Food and Culture
Chinese Restaurants in Hawai‘i
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Food, they say, is the essence of life. Or, as Joseph R. Conlin puts it, “food is third only to air and water as a basis of life and, much more than the others, is an important element of culture and social relationships.”¹ Many people delude themselves that they “eat to live,” comments Deh-Ta Hsiung, but he believes that the Chinese are honest enough to admit that they “live to eat.”²

Despite these observations about the significance of food, surprisingly little has been written about food and human relationships. Anthropologists have only begun to study this subject; Marvin Harris, Peter Farb, George Armelagos, Mary Douglas, and Jack Goody are some of the pioneers in this field.³ Of the subject of food and Chinese culture there has been even less treatment. Kwang-chih Chang, Eugene Anderson, and Lionel Tiger are among the few who have examined the topic.⁴ Historians have been comparatively slow to analyze people and foodways; Thomas J. Schlereth comments that they have paid “scant attention” to eating and food habits.⁵ However, John E. Schrecker and Arthur J. Marder have edited or written forewords to cookbooks, while Daniel W. Y. Kwok has lectured on Chinese cuisine.⁶

Foodways are an emblem of ethnicity and identity, and restaurants are an expression of foodways. In Hawai‘i’s historical setting, Chinese restaurants have reflected the experience of the Chinese as they evolved from sojourners to settlers and permanent residents. Restaurants have been indicators of change: change in diet and food preparation and presentation; change in the status of the Chinese in Hawai‘i; change in Hawai‘i due to the Chinese; and change resulting from national and international influences. Chinese restaurants demonstrate that culture is not static and that people adapt to changing circumstances.

EARLY YEARS: THE PLANTATION AND RURAL PHASE

Chinese were recruited in 1852 to come to Hawai‘i and work on the plantations. Even as they voyaged to Honolulu, the first shipload of Chinese laborers aboard the Thetis were provided certain foods. Rice, salted fish, sweet potatoes, yams, sugar, cooking oil, lime juice, vinegar, water, coffee, and tea were among the provisions to be supplied on the ship.⁷ In the years that followed, a continuous stream of migrants arrived from Guangdong Province to sustain the growing Hawaiian economy in rice and sugar production. While living on the plantations, the Chinese obtained most of their food from the plantation stores or grocery stores set up to cater to their needs.

On the plantations the Chinese had a varied diet. They were fortunate that the Hawaiian Islands had pigs, chickens, ducks, fish, taro, sweet potatoes, bananas, yams, and coconuts in abundance.⁸ To these items, the Chinese added their own, bringing dried, salted, smoked, or preserved shrimp, bean curd, cuttlefish, squid, duck, sausages, bêche-de-mer, seaweed, and eggs. To enhance their diet, those who came as free labor not bound by term contracts went into fishing and farming. Fishing brought fresh products from the sea, while farming meant that fruits, vegetables, staples, and animals native to South China were raised for consumption. Chinese taro, coriander, mustard cabbage, bok choy, star fruit, lichee, longan, pomelo, apple, banana, bamboo, loquat, kumquat, persimmon, and lotus were reportedly introduced by the Chinese to Hawai‘i.⁹

Those who were given garden plots on the plantations or chose not to renew their labor contracts also raised their own animals, poultry, fruits, and vegetables. Moreover, since rice was not readily available initially except as an imported staple, many Chinese entered into rice production to meet the needs of their fellow countrymen. The foods eaten by the Chinese in Hawai‘i were similar to those of their counterparts in California. The latter also ate pomelos, oysters, shrimp, bean curd, bamboo shoots, duck eggs, and mushrooms.¹⁰ But Hawai‘i had a subtropical climate much like that of Guangdong, and the migrants there were able to grow Chinese vegetables and fruits like longan, lichee, and mangoes that could not be planted in California.

During this period, many of the Chinese who worked on the plantations were organized into groups and camps with cooks who prepared the meals for them. The Chinese, mostly bachelors or men who had left their wives in China, found this a convenient arrangement. At the same time, those who married Hawaiian women became increasingly
acquainted with the native diet. Romanzo Adams estimated that as many as 1,200 to 1,500 Chinese men entered into marital relations with Hawaiian women before 1900. Offspring of these interracial marriages ate meals consisting of Hawaiian and Chinese foods. When Chinese food was prepared, chopsticks and bowls were the utensils. When Hawaiian food was eaten, poi and laulau were consumed with fingers or spoons. The father dressed in Chinese clothes and spoke Chinese to the children, while the mother wore a holoku and spoke Hawaiian.

Plantation work was demanding, and the opportunities for higher wages or upward mobility were limited. Once their contracts expired, many Chinese migrated off the plantations and entered into other forms of employment. Some preferred to become traders and peddlers, domestic servants or cooks, or fishermen or farmers. Others with more funds started stores or restaurants. These enterprises might receive operating money from the Chinese hui or rotating credit associations. While some were partnership arrangements, many were family businesses.

Between 1850 and the turn of the century the Chinese operated most of the restaurants in Hawai‘i. Caucasians and Hawaiians were not as interested in opening public eating places. The Chinese had 58 percent of the “victualling” licenses in 1886 and 85 percent in 1889. They ran all of the nineteen “coffee saloons,” forty-two of the restaurants, and ten of the eighteen bakeries in Honolulu mentioned in the 1896 directory of the Islands. On the other islands, they ran thirty-two of the thirty-nine coffee shops, nineteen of the twenty-three restaurants, and seven of the eight bakeries. The large numbers of Chinese employed in restaurants eventually led to the formation of the Cooks and Waiters Guild in 1901.

Many of the first restaurants operated by the Chinese were combination bakeries and coffee shops or coffee saloons. Others were dining areas attached to grocery stores or general merchandise stores. The menu items were often selected to appeal to both the Chinese and the non-Chinese clientele. Some of the cooks for these restaurants had learned about non-Chinese recipes and foods while working earlier as domestic servants or hired cooks. Helped by these experiences and insights, they later used their knowledge and skills to become independent businessmen. Others took the path suggested by Diane Mark: they “made friends with the Hawaiian people, learned laau food was ono and introduced their neighbors to rice char siu.”

Exchanging recipes and information, they then incorporated dishes enjoyed by their acquaintances into their restaurant offerings. Western and Hawaiian foods were sold with Chinese dishes and dian xin, the cakes and pastries of Cantonese teahouses. The C. Akeoni Store of Hanalei, Kauai, owned by Chock Chin, was an example. An aggressive and imaginative merchant who emigrated from Zhongshan county in Kwangtung Province in 1883, he had opened a combination bakery-restaurant and general merchandise store by 1898. During his career as an entrepreneur, he also operated a rice plantation and mill, a hotel, a saloon, a dairy, and a blacksmith shop. A creative cook, Chock Chin experimented with roast beef sandwiches and potato salad, baked papaya custard, coconut, and apple pies, and cranked his own ice cream. He also steamed and baked dian xin pastries such as shuai pi su bing (flaky tarts), guang su bing (crescent-shaped tarts), tao bao (sweet bun), xian bao (salty bun), song gao (rice cake), and ji dan gao (spoon cake). Panilo cowboys enjoyed eating chop suey, pickled pork, chicken, fish, beef, curry, ham and eggs, rice, and bread, and drinking home-roasted, home-ground coffee. For special dinners ordered in advance, Chock Chin elaborately garnished the dishes of chop suey, pickled pork, boned duck, stuffed mushrooms, and chicken. Sometimes the customers brought fish as payment for their bills.

In Hilo, on Hawai‘i, the Hilo Coffee Saloon was owned by Wong Kwon, who had been given the Hawaiian name “Akana” by his neighbors and later married a Chinese Hawaiian widow. Akana’s business was a combination coffee shop and bakery. He advertised in the Hilo Tribune that the “best coffee, tea & chocolate” were available, along with cakes and bread. The restaurant was open every day from 4:30 in the morning until 9:00 at night. Old-timers used to gather there at 5:00 in the morning to gossip and discuss politics amidst the aroma of wonderful bakery smells and hot coffee. Just when the Hilo Coffee Saloon was opened is not certain, but it was listed, with Akana as the owner, as early as 1888 in Husted’s Directory of the Hawaiian Kingdom.

Another example was the business operated by Po Hee Hong. Born in 1882 at Anahola, Kauai, he moved to Hanapepe and started a small restaurant and bakery shop. He baked breads, pies, and Chinese dian xin pastries such as jian dui and rice cakes. He even made his own noodles, flattening the dough into thin sheets and cutting them into strips with a sharp knife. He imported the Chinese merchandise he needed from Honolulu stores such as Wing Sing Wo and Wing Hong Yuen, and purchased other supplies from wholesalers such as H. Hackfield Company, Theo. H. Davies and Company, McBryde Sugar Company, and Hofgaard. His patrons included travelers, Filipino laborers, and members of the Hanapepe community. In 1918 Hee Hong expanded his business to sell groceries and general merchandise as well. The Hew Store and Restaurant in Paia, Maui, opened by Hew Fat in 1906, operated in a similar fashion. It sold coffee, pastries, homemade noodles, groceries, clothing, and general merchandise.

MIDDLE YEARS: THE URBAN PHASE AND HONOLULU’S CHINATOWN

Honolulu’s Chinatown initially had few restaurants that catered exclusively to the Chinese. Several reasons appear to account for this. First of all, the Chinese were frugal. Those
who saw themselves as sojourners wanted to save money to return home or to send remittances back to their relatives in China. Even those without families and wives in Hawai'i preferred to cook their own food. Second, if they chose to buy cooked foods, it was easy to do so at the Sunday markets. The Sunday markets in Honolulu and the outlying areas were a local adaptation of the periodic market towns that characterized China. Here, amidst the hustle and bustle of meeting familiar faces, individuals ordered noodles, pastries, or other delicacies from peddlers. They could also purchase fresh produce, poultry, fish, and meat. Finally, clubhouses and stores met many of the social needs of the Chinese in Hawai'i. Meetings, celebrations, and festive banquets were held in the lodges and huiguan of the district, village, and surname associations. At the same time, food and fellowship were often available at the grocery stores. Here one could also buy necessities, get a letter written or read, or pick up the latest gossip about Guangdong or the Chinese community.

After the 1890s, however, the Chinese population became increasingly urban. Its members resided either in Honolulu on Oahu or in the larger towns on Hawai'i or Maui, such as Hilo, Lahaina, Wailuku, and Kahului. The occupational differentiation of the Chinese community into varied professions and services, an increase in family life, and the acculturation of the second generation permitted a greater receptivity to Chinese restaurants. Many bakers and dian xin shops and restaurants catered to these new constituencies. Chinese farmers, fishermen, grocers, importers, bakers, soft drink bottlers, slaughterhouse operators, noodle factory owners, and ice cream manufacturers became part of an integrated Chinese food production and distribution system that linked up with restaurant owners and workers. The restaurants in Honolulu's Chinatown were the center of this network, helping to sustain these other enterprises.

These Chinese restaurants specialized in the foods of Zhongshan, a county in Guangdong Province close to the Portuguese colony of Macau. Although the first group of Chinese plantation laborers imported to Hawai'i aboard the Thetis had come from Fujian, there were no restaurants that offered its cuisine. Instead, the Chinese restaurants mirrored the food tastes of the Zhongshan Chinese, who were in the majority. (Similarly, the Chinese schools in Hawai'i used Zhongshan's Shiqi dialect of Cantonese as the language of instruction.) In this respect, Chinese restaurants differed from their counterparts on the mainland, whose cuisine came primarily from the Taishan or Siyi districts.

Chinese restaurants also differed from their mainland counterparts in another fashion. They were not examples of pariah capitalism in which segregation and discrimination dictated ethnic occupational specialization in laundries and restaurants. While there was an anti-Chinese movement in Hawai'i and attempts were made to restrict Chinese immigration, these sentiments were less overt and virulent than they were on the West Coast. Exclusion only became a fact after the United States annexed Hawai'i in 1898 and extended national immigration laws to this Pacific territory. Even then, in spite of this change, social and economic opportunities were much more open than on the mainland, and the Chinese who moved off the plantations achieved rapid representation in many of the professions and service trades.

In the 1920s and 1930s, combination bakeries and dian xin restaurants became popular in Honolulu's Chinatown. Many were simple in appearance. The architecture was plain and the interior design was not ornate. The seating capacity was modest. These restaurants served breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but the yin cha business was a noteworthy feature. Yin cha is the Cantonese pastime of eating dian xin pastries with accompanying dishes, noodles, or rice soup. Each restaurant had wooden tables with chairs and stools. Wooden booths and booth seats appeared later. Patrons were supplied with wooden or bamboo chopsticks and porcelain spoons. Diners had to pour hot water into bowls containing tea leaves to drink tea. Later, teapots, teacups, and teapot holders were introduced. Because these restaurants catered primarily to the Chinese, they included few of the Western items found in the earlier coffee shops. Their menus offered more varied and comprehensive Cantonese selections, and their culinary offerings and nine-course banquets set the standards for those in the rural areas to imitate.

The three most notable restaurants in Honolulu before World War II were Sun Yun Wo and Wo Fat in Chinatown and Lau Yee Chai in Waikiki. Sun Yun Wo was reportedly started in 1892 by Hee Cho. A two-story restaurant, it was one of the most popular places to yin cha. Customers ordered plates of dian xin or other dishes as they talked and conducted business. According to one account, on January 31, 1922, fifteen Chinese merchants met there and signed an application for a banking charter that resulted in the opening of the Liberty Bank.

The second restaurant, Wo Fat, prided itself on being the oldest Chinese restaurant in Hawai'i. It opened in 1882 and was rebuilt twice after fires burned down Chinatown in 1886 and 1900. A Chinatown fixture by the 1920s, it was famous for its noodles and Chinese dishes. In 1937 the wooden structure was torn down and a three-story building that still stands today took its place. In this new incarnation the restaurant was much more lavishly decorated, with a green tiled floor, upturned eaves, and a pagoda-like tower. It contained a bar on its first floor; a second-floor dining room painted in Mandarin red, soft green, and gold; and a dance floor on the top level. Wo Fat became a favorite place to have banquets and wedding receptions.

Lau Yee Chai, opened in 1929, was of much later vintage than the other two restaurants but was easily the most ornate. Located in Waikiki, it was owned by Chong Pang Yat, a colorful personality who mixed easily with people and billed himself in pidgin English as “Me P. Y. Chong.” Lau Yee Chai was the first Chinese restaurant in Honolulu to use elaborate Chinese architecture and decorations to attract customers. It featured expensive paintings and scrolls, fancy lacquered screens,
waterfalls and ponds with carp, and attractive plants. Its advertisements claimed that Lau Yee Chai was "the most beautiful Chinese restaurant in the world." Tourists viewed it as a scenic landmark, while local Chinese found its spacious and luxuriant interior suitable for large parties and celebrations.

Whatever tourists may have thought, the Chinese in Hawai'i evaluated their restaurants according to different criteria. One was the quality of the dian xin. Many of these restaurants permitted patrons to yin cha, to dine, or to purchase foods to take out. Another concern was the quality of the chefs. While many restaurants were family owned and operated without professional chefs, the Chinese grapevine critically analyzed the cooks at the various places. The tight Chinatown community soon knew who the best chefs in Honolulu were and whether they had "jumped" restaurants or had been surpassed by a new one hired from China or Hong Kong. Finally, the important events in the Chinese family and community dictated that restaurant size was an important consideration. Restaurants alternated with club-houses as sites for important gatherings, and the banquet facilities had to be able to accommodate large crowds.

Chinese restaurants increasingly became a vital part of the Chinese community. First of all, key social and life cycle events were held there, such as weddings, birthday parties, full-month baby celebrations, funeral dinners, spring banquets, and election parties. Second, restaurants provided the outside community with an opportunity to learn more about their Chinese neighbors through the medium of food. Chinese leaders often entertained members of the larger community to generate good will and promote interracial harmony. Third, restaurants provided employment to Chinese owners and workers of both the first and the second generations. Last, restaurant owners as merchants supported community activities with funds and donations for schools, charities, and other worthwhile causes. As businessmen, they also provided leadership for many organizations and associations. Not surprisingly, they often participated in local, national, and international politics. As an example, Wong Kwon, the owner of the Hilo Coffee Saloon, maintained a lively interest in the fate of modern China. At the turn of the century, he was the president of the Hawai'i branch of the Baohuang Hui (Protect the Emperor Society), which advocated a constitutional monarchy. Later, however, Wong Kwon shifted allegiance and backed the Republican movement that sought an end to the monarchy. In 1904, when the leader of the Republican cause, Sun Yat-sen, visited the Hawaiian Islands, he stayed as a guest at Wong Kwon's house in Hilo.31

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Chinese restaurants shared the fate of other such businesses in the Hawaiian economy. Prohibition officially curtailed the sale of alcoholic beverages and affected receipts until 1933. In Hawai'i, the U.S. Congress imposed the ban as a World War I measure about a year and a half before the Eighteenth Amendment came into force.32 At least one restaurant owner, however, circumvented Prohibition; he drank okolehao and cooked with it. As his daughter Ardith Yook Larn put it: "Whoever heard of Chinese cooking without liquor?"33 The Great Depression, which began in 1929, also affected business, and the Chinese American Bank was closed in 1932.34

When the war came in 1941, Chinese restaurants had to weather the restrictions of blackouts and curfews, martial law, rationing shortages, and a brief liquor ban.35 Some foodstuffs from China had been restricted since the 1930s, and Chinese sausage and other items were imported from San Francisco and Vancouver, Canada.36 Even grocery stores experienced occasional rice shortages and had to contend with irate or concerned customers.37 Enterprising restaurant owners were nonetheless able to acquire merchandise and goods through the black market. Despite the curfews and the loss of the tourist trade, many restaurants actually enjoyed increased business because of the defense jobs, the higher salaries, and the influx of servicemen.38

The end of the war in 1945 brought mixed results. Some restaurants that had prospered under the war economy were now hurt by demobilization.39 On the other hand, many benefited from postwar spending. Consumers who had accumulated savings because of rationing bought the commodities denied them during the war. As part of the growing middle class in America, they purchased new automobiles and suburban homes. Indeed, the promise of affluence for everyone seemed to be just around the corner.

Important immigration reforms also took place. The immigration laws enacted in 1943, 1952, and 1965 ended the former policy of exclusion and permitted Chinese immigration once again. In 1959 Hawai'i followed the example of Alaska by shedding its territorial status and becoming the fiftieth state. Government and business leaders realized the potential for expanded tourism and successfully promoted Hawai'i as an island paradise, the "Aloha State." The improved efficiency of air travel with the enticement of warm weather and beautiful beaches drew an increased flow of domestic and international visitors to Hawai'i.

**LATER YEARS: THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD**

In the 1950s, island residents in downtown Honolulu could see movies at the Princess, Hawaii, Liberty, King, Golden Wall, or American theaters. After the showings, they could dine at any of the many Chinese restaurants in Chinatown. But statehood and the opening of the Ala Moana Shopping Center in 1959 signaled profound changes for the downtown and Chinatown areas. Like other American cities, Honolulu experienced urban deterioration and the flight of businesses from the central city in the 1960s. Inner-city blight and urban renewal closed many familiar landmarks. When Tai Sam Yuen shut its doors in 1977, prominent Chi-
nese reminisced about the fond memories and experiences they had shared at this unpretentious eating place. They also lamented the loss of restaurants that served informal, home-style village cooking. Eight years later, the closing of Tin Tin Chop Suey elicited similar nostalgic feelings of sorrow and loss. It had been one of the standbys for noodles, chao fen, and zhou (rice soup). Its demise led some to comment that there was no place to go in Chinatown anymore for xiao ye (evening snacks).

The rising value of land and the appeal of tourism fostered business's desire for greater returns on landholdings. The scenic Lau Yee Chai restaurant was razed to make way for a new high-rise building. It reopened in 1978 in a Waikiki shopping plaza, but its decor was no longer as impressive and it lost its dominating presence on the Chinese culinary scene. Investors also planned a Chinese cultural plaza to revitalize Chinatown and to provide a headquarters for Chinese organizations and language schools. Jewelry stores, curio shops, and fifteen Chinese restaurants were to be housed there. The final chapter on this experiment has not yet been written, but the Chinese Cultural Plaza was generally considered a financial disaster and a serious error in redevelopment planning.

New immigration from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China in the past two decades has also affected the restaurant trade. Hong Kong–style dian xin and noodle shops have reflected this change, which was heralded in the early 1960s by the Moon Palace on the former site of the Sun Yun Wo restaurant. Hong Kong–style dian xin, yun dun, and noodles are much smaller and more delicate. The portions contrast with the larger ones in the older-style restaurants such as Char Hung Sut. Another effect was the appearance of Mandarin-style restaurants, an umbrella label to denote regional cuisines that are non-Cantonese. Mandarin restaurants presented dishes from Szechuan, Shanghai, Fukien, Hunan, and Taiwan. Mandarin chefs tended to cook with smaller woks than their Cantonese counterparts and used a one-handed flip-frying technique as opposed to the two-handed, two-utensil approach. One of the first Mandarin restaurants to appear was Paradise Garden on Kalakaua Avenue. This was rapidly followed by the Mandarin and King Tsin restaurants, both of which were operated by Korean-Chinese immigrants of Shandong origin. In the neighborhood of the University of Hawai‘i, the Maple Garden and Woodlawn restaurants soon became favorites with faculty and students.

The consumer revolution in the United States brought new marketing and business practices to Hawai‘i as well. Local residents and tourists had dollars to spend, but restaurants had to capture their attention. One strategy was to emphasize differences from traditional restaurant offerings. Restaurateurs promoted regional cuisines as a contrast with conventional Cantonese fare. Mongolian barbeque dishes, Mongolian firepot meals, Hakka and Chaozhou cooking, and sizzling tie ban entrees represented new choices. Another tactic was to portray Chinese food as haute cuisine for an affluent, more sophisticated set. A premium was placed on service. Instead of casual waiters or waitresses who shoved menus before customers and demanded their orders, there were waiters and waitresses attired in suits or uniforms, and a maître d’ presided over the floor to ensure good hospitality. Cocktails and wines, hors d’oeuvres, and desserts, accompanying the main courses, were the elements of an exquisite meal. Still another method was the introduction of theme restaurants. Some eating places stressed that fresh seafood was their forte and even stocked fresh carp, prawns, and lobsters to prove it. Wo Fat Restaurant was remodeled and decorated its walls with historical pictures and photographs to underscore its tie with the past. Not all theme restaurants were successful, however. The Oceania Floating Restaurant, moored in Honolulu Harbor, which borrowed an idea from Hong Kong’s Aberdeen area, was a resounding failure.

The competition among Chinese restaurants is keen, and advertisements show how they have attempted to appeal to different segments of the public. The Chinese Menu Seafood Restaurant listed “Live Prawns, Live Lobsters, Live Crabs, Live Clams, Fresh Fishes; Excellent Cantonese Cuisine—Hong Kong Style.” The Great Wok of China boasted, “Gather around the Great Wok and savor the delicious secrets of wok cooking; An exciting new dining experience in Waikiki.” On the chance that some people liked French cuisine, the Golden Dragon billed its food as “nouvelle Chinese.” The Five Spices Restaurant offered “Taiwan, Cantonese, Shanghai and vegetarian specialties.” The House of Hong opined that it was “One of the Most Beautiful Chinese Restaurants in the World; The Finest in Cantonese Dishes; Intimate Dining for the Connoisseur of Fine Chinese Cuisine.”

Local residents were welcomed, too. Wo Fat mentioned that it was “In the Heart of Honolulu Chinatown; A Down-town Landmark Since 1882 Where Local People Dine for Authentic Cantonese Food.” Lau Yee Chai presented itself as a “World Renowned Chinese Restaurant,” open since 1929, where people could “See Historical Oriental Oil Paintings & Priceless Artifacts” that were “A Must for Every Visitor and Kamaaina.” Ming Palace extolled itself as “One of Hawai‘i’s Most Popular Chinese Restaurants Where Locals or Tourists Dine Like Royalty.” For those that mourned the passing of Tai Sam Yuen, the Silver Dragon reminded readers that it was “Specializing in Home Style Cooking.”

Probably the most imaginative pitch was made by Tasty Chop Suey. It playfully recommended that those “Hungry for God’s Word—go to Church; Hungry for Chinese Food, Come to Tasty Chop Suey.” Some advertisements were exaggerations, but that was nothing new. As one mortuary advertised in Hawai‘i’s Mid-Pacific Magazine in 1925: “Honolulu is so healthy that people usually don’t die there, but when they do they phone in advance to Henry H. Williams.”

Other momentous changes lie ahead for the Chinese restaurants in Hawai‘i. Outside capital, franchise operations,
and consumer preferences for economy and convenience have brought other new developments. For example, new investors from the U.S. mainland and Asia have entered the restaurant trade. Many outside investors are interested in Hawai‘i’s potential, and the Chinese Cultural Plaza itself was purchased by Taiwan investors. Small chains have appeared of two or three Chinese restaurants with the same name, but more extensive franchise operations may soon be found. On the U.S. mainland, Chinese food franchises with non-Chinese ownership include companies such as the Quick Wok, the China Roll, the Eggroll Express, and the Nankin Express. Chinese buffet restaurants have also increased in popularity, as have combination Chinese-Vietnamese restaurants with iced milk coffee on their menus. Finally, Chinese karaoke-style restaurants where patrons can sing are beginning to appear in an imitation of trends in Japan and Taiwan.

The proliferating array of Chinese restaurants has made it difficult to evaluate their quality. Those from Taiwan and China prefer the “spicier Mandarin cuisine,” while the old-timers like the “unadulterated Cantonese style.” In the quest for the novel, some of the younger generation casually dismiss Cantonese food as chop suey, unaware of the famous Chinese proverb that it best “to be born in Suzhou [a city noted for its refined manner and beautiful women], to live in Hangzhou [where the scenery is majestic], to eat in Guangzhou [Canton, where there is unparalleled cuisine], and to die in Liuzhou [where fine teakwood coffins are made].” Others who are more status-conscious patronize restaurants that have won Honolulu magazine’s Hale‘Aina awards, Hawaiian equivalents of Holiday or Gourmet awards for culinary distinction. In truth, the diversity of the Chinese population itself in terms of region, dialect, generation, class, and acculturation has resulted in culinary pluralism with multiple standards of evaluation. Different Chinese restaurants are preferred for dian xin, regional-style cuisines, xiao ye offerings, ambiance and service, space for banquets, convenience, and cost.

The sheer range of Chinese food choices and traditions has occasionally led to odd and comical moments. The author has witnessed a young self-styled gourmet at a nine-course banquet in Honolulu refuse to eat rice because “it was for peasants.” Educated and refined Chinese, he declared, “only ate the sung, not the fan.” In another example, a Hawai‘i-born Chinese received a startling revelation from his Hong Kong wife when he took her to a local open market. Showing her the fish displayed on the crushed ice, he exclaimed, “Look at the fresh fish!” She replied, “They are dead.” For many Hong Kong residents, “fresh fish” means live fish swimming in a tank for customers to select.

**CHINESE RESTAURANTS AS AN INDEX TO CHINESE AMERICAN CULTURE**

Although the Chinese who came to Hawai‘i in the nineteenth century brought their foodways with them, their diet and methods of food preparation and presentation underwent change. Some items could not be planted, grown, or imported and simply were not available, but different fishes, meats, fruits, and vegetables were substituted. When the Chinese moved off the plantations into rural areas and opened restaurants, accommodating the tastes of the non-Chinese clientele became a necessity. In their coffee saloons and bakery-restaurants, the Chinese met their customers halfway. Besides offering Chinese dishes and dian xin pastries, they added foods and beverages such as coffee, Eagle brand condensed milk, guava jam, butter, breads, cookies, pies, and stews to their menus. Although they continued to enjoy eating birds, dogmeat, and other familiar favorites, they omitted these items from their restaurant menus. Their kitchen utensils, woks, and cooking methods reflected their Zhongshan or Guangdong heritage, although experimentation and innovation inevitably occurred. Pork lard and fat, for example, continued to be major ingredients in cooking, as in traditional practice. As Ardith Yook Larn recalled, “cholesterol was of no concern in those days.”

Restaurants reflected the new dietary patterns of the Chinese in Hawai‘i. The Chinese consumed more beef, pork, chicken, duck, and fish, but their food choices were less diverse. Dogmeat, eels, frog legs, rabbits, snails, and snakes were eaten less due to cost, unavailability, or social attitudes. One consequence has been that while Chinese Americans have a lower atherosclerotic heart disease mortality rate than non-Chinese Americans, they have a higher prevalence of coronary heart disease than their Asian counterparts.

Chinese restaurants have also reflected the changing status of the Chinese in Hawai‘i. From the plantation and rural era through the urban and Chinatown era to the contemporary period, the restaurants have reflected the patterns of occupational diversity, urbanization, upward mobility, residential dispersion, and new immigration. The different types of Chinese restaurants in Hawai‘i today were influenced by these trends, and their characteristics reflect these three historical periods. People can select the Hong Kong-style dian xin and marvel at the pushcarts displaying plates of webbed duck feet, custard tarts, beef balls, and nuo mi ji (chicken and sticky rice wrapped in bamboo leaves). Others prefer the older style and line up at Char Hung Sut in Honolulu’s Chinatown to buy pastries and foods to eat or to take back to the other islands. They order local Zhongshan favorites such as ye zi, ma ti su, ya tui mian, and hong shao jiao zi mian. And in certain Chinese restaurants, people can ask for either American or Chinese foods. In essence, Chinese restaurants have historically accommodated their various eating publics, and this accounts for the coexistence of these divergent types of restaurants.

But it is not only the Chinese and their restaurants that have adapted to Hawai‘i. Change has not been one-sided, and Hawai‘i has also adapted to the Chinese. As Hawaiians met the new immigrants, they coined new words such as Pake, Kina, Aina Pake, Aina Pua, and Kinikiu. As social encoun-
ters increased, interracial marriages also occurred. Chinese restaurants undoubtedly helped to promote intercultural understanding and cooperation. By introducing new foods to the Hawaiian diet, they added terms to the Hawaiian vocabulary, such as mea ‘ono pu’a’a, pepeiao, and mea ‘ono kihi kihi.\(^{59}\) They must also be credited with fostering the entry of Chinese foods into the local lunch plates, pupu platters, luaus, buffets, restaurants (Polynesian, Continental, and local), and other eating contexts.

Besides popularizing foods, Chinese restaurants have integrated themselves into the pivotal episodes in island life. For the Chinese, restaurants are places to commemorate key life cycle events and important happenings. Full-month baby observances, wedding receptions, birthday celebrations, funeral dinners, spring banquets, and official inauguration parties are held there. As the people of modern Hawai‘i have become more accustomed to Chinese food, they have selected Chinese restaurants for graduation parties, baptism and confirmation observances, business meetings, engagement receptions, bridal and baby showers, and charity fundraisers. For many Japanese in Hawai‘i, it is extremely fashionable to have nine-course wedding dinners at Chinese restaurants, gaily decorated with a thousand and one paper cranes. On festive occasions and holidays, people celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas, or New Year’s at Chinese restaurants. Or they ask Chinese restaurants to cater or to provide the food for home dining or office parties.

In recent years, national and international influences have changed both Hawai‘i and its Chinese populations. Improvements in communication and transportation have tied Hawai‘i closer to the mainland and Asia. The period after World War II and statehood hastened marketing and distribution changes and eroded the control of the “Big Five” firms in Hawai‘i.\(^{60}\) Large corporations, fast-food franchises, and outside capital have moved into the state, increasing competition. Wholesalers now supply Chinese restaurants with frozen pork butts, lard, and poultry from the mainland, instead of the more costly fresh island produce, for dian xin, yun tun, and other dishes. At the same time, America has discovered that it likes Chinese food and chop suey. Fast-food chains advertise Oriental salads, chicken nuggets with sweet-and-sour sauce, and egg rolls. National and international food corporations now offer canned bean sprouts, chop suey, fried rice, canned won ton soups, packaged fortune cookies, and frozen Chinese entrees.\(^{61}\) The marketing of egg rolls on a stick, chopstick holders at place settings, and pizza with Chinese sausage and Peking duck may not be far behind. Keen competition from outside corporations with advantages of economies of scale and low operating costs may make it difficult for some local businesses and Chinese restaurants to survive.

Closer ties to the U.S. mainland and the international economy have brought both advantages and disadvantages. The tourist industry touts Chinese restaurants and Chinese food as prime examples of Hawai‘i’s being a multiracial island paradise. But while the tourist dollars assist the local economy, they also have raised the costs of living and the prices of real estate. Faced with bewildering and rapid social change to their lifeways, some residents of Hawai‘i seek refuge in the past and in their local identity. They value nostalgia and local experiences to validate and give meaning to their lives against the puzzling changes they see. It is an example of local revitalization, resurgent ethnicity, and “palaka power.”\(^{62}\) Symbols of an island lifestyle such as speaking pidgin; wearing Cane Haul Road T-shirts; eating saimin, shaved ice, cracked seed, and lunch plates; “talking story”; and listening to Hawaiian slack-key guitar music are valued. These symbolic acts rekindle memories of an idyllic, innocent past, not so distantly lost.

In this opposition of local culture against the outside, food has become an important metaphor. Perhaps as a legacy of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, many local Chinese are interested in the home-style village cooking of their parents or grandparents from Zhongshan. Unfortunately, most Chinese cookbooks present only the banquet foods or metropolitan versions of regional cooking in China and do not focus on Zhongshan-style cooking.\(^{63}\) Those who can’t enjoy eating at the new restaurants opened by Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong that have a more informal, home-style cooking format; but these, too, are not representative of Zhongshan-style cooking. The younger generation of Hawai‘i-born Chinese also write about food and local identity. Diane Mark, for example, writes in her poem “Dawn Is in the Rain Forest” that

\[
\text{it’s the age of Hawai‘i 5-0 television,}
\text{volkswagen rabbits, take-out manapua,}
\text{polyester pant suits and Chung King chop suey}
\]

\(
\text{my culture is both Chinese}
\text{and ‘local’}
\text{these islands are my home}
\text{and I listen to the grandparents’ stories}
\text{of what they were once like} . . . \)

Wing Tek Lum in his poem “Chinese Hot Pot” writes:

\[
\text{My dream of America}
\text{is like da bin louh}
\text{with people of all persuasions and tastes}
\text{sitting down around a common pot}
\text{chopsticks and basket scoops here and there}
\text{some cooking squid and others beef}
\text{all in one broth}
\text{like a stew that really isn’t}
\text{as each one chooses what he wishes to eat}
\text{only that the pot and fire are shared}
\text{along with the good company}
\text{and the sweet soup}
\text{spooned out at the end of the meal.}\]

Both Diane Mark and Wing Tek Lum seek to understand and to reclaim their Hawaiian Chinese heritage.

In their historical development, Chinese restaurants in Hawai‘i have reflected the changes of the local Chinese population. The trends of the future are difficult to predict; even
teahouses and restaurants in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are undergoing change; culture is not static. But in the past, Chinese restaurants have acted as cultural brokers mediating the social relationships between the Chinese and the general community. Although the Chinese now make up only a small percentage of the population, Chinese restaurants have become a dominant fixture in Hawai’i’s culinary landscape. Chinese food has won widespread acceptance. If food is a language, then Chinese restaurants have been extremely eloquent and persuasive in their expression. By intersecting with the foodways of Hawai’i, Chinese restaurants have contributed to interethnic communication and an ongoing multicultural exchange.

NOTES

9. Y. Baron Goto, former director of the Agricultural Extension Service of the University of Hawai’i, wrote: “Among the many people who have migrated to Hawaii, the Chinese have contributed the most plants because they came from South China where the climate is sub-tropical. Their plants adjusted well to conditions in the islands.” Ah Jook Ku, “Contributions of the Chinese to Hawaii,” in A Legacy of Diversity (Honolulu: Ethnic Resource Center for the Pacific, College of Education, Educational Foundations, University of Hawai’i, 1975), 23.
13. For a comparison with the hut and Chinese restaurants in London, see James L. Watson, Emigration and the Chinese Lineage: The Man in Hong Kong and London (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 106–8. Chinese restaurants also exist in the Philippines, Mexico, Canada, France, Germany, Korea, Japan, and other countries. There are also Cuban-Chinese and Vietnamese-Chinese restaurants in New York. It would be interesting to see who their owners are, their clientele, their methods of food preparation, the degree to which the food has been indigenized or nativized, and the extent to which it has been accepted.
21. Glick, Sojourners, 142.
25. Glick, Sojourners, 142.
26. Ibid., 143.
27. Ibid., 372 n. 7.
The proverb is “five to six.”

The singing is done with electronic music machines playing electronic music.

Glick, Sojourners, 80–81.

Hart, 31.


Wong, 202.

Glick, Sojourners, 92.

The ban lasted until February 1942. Kuykendall and Day, 257.


Zane, 145.

Honolulu Star-Bulletin, July 3, 1977. Before World War II, such restaurants maintained a kai fan system. After paying five or ten cents, a person could feast on the dish of the day, soup, and all the rice that he could eat. Bachelors especially welcomed this practice.

Honolulu Advertiser, 2 March 1985.

Honolulu Star-Bulletin, 8 June 1965; 6, 10 April 1987. See also Honolulu Advertiser, 4 October 1965, 28 July 1966.


Tonia Chao, “Communicating through Architecture: San Francisco Chinese Restaurants as Cultural Intersections, 1849–1984” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley), 179. I am indebted to Judy Yung for bringing this work to my attention.

For a San Francisco parallel, see Victor G. Nee and Brett de Bary Nee, Longtime Californians: A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986), 115–16.


The advertisements are drawn from the restaurant and chop suey sections in Oahu Telephone Directory: Yellow Pages (Honolulu: Hawaiian Telephone, 1982). Despite the sizable Hakka Chinese population in Hawai‘i, Hakka-style specialty restaurants did not appear until recently. Interesting, too, is the trend for some restaurateurs to contract with travel tour operators for the tourist trade. Finally, Western names or translations of Chinese names are increasingly preferred by restaurant owners, perhaps to attract a larger clientele. Even Hawaiian words such as wahine and kane, which mean “females” and “males,” no longer appear on bathroom doors.

Mid-Pacific Magazine 29 (January 1925): 12.


The singing is done with electronic music machines playing recorded tunes in the background. Asian Week, 27 May 1988.

The proverb is “sheng zai Suzhou; zhu zai Hangzhou; shi zai Guangzhou; si zai Liaozhou.” See also Hong Kong (Singapore: APA Production, 1986), 221.


In the 1960s, food inspectors attempted to ban the sale of certain pork organs and parts as being unhygienic. They also forced local merchants to use refrigerated display cases instead of placing pork and meat on the tables in the stalls on King Street. Lastly, they pushed for the use of gas ovens instead of charcoal for cooking roast pork and cha shao.

These subtle contests over food values and food tastes are generally unnoticed by the public but are advocated by government officials as promoting hygiene. A mainland parallel would be the famous San Francisco roast duck controversy in the 1980s. Inspectors had argued that roast ducks hanging in Chinese restaurant kitchens and butcher stalls bred bacteria and were unsanitary and that the ducks should be refrigerated. Public uproar finally caused the inspectors to retreat and permit a continuance of traditional practices.

Wong, 199.


Judy Perkin and Stephanie F. McCann, “Food for Ethnic Americans: Is the Government Trying to Turn the Melting Pot into a One-Dish Dinner?” in Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity, ed. Linda Keller Brown and Kay Missell (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 249–51. The Hawai‘i diet may include more seafood, however, than the California diet.

Pake, Kina, Aina Pake, and Aina Pua are words for China; Pake and Kina also mean Chinese, but Kinikiu is uncomplimentary and possibly derived from the English word “Chink.” Mea ‘ono pua’a, more popularly rendered manapua, is cha shao bao, or pork bun. Pepeao is Chinese pastry stuffed with meat and vegetables, and is named for its resemblance to an ear. Mea ‘ono kihikihi is a square or rectangular pastry made by the Chinese.


As food costs have risen, many consumers have opted for seven-course banquetts instead of the traditionally popular nine-course dinners.


Palaka is a plaid broadcloth woven by plantation workers. David Hagino authored a pamphlet, Palaka Power, in 1977, which was a rallying cry for local power and empowerment. Hawaii Herald, 15 April 1983. A document with this palaka which was a rallying cry for local power and empowerment. Hawaii Herald, 15 April 1983.

Another method of learning ‘old-style’ cooking is to attend cooking classes or demonstrations by the local utility company. The commemorative souvenir annuals and the festive events scheduled during the Lunar New Year and narcissus Festival celebrations by the Chinese community also teach the younger generation.

65. Wing Tek Lum, 105
66. That the teahouse in Guangdong may have evolved over time is suggested in Wang Shizhen, *Chi zai Zhongguo: Jiangnan pian* [Eating in China: South of the Yangtze] (Taipei: Xingguang chubanshe, 1981), 100.

**GLOSSARY**

cha shao (char siu)
chao fen (chow fun)
da bian lu (da bin louh)
dian xin (dim sum)
guang su bing (gong su bang)
holoku (a loose dress with a yoke and usually a train, patterned after the Mother Hubbard clothing of the missionaries)
hong shao jiao ji mian (hong siu gau gee mein)
hui (wui)
hui guan (wui goon)
ji dan gao (gai dan gow)
jian dui (chin dui)
kaifan (hoifan)
kamaana (native-born, or born in Hawai‘i and a longtime resident)
luat luau (meat, chicken, pork, or fish wrapped in banana leaves and baked, steamed, or broiled; in the past, cooked in ground ovens)
li zhi (lichée)
long yan (longan)
luu (a Hawaiian feast)
ma ti su (ma tai su)
uo mi ji (no mai gai)
okolehao (Hawaiian alcoholic beverage made from ti leaves)
ono (delicious)
paniuolo (Hawaiian cowboy)
pupus (party food or appetizers in modern-day Hawai‘i)
Shiqi (Shekki)
shuai pi su bing (lut pee su bang)
Siyi (See Yup)
song (sung)
song gao (sung gaw)
Taishan (Toisan)
tang bao (tong bau)
tie ban (ti ban)
xian bao (harm bau)
xiao ye (siu yeh)
ya tui mian (op tui mien)
ye zi (yip jai)
yin cha (yum cha)
yun dun (won ton)
Zhongshan (Chungshan)
zhou (jook)