on “the opinion that public order, decency, and morality require that girls and young women to be excluded from Chinese restaurants.” 47 The Chinese restaurant bill was passed again in the House by a vote of 118 to 88. However, this time it lasted for only twelve days until the justices of the Massachusetts Supreme Court deemed it “unconstitutional.” 48 It is worth mentioning that five years before Representative Newton of South Boston took on the Chinese restaurant bill, he introduced a bill “to take steps to counteract tendency know as race suicide,” a term widely used in eugenics that portrays “Yellow Peril” and other non-white, racialized immigrant groups as an existential threat to white Anglo-Saxons. 49 U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt popularized the concept of “race suicide” in 1902 by calling it “fundamentally infinitely more important than any other question in this country.” 50

Although the Chinese Restaurant Bill never achieved the long-term effect that Donovan and Newton had hoped for, the fact that the bill was adopted twice by the House in less than a year and had to be put to bed by the Supreme Court offers a glimpse of the level and scale of racial discrimination and antagonism that the Chinese American communities were facing in the early 20th century. As legal scholars Gabriel J. Chin and John Ormonde pointed out in their 2018 article “The War Against Chinese Restaurants”, the movement to keep white women out of Chinese restaurants was happening not only in Massachusetts but across the United States. Similar bills were considered by State legislators in Arizona, Iowa, Montana, Oregon, and Washington, as well as city governments of Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco. 51 On the other side, the national movement against Chinese restaurants also reflects the distinctive nature of Chinese restaurants as a political and cultural space in which a Chinese identity is expressed, celebrated, and challenged for its presumed irreconcilable difference with the dominantly white American society.

Again, ironically, the Chinese Restaurants Bill not only failed to achieve long-term legal restrictions on Chinese businesses but strengthened the public portrayal of Chinese restaurants as dangerous to white women and to white society in general and contributed to the counter-cultural cachet of Chinese restaurants as places for Boston's mischievous elites to go wine and dine their mistresses with exotic foods “in the wild.” Observing the burgeoning chop suey craze, a newspaper reporter wrote in 1908: “it has taken the American public a long time to swallow its chop suey, but every season a larger number of uptown patrons regularly resort to Chinatown to eat, and new chop suey restaurants are being opened without the flourish of trumpets but with considerable gilding and decoration.” The article was accompanied by vivid illustrations of the restaurant scene. One illustration, captioned “the Call of the Wild,” presents a gang of well-dressed men and women crowded in a limousine marching towards Chinatown into the night with a man shouting “Chop Suey” through a megaphone. At a more intimate corner of the Chinese restaurant, over a table of tea and cakes, a dark-suited white man leaned towards a fashionable young woman with a seductive smile. The sketch was captioned - “Busy as the Office.”

At a time of rigid social and gender codes, Chinese restaurants provided spaces for the American upper and middle-class women to explore their sexuality without the constraints of their neighborhoods. By flaunting exoticism and offering freedom, Chinese restaurants also created spaces for much-needed interracial, interethnic, and inter-class encounters and connections when American cities were becoming more spatially and socially divided along race and class lines. These were places where “whites, blacks, and Mongolians mingled without signs of prejudices.” After dark, they were the center of town where “men, women and boys, black, white and yellow, and all shades of morality” came together for music, dance, and chop suey while the city sleeps. As Heather Lee eloquently stated, Chinese restaurants were “Marginal Places for the Marginal People.”
By the 1920s, Orientalism was in full business. A Chinese garden restaurant opened on the top floor of Boston’s most luxurious department store featuring “serving maids” dressed in Chinese costumes and a Chinese chef supervised by a British steward.34 Chop Suey restaurants became so prominent across the American urban landscape that they even made it to Edward Hopper’s canvas in 1927.35 Figure 18) However, while it was the Chinese who fought through institutionalized exclusion and the rampant anti-Chinese racism to finally create the Chop Suey Craze and the Chinese restaurant’s boom, white American elites quickly chipped in and conveniently disappeared the Chinese people from Chinese foods. “In order that girl students may enjoy Oriental foods without having to visit Chinese restaurants,” a Boston Post reporter wrote in 1921, “the Misses Torrence and Imogene Voorhees, graduates of Northwestern University, have opened a chop suey restaurant in Evanston, III.”36 Figure 19) Just like there are no Chinese people in Edward Hopper’s painting of a Chop Suey restaurant, Chinese persons, their labor, toll, and sufferings from racist attacks and exclusionary laws were swept under fancy Oriental carpets, hidden behind kitchen doors, and Erased From Their Own History.

Figure 18. (left) Edward Hopper, Chop Suey, 1927.

Figure 19. (top) Two girl students from Northwestern University opening a Chinese restaurant so “other girl students may enjoy Oriental foods without having to visit Chinese restaurant.” Boston Post (Boston, MA), April 17, 1921, page 34

CHAPTER THREE

UNITED AT RUBY FOO'S
The 1930s marked the 50th anniversary of institutionalized exclusion against Asians, specifically the Chinese, from American society. (Figure 21) However, against all odds, Chinese restaurateurs tripled their share of Boston’s restaurant market in two decades from the height of anti-Chinese racism in the 1910s to the 1930s. (Figure 22) The year 1937 also marked a sharp swing in American public opinion towards sympathy for the Chinese after witnessing their suffering from Japan’s atrocities in Shanghai and Nanjing.61 However, as the most important trading partner with Japan and the main supplier of Japan’s import of war materials from 1937 to 1940, the United States government remained “neutral” in the events leading up to World War II despite mounting pressure from the American public to break ties with Japan. It was not until Japan dropped a surprise bomb on Pearl Harbor and declared war on the United States that the U.S. Congress finally decided to join China and the Allies against Japan’s expansion.62

The Chinese role as a wartime ally finally forced the Americans to “end” the Chinese Exclusion Acts in 1943 and only to replace the total exclusion of the Chinese with an annual quota of 105 ethnic Chinese men.63 Compared to the national quotas given to European countries, the Chinese quota was negligible in size and was based on ethnicity instead of the country of citizenship, which meant that a Chinese person migrating from anywhere in the world would be counted against the Chinese quota. The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts was never meant to open America’s door for Chinese immigration but merely a way for the United States to combat Japanese propaganda by proclaiming that the Chinese were welcome.64 As a result, the repeal had virtually no effect on the Chinese population in Boston between 1940 and 1950 while Chinese restaurants grew slowly in number and gradually expanded outside of Chinatown. (Figure 22: Map 7&8)

1930 - 1950: United At Ruby Foo’s

Figure 21. Timeline of U.S. Immigration Laws and Historical Events leading up to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, 1875 - 1954

Figure 22. Trendline showing virtually no change in Chinese population in Boston after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1943 while Chinese restaurants, after a decline during the Great Depression of the 1930s, stead grew during the WWII era.

65. End
(1940) Chinese Restaurants and the Dominant Ethnic Groups in Boston
data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer

This map shows:
38 Chinese restaurants in Boston, 21 in non-Asian neighborhoods.


(1950) Chinese Restaurants and the Dominant Ethnic Groups in Boston
data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer

This map shows:
47 Chinese restaurants in Boston, 31 in non-Asian neighborhoods.


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However, the China-U.S. alliance in World War II marked another transformation in the Chinese restaurant industry in Boston. While the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act did not grant the Chinese the right to citizenship nor the right to own land or properties, the symbolic gesture nonetheless allowed the Chinese in the United States to claim their American identity and belonging and also marked another transformation in the Chinese restaurant industry in Boston. It opened up opportunities for Chinese restaurateurs to emphasize their Americanness while turning the image of Chinese restaurants from places of vice and immorality into an appealing experience for the larger American middle-class, with an Oriental flair. Chinese restaurants started to market themselves as “American and Chinese” notice the order, American first. (Figure 23) They featured celebrations of American holidays such as Thanksgiving and New Year’s Eve, and even Valentine’s Day, when most American businesses were closed. (Figure 24) Their menus served “Delicious and Real Chinese and American Food to Soothe the Palates of The Most Fastidious” (Figure 25)
Chinese restaurants’ shift from serving exclusively to the Chinese merchant class to opening to the American middle-class is particularly visible through the transformation of Hong Far Low, one of the first Chinese restaurants listed in the Boston City Directory. From its inception around 1900, the cover of Hong Far Low’s menu was illustrated with a bald Chinese man staring earnestly into your eye and standing proudly in the traditional attire of Qing China. By 1930, the menu cover had changed to the face of a young Chinese woman wearing Western-style hair and makeup with an enchanting smile. (Figure 26 & 27)
Between 1940 and 1950, more than half of Chinese restaurants moved outside of Chinatown into non-Asian neighborhoods. (Map 7 & 8) Contrary to the stereotypical portrayal of Chinese people as passive and indifferent to politics, Chinese restaurateurs of the World War II-era were aggressively building bridges of interethnic connections and, in the meantime, redefining the dining-out culture in Boston through entrepreneurship and innovation.

One such figure is Ruby Foo. Her “Den” in the heart of Chinatown became the center of town during the World War II era. Marketing itself as “Chinatown’s Smartest Restaurant,” Ruby Foo was groundbreaking in many ways. (Figure 29) She created “the only place” “where theatrical folk and nightclub entertainers” could go after dark.66 She created a style of Chinese food that was friendly and approachable to Americans and named it “Boston Famous Den Style.” (Figure 30) Her menu offered guidance and suggestions to her non-Chinese clientele, who often find ordering Chinese food intimidating/challenging. She was diplomatic and charismatic. As the first female Chinese restaurateur in the city, she laughed off those who “singled her out” and paved the way for many others to come.67 She created a “national institution”68 by branching her restaurants into Providence, Miami, New York, and even Montreal, a decade before the first McDonald’s restaurant opened its first brand store outside of California in 1955 in Des Plaines, Illinois.69

If the earlier generation of Chinese restaurateurs were using their restaurants as spaces and means of political engagement, Ruby Foo’s represented a case in which Chinese restaurants were sites of cultural production. Ruby fostered the Chinese-American alliance by making Chinese food and the dining experience desirable and appealing to the American upper-middle-class. Through her innovations, Ruby opened the door of Chinese restaurants to the larger American public, not just those in the skimming mood.
LA CHOY MAKES CHINESE FOOD SWING AMERICAN
1950 - 1970: La Choy Makes Chinese Food Swing American

The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts and the end of World War II opened up the naturalization process to Chinese Americans who were not native-born. The 1945 War Brides Act also improved the gender imbalance in Chinese American communities by allowing men who had served in the military during World War II to bring wives and fiancées to the United States. The 1950s also marked the repeal of the Alien Land Laws, which prohibited Chinese and other Asian immigrant groups who were barred from naturalized citizenship from owning land or property. However, Chinese immigration remained severely restricted given the minimal national quotas given to Asian countries and the fall-out between U.S. and China after the Communist takeover and heightened antagonism between the two countries during the Cold War. It was not until 1965 that immigration from Asia finally started to grow after Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act that replaced the national origin quotas with a system favoring skilled immigrants and family reunification. As a “classic case of unanticipated consequences,” the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 led to a significant increase in immigration from Asian countries while European immigration started to fall. The foreign-born Chinese population in Boston grew more than half from 3,647 in 1960 to 5,805 in 1970 and quickly doubled in the next decade. (Figure 31) Much of the increase in Asian migration to the U.S. during this period came through the family reunification clause, leading some Chinese Americans to call it the “Brothers and Sisters Act.” (Figure 32)


Figure 31. Trendline showing the percentage of Chinese population in Boston started to grow after 1950, while Chinese restaurants remained steady.
Chinese Restaurants and the Dominant Ethnic Groups in Boston

On the other side, Chinese restaurants in Boston did not grow much in number in the post-WWII period, even though the Chinese American population grew internally from naturalization in the 1950s and later from immigration in the 1960s. However, they continued their dispersion beyond Chinatown while those near Chinatown also became more concentrated. The number of Chinese restaurants in Chinatown increased from sixteen in 1950 to twenty in 1970, while the total number of Chinese restaurants remained relatively the same in these two decades. (Map 9 & 10) It was largely due to the massive urban renewal projects from 1950 to the 1980s that turned Chinatown into an enclosed and isolated ethnic enclave, both physically and metaphorically.


This map shows 35 Chinese restaurants in Boston, 19 in non-Chinese neighborhoods.

© 2022 Mapbox © OpenStreetMap


data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer

Figure 32. Timeline of U.S. Immigration Laws and Historical Events after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, 1943 - 1956

1943 ● Chinese Exclusion Acts repealed
1945 ● Japan surrendered, China -> Civil War
1947 ● Cold War
1949 ● China PRC led by Communist Gov.
1950 ● Korean War
1952 ● Race Removed from Immigration Laws
1955 ● U.S. confirmed support for Taiwan
1964 ● Vietnam War
1965 ● "Brothers and Sisters Act"
1966 ● Cultural Revolution in China

By 1969, urban renewal and highway construction had shattered the original Chinatown neighborhood and displaced hundreds of Chinese families and businesses. It was locked in space by Massachusetts Turnpike on the south, the Central Artery on the east, the infamous Combat Zone, and the downtown shopping district from the north, and threatened by the expansion of Tufts University Medical Center on the west. However, it was the relentless protests and intense negotiations initiated by Chinatown’s residents, business, and civic leaders that kept their neighborhood from “progressively being boxed and whittled away” entirely from Boston’s urban landscape. By emphasizing the economic significance of Chinatown’s iconic restaurant industry and the concentration of manufacturing jobs and taxable properties in the area, Chinatown’s civic leaders and advocates from other parts of Boston successfully convinced the then Mayor Hynes of Boston to modify the original Central Artery plan that would demolish practically all of Chinatown’s residential neighborhood and three-quarters of Chinatown’s major restaurants as well as a fourteen-story garment factory employing over five thousand people, three churches, a branch of the public library, a playground, and two public schools.

Kevin Lynch, a key figure in Boston’s urban planning, remembered for his canonical book Image of the City, only mentioned Chinatown once and described it, along with North End, as “introverted,” “chaotic,” “characterless,” and isolated from the rest of the city. (Figure 34) In his study for the development of the New England Medical Center in the South Cove, Lynch painted Chinatown as “clearly decedent and substandard; an area of physical dilapidation and progressive abandonment, of mixed shifting use, of declining values, declining population, low incomes, low rents, and poor health.” For Lynch, Chinatown was an area unable to save itself from the inevitable faith of urban blight and in need of saving with “strong forces” from Boston’s urban planners. What Lynch failed to recognize is the violent histories of war, exclusion, racism, and structural inequality that both Chinese and Italian immigrant communities have suffered and actively resisted by aggressively integrating their restaurants and presence into Boston’s urban landscape. Chinatown and North End did not wall up themselves; they were cut off from the city both physically and culturally, first by economics, then by cultural hostility, and in Lynch’s day by urban renewal advocates.

Figure 33. Map showing the impact of Urban Renewal on Boston’s Chinatown and North End neighborhoods, with newspaper clips of Botwright, “An Exotic front,” The Boston Globe, 1969

Figure 34. Excerpt from Lynch, The Image of the City, pp. 71
Besides the drastic impacts of urban renewal on the Chinese American communities in Boston, the 1940s to the 1960s also marked another transformation of Chinese foods from the “exotic” delicacies reserved for the adventurous elites to a “different” but easy meal friendly to everyday American families. (Figure 35) This was largely driven by the popularization of canned Chinese foods by two American food corporate giants of Post-WWII America - La Choy and Chun King - one started by a Korean immigrant in Michigan and the other by an Italian immigrant in Minnesota, whose face appeared on all the packaging of his famed frozen pizza rolls but none on his frozen Chinese food line.80 (Figure 36)

While American corporations were capitalizing on the ‘exotic’ appeal of Chinese food built by generations of Chinese restaurateurs against institutionalized exclusion and racism, they successfully introduced Chinese food into everyday American families and ironically made Chinese food less “exotic” and “different.”

However, massive marketing campaigns and the proliferation of canned Chinese foods on grocery aisles also took American customers away from Chinese restaurants and took Chinese people away from Chinese food. The corporate popularization of canned Chinese food posed increasing challenges to Chinese restaurants. To survive, they had to stand out. The transformation of Bob Lee’s on Tyler street from 1930 to 1960 serves as a prime example showing how Chinese restaurateurs were constantly reinventing themselves in negotiation with the structural forces that cast their marginality. In three decades, Bob Lee’s restaurant on the same location on 6 Tyler street transformed from Bob Lee’s Lantern House to Bob Lee’s Islander. Originally its menu featured Chinese specialties dishes in 1930 but changed to Polynesian Chinese in 1960 - from offering “the most authentic chop suey” to inventing “the first pu-pu platter in town.” (Figure 35&36)

Bob Lee’s transformation from the 1930s to the 1960s is a perfect example of Gidden’s argument that the construction of self-identity under modernity is a reflexive project through the continuous negotiation between diasporic agency and the power structure that governs them.\(^{81}\) The long history of exclusion and discrimination against the Chinese people portrays them as perpetual foreigners who were unable or unwilling to become American. But the constant invention and reinvention of Chinese restaurants as an economic, political, and cultural space in dialogue with the ever-changing context have showcased an incredible level of resilience and bittersweet ingenuity of the Chinese restaurateurs who reclaimed their agency in defining who they were and what they could by turning Americans’ Orientalist fantasy into a business model and running restaurants into a process of self-realization even through exaggerating, and hence perpetuating, their status as the racialized Other.

Stop worrying and love Peking duck.

Chapter Five

data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer

1970 - 1990: Stop Worrying and Love Peking Duck

Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 marked a watershed moment in the U.S.-China relation and opened America’s door to migrants from mainland China and other Asian countries. Chinese restaurants in Boston experienced an unprecedented boom in the 1970s and another in the 1980s. The first one grew out of the influx of migrants from Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos under the Indochina Refugee Act of 1975; many of them entered the booming Chinese restaurant industry and later opened their own restaurants featuring pan-Asian cuisines. The second boom was brought by a large influx of migrants from mainland China after the United States established a formal diplomatic relationship with the People’s Republic of China in 1978, shortly after Nixon’s visit, and China’s economic reform and opening up in the 1980s. (Figure 37 & 38) From 1970 to 1990, Chinese restaurants increased dramatically in number and grew into every neighborhood in Boston and the outer suburbs. Polk’s Boston City Directory of 1970 listed thirty-five Chinese restaurants, and twelve were located outside Chinatown.82 In 1990, the number of Chinese restaurants have reached 289, with 271 outside Chinatown spanning all over Boston and beyond.83 (Map 10 -12)

*Figure 37.* Trendline showing a dramatic increase in the percentage of Chinese restaurants in Boston from 1970 - 1990, along with a significant increase in the percentage of Chinese people in Boston while the percentage of foreign-born Chinese population have remained low.
The Chinese restaurant boom also attracted other ethnic groups to join the ride. In 1973, an Italian couple transformed their Italian eatery in North End into a Chinese restaurant named 'Joe’s China Vittoria'. Within three months, their business tripled.84 In 1996, the Boston Globe reported the story of Quinzani’s bakery in South End - an Italian bakery supplying French bread to all Chinese restaurants in Greater Boston.85

However, both businesses experienced the drastic impact of Urban Renewal from 1950 to the 80s. The Italian-turned-Chinese restaurant in North End closed business soon after the Central Artery cut North End away from the city in the 1950s and turned it into an Italian neighborhood without Italian residents. (Map 8 &11, 12&13) While the Italians were being priced out of the North End, Chinatown and South End were overcrowded with newly arrived Chinese immigrants who came to join their families and friends after the 1965 “Brothers and Sisters Act.” The number of Chinese people living in these two neighborhoods more than tripled from 1950 to 1980. (Map 14&15) And the Irish remained the dominant ethnic group in Boston, occupying most of the higher-than-median rent areas, surrounding the Chinese and Puerto Ricans in the middle. (Map 8&11)

The Chinese restaurant boom of the 1970s and 1980s shows us the often hidden layer of Chinese restaurants. Behind every Chinese restaurant, there is a large network of people and businesses, many of them coming from different ethnic groups or cultural systems, that came together to support their operations. Chinese restaurants have not only acted as the key political and cultural space of inter-racial/inter-ethnic encounters and connections but also functioned as an important economic space that has enabled interactions and cooperation between groups across ethnic, racial and socioeconomic boundaries.
(1950) Chinese Restaurants and the Dominant Ethnic Groups in Boston

data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer


data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer
Chinese Restaurants and the Median Rent in Boston


This map shows:
More than two-thirds of Boston’s neighborhoods were below median rent, especially in South Boston, North End, East Boston, Chinatown and South End which were occupied mainly by Irish, Chinese and Italian immigrant communities.

Median Monthly Rent
$17 - $84


This map shows:
More than half of Boston’s neighborhoods have higher-than-median rent, suggesting the drastic impact of Urban Renewal 1950-1980 on housing cost, which effects disproportionally low-income immigrant neighborhoods such as Chinatown and North End.

Median Monthly Rent
$71 - $362
(1950) Chinese Restaurants and Asian Population in Boston

data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer


This map shows:
1379 Asian immigrants were living in South End and Chinatown.


data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer


This map shows:
6288 Chinese persons were living in South End and Chinatown, with more than 400% increase from 1950.
CHAPTER SIX

ALL THE WORLD’S ON A PU-PU PLATTER
1990-2020: All The World’s On A Pu-Pu Platter

The turn of the 21st century marked the rise of a cosmopolitan ethnic dining scene in Boston. However, it started with an economic recession, another immigration boom, particularly from China and other Asian, African, and Latin American countries, and an initial plateau and a sharp decline of Chinese restaurants in Boston. (Figure 40) This was triggered first by the introduction of H1-B visas that targeted skilled temporary workers and the EB-5 visas that required $1M direct investment and the creation of ten jobs for American workers. China’s economic boom after the Reform and Opening-up in the 1980s also created a group of the super-rich who wanted to park their wealth abroad and a growing upper-middle-class population who were ready to send their children to the United States for American education. Since 2008, China has become the top course for International students in U.S. higher education. Since 2013, it surpassed Mexico as the top migrant-sending country to the U.S. In 2014, Chinese nationals received 85% of EB-5 Investor visas. And the Chinese have become the second-largest receivers of H-1B visas since 2015.

The rise of a new generation of Chinese immigrants, mostly coming from middle and upper-middle-class families, marks an increasing gap between the old and the new Chinese diaspora in the U.S. While the older generation remained in Chinatown and other established Asian communities in Quincy and Malden, the new generation of Chinese immigrants and well-to-do Chinese American families moved into wealthy urban neighborhoods of Beacon Hill, Back Bay, and outer suburbs. From 1990 to 2020, the market share of Chinese restaurants in Boston dropped from 35% to 16%. But the number and geographic distribution of Chinese restaurants remained relatively the same. This suggests the growth in size and heightened competition in Boston’s restaurant industry overall. It also shows a halt to the massive suburbanization of Chinese restaurants from 1970 to 1990.

China’s “Emigration Craze”

Chinese experienced “emigration craze”, especially among the wealthy and high-skilled/educated, while low-skilled emigration remained stagnant, increasing economic gap between new and old Chinese in the U.S.

Investor Visa Fraud Investigation

900 Cases suspended, leaving immigrant families in limbo

China: Top Source of International Student which remained for the next 10 years. 2019, Chinese international students paid $15.98 for tuition and fees, almost the same amount U.S. gov. spent on COVID-19 vaccines.

China: Top Migrant-Sending to U.S. surpassing Mexico, followed by India

China: Received 85% of Investor Visas of the 10,692 EB-5 visa issued, others include South Korea, Taiwan

China: 2nd Largest Recipient of Work visas after India, and followed by South Korea

EB-5 Investor Visa Req. Raised to $1.8M or $900,000 in rural or distressed urban areas

Hudson Yards raised $1.2B of EB-5 Money

1990 - H-1B for the professional, EB-5 for the rich immigration act created H-1B encouraging high-skilled temporary workers and EB-5 for investors that will invest $1M or $1.2M + 10 jobs for American workers

2000 - China’s “Emigration Craze” Chinese experienced “emigration craze”, especially among the wealthy and high-skilled/educated, while low-skilled emigration remained stagnant, increasing economic gap between new and old Chinese in the U.S.

2008 - Investor Visa Fraud Investigation 900 Cases suspended, leaving immigrant families in limbo

2014 - China: Top Source of International Student which remained for the next 10 years. 2019, Chinese international students paid $15.98 for tuition and fees, almost the same amount U.S. gov. spent on COVID-19 vaccines.

2015 - China: 2nd Largest Recipient of Work visas after India, and followed by South Korea

2019 - EB-5 Investor Visa Req. Raised to $1.8M or $900,000 in rural or distressed urban areas

2020 - Hudson Yards raised $1.2B of EB-5 Money


Figure 40. (bottom) Trendline showing a dramatic increase in the percentage of Foreign-born Chinese in Boston after 1990, while Chinese restaurants began to drop in terms of their share of the restaurant market in Boston.

Figure 41. (left) Timeline of U.S. Immigration Laws and Historical Events 1990-2020.
(1990) Chinese Restaurants and the Chinese Population in Boston

data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer

This map shows:
- High concentration of Chinese population in Chinatown and the neighboring Downtown and South End, while Chinese restaurants were scattered all across the city.

(2020) Chinese Restaurants and the Chinese Population in Boston

data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer

This map shows:
- Chinese population were less concentrated in Chinatown and South End but have spreaded into Allston, Brighton, Fenway and West End.
(1990) Chinese Restaurants and the Dominant Ethnic Groups in Boston
data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer

(2020) Chinese Restaurants and the Dominant Ethnic Groups in Boston
data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer
(1990) Chinese Restaurants and the Median Rent in Boston

data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer

(2020) Chinese Restaurants and the Median Rent in Boston

data source: Boston City Directory via Ancestry.com; the U.S. Federal Census via Social Explorer


The saga of Weylu’s restaurant empire serves as a prime example of the dramatic rise and fall of Chinese restaurants in Boston from 1990 to 2020. In 1989, a replica of the Imperial Palace showed up on Route 2 in Saugus. It was reported to cost $13 million to build and was followed by a replica of the Forbidden City in Woburn, a glass storefront carrying the same name in a mall in Salem, another in Brockton, one in Newton, and one located in the prime downtown real estate with a view to Boston Harbor. The crown jewel of Weylu’s empire is the palace in Saugus. It was reported as the largest Asian restaurant in the country, with a menu of 280 items and a banquet hall with 1500 seats.88

It was immediately the talk of the town, attracting business from park-and-dine eaters waiting in line to see the “24-carat-gold-plated dragon columns” and the lavishly decorated space that “rival the glory of the Forbidden City.”89 (Figure 42) However, within the six years in business, Weylu’s empire crumbled and was left in ruin, and his iconic signature in Saugus was eventually demolished in 2015.90 (Figure 43) The dramatic rise and fall of Weylu’s marked the end of another era in the Chinese restaurant history brought by a new generation of Chinese immigrants who came with capital and ambition to achieve the American dream but quickly hit a glass ceiling. One side remains the prolonged stereotype of Chinese American foods as cheap and easily accessible. On the other, it is the dog-eat-dog competition within the ethnic dining scene of the new millennium.
There was, in fact, another change. The rising population of migrants from diverse regional, economic and cultural backgrounds created a scene of Cosmopolitanism in Boston’s ethnic dining market at the turn of the century. In 1996, the Boston Globe reported the booming market of “ethnic dining,” proudly claiming that “you can taste the world without leaving town.” (Figure 44) On Thanksgiving in 2002, the Boston Sunday Globe reporter wrote, “Thankfully, alternatives,” referring to Boston’s “wealth of ethnic dining” that “a few meals of Ethiopian or Thai or Tibetan” would “limber up your taste buds.” In 2007, another Boston Globe report announced that ethnic dining is taking root “all around the city.” But what exactly is “ethnic dining”?

The question is best answered by restaurant guides. In 1962, the Boston Globe Dining Guide listed eight groups of restaurants - four defined by location and the other four by ethnicity. In 1972, the ethnic restaurant list expanded from Chinese, German, Greek, and Italian into eleven groups, while the location-based list remained. But why was “China Pearl” listed under “Chinese restaurants” while “Mediterranea” was categorized under “Chestnut Hill”? (Figure 45)
Sociologist and Food Studies Professor Krishnendu Ray says it is because a cuisine’s status is governed by what he calls “a global hierarchy of taste,” “the more capital or military power a nation wields, and the richer its emigrants are, the more likely its cuisine will command higher menu prices and acquire more cultural cachet” in the cosmopolitan dining scene of global cities.14 Expanding on Ray’s argument, the Atlantic boldly claimed that “the future is expensive Chinese foods,” citing examples of how Italian foods became American as American Italians gradually ascended up the economic and social ladder over the 20th century and how Japanese food became haute cuisine as Japan rose up as a major economic power. (Figure 46) However, as a new generation of Chinese immigrants came with capital and education, its food continued to remain on the lower ladder of the American hierarchy of taste. Ray explained the contradiction of Chinese foods in America by stating that there is this “funny disdain” that Americans hold about China, “that it is about cheap and crappy stuff, including cheap and crappy food.”15 And to make Chinese food less “horseshit,” more “authentic,” and “cleaner,” white celebrity chefs such as Andrew Zimmern, Gordon Ramsay, and Arielle Haspel opened high-end “Chinese-inspired” restaurants that allowed their upper middle-class clientele to enjoy Chinese foods without the worry for MSG, dirty kitchens and unhealthy dishes that are often attached with Chinese American restaurants.16 (Figure 47)


Figure 46. (left) How Have Cuisines’ Statuses Changed in 30 Years. the Atlantic, 2016.
What white celebrity chefs failed to perceive their appropriation of Chinese foods and restaurants underscores the problematic ways that Chinese American food has become mainstream and obscures the fact that American multiculturalism is built on the labor of racialized migrant workers who were conveniently disappeared from the scene. (Figure 47 & 48)
From the outset, American immigration laws have discriminated against and marginalized Chinese peoples, especially the Chinese working-class and Chinese women, based on the social construction of race, gender, and class that casts them as inferior, ineligible, and irreconcilable to American society. While the laws have been rephrased from the racist rhetorics of "Yellow Peril" to the classist speech of "model minority," they have continued to exclude poor, working-class Chinese men and women from entering the United States or becoming Americans on the basis of a racialized, gendered and socioeconomic hierarchy.98

However, it is exactly the millions of working-class Chinese immigrants who have been considered unworthy of American citizenship that supported and made possible the popularization of Chinese foods and the proliferation of Chinese restaurants in the United States. They were the ones who labored and toiled on American mines and railroads, were exploited in Chinese laundries and restaurants, targeted by anti-Chinese violence and exclusionary laws, separated from their families, stuck between borders and deemed unworthy of American citizenship because of their skin color and their socioeconomic status. They were the servants and employees of the Chinese merchants in the early 19th century who prepared the lavish banquets to host Boston's political and business elites. They were the cooks and dishwashers hidden behind the kitchen doors of luxurious chop suey palaces of the 1910s and 30s, only to be rendered invisible in Edward Hopper's painting of a Chop Suey restaurant when their place of work has ingrained the American urban landscape. They were the ones who laid the foundation for Ruby Foo's ingenuity and entrepreneurship in turning Chinese restaurants from places of vice and immorality to the center of entertainment and desire for the American middle-class in the 1940s. They were the ones who were living in crowded and dilapidated apartments of Chinatown, painted as irreconcilable with Kevin Lynch's image of the city, and displaced by Boston's Urban Renewal in the 1950s and 80s. They were the ones who invented Chinese American foods that allowed La Choy and Chun King to amass billions of dollars from selling them in cans and frozen boxes to American housewives across the country. They were the labor behind Bob Lee's magic transformation from a Chinese Lantern House to the exotic Islander from the 1930s to the 1960s. They were the Chinese cooks in the Italian-owned China Victoria of North End in the 1980s and most likely also in the chop suey restaurant that the two women graduates from Northwestern University opened in Evanston, Illinois in 1921. They were the ones who served the 280 menu items and the 5000 daily meals in Weylu's Imperial Palace in Saugus in the early 2000s. And they were the ones who were cast aside and rendered invisible from the growing population of rich and professional new Chinese immigrants who are climbing up the American social and economic ladder with skills and means that were unimaginable for the average Chinese Americans after a quarter-century-long exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization. The average working-class Chinese immigrants have been the backbones of the Chinese restaurant industry, but they have remained unnamed and invisible from the archives, the newspaper articles, and the official records that I have encountered in my research.
CONCLUSIONS
Conclusions:

Through this thesis project, I have mapped, narrated, and visualized the development of the Chinese restaurant industry in Boston for the past 140 years in order to highlight the monumental importance of Chinese restaurants in the history of Chinese Americans in their strenuous fights for space and place in Boston's urban space and society. From Hong Far Low of the 1900s to the 1930s, Ruby Foo's Den of the 1940s and '50s, Bob Lee's Lantern-House-turned-Islander in the 1930s and '60s, Joe's China Vittoria of the 1980s to Weylu's restaurant empire of the 2000s, I have foregrounded the incredible level of resilience, ingenuity, and reflexivity that Chinese restauranteurs (Joe included) have shown through their constant invention and reinvention in negotiation with the ever-changing social, cultural and geopolitical context. By linking these individual restaurants with city-scale maps of demographic movements and economic trends, I have presented spatial evidence to show that the Chinese communities in Boston have been actively expanding their businesses and integrating their lives into Boston's urban landscape as early as the 1910s, decades earlier than the common belief that the Chinese have been trapped inside the isolated and insular ethnic enclave of Chinatown until massive Urban Renewal in the 1950s and 80s pushed them out. The early dispersion of Chinese restaurants outside Chinatown and their continuous function as the means of political engagement and the spaces of inter-racial and inter-ethnic interactions have dis-proved the long-held stereotype of the Chinese American communities as lacking cultural creativity and passive/indifferent to politics. But, after all, what can this research do to help Chinese restaurant owners and workers now?

When I first decided to take on this project researching the history of Chinese restaurants in Boston, I wanted to understand the politics of Chinese restaurants behind the kitchens and into the everyday lives of Chinese restaurant workers. As a start, I approached a Chinese restaurant owner, who is also a friend, with my idea for the project and asked him if I could visit his kitchen and interview some of his employees. “This is what you have been doing at Harvard?!” he replied with a smile and told me that I would put him in a difficult position if I poked around the kitchen and inquired about information from his employees. After a few drinks, he told me that the kitchen is a sensitive area, especially for Chinese restaurants, because it has been long being a target of Boston’s health inspectors, who are prone to prove or disprove the stereotype of a dirty Chinese restaurant kitchen piled with suspicious ingredients. On the other hand, he continued, his cooks don’t speak English or standard Mandarin Chinese, which would make communication extremely difficult. Reading between the lines, I sensed that, even as a friend to the owner, I was not welcomed because the Chinese restaurant kitchen has become not only the place of employment and protection for Chinese restaurant workers but also the site of their exploitation. From the Chinese Exclusion Acts of the first half of the 20th century to today's category system that limits U.S. immigration to the rich and high-skilled, American immigration laws have continued to exclude working-class Chinese people from the right to legal immigration and the right to American citizenship. If the Chinese Exclusion Acts of the first half of the 20th century have created a nested system of class-and-gender-based exclusivity within the larger system of racial exclusion that forced the working-class Chinese under the employment and protection from the Chinese merchants and elites, American immigration laws of today have replaced the race-based exclusion with class-based discrimination that continues to allow the exploitation of undocumented working-class Chinese people whose labor maintained the ubiquity of Chinese restaurants and the economics of Chinese foods in the United States. If my research would do anything in the real world, I hope it would inform the owners, workers, and patrons of Chinese restaurants of the bittersweet history behind every Chinese restaurant in this country with not only the toil, blood, and tears but also the resilience, ingenuity, and playfulness that allowed Chinese restaurants to flourish against all odds. So next time when a customer comes in and complains about the two-dollar raise on the menu, my Chinese-restaurant-owner friend can proudly say it is a price way overdue.


———. 1921. “In Order That . . .”, April 17, 1921.


———. 1898. “Chinese Patriots: They Have a Rousing Flag Raising in Chinatown, Unfurl Old Glory in the Presence of Fully 50,000 People,” May 18, 1898.
———. 1911a. “Great Day for All Chinatown, Barkers Are All Busy Cutting Off Queues,” January 16, 1911.
———. 1940. “Chinese of Boston Celebrate New Year,” February 8, 1940.
I have examined the changing geography of Chinese restaurants in Boston from 1880 to 2020 because Chinese American restaurants are the quintessential example of how diasporic identity is expressed, produced, and transformed in the built environment through constant negotiations and interactions across the color line.

Drawing data from U.S. Census, Boston City Directory, and Yellow Pages, I map the changing geography of Chinese restaurants in Boston for the past 140 years in order to show that Chinese restaurants have not only functioned as essential means of economic survival but also key spaces of cultural production and political engagement that enabled the Chinese diaspora to negotiate their belonging and carving out spaces of living and livelihood in Boston which in turn shaped the city into the multiethnic and multicultural metropolis that we know today.

The Blood, Sweat and Tears
AND Resilience, Ingenuity
and Playfulness in the
Making of Chinese American
Restaurants of Boston