Flexible Authenticity
Din Tai Fung as a Global Shanghai Dumpling House Made in Taiwan
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CHANGES IN THE CHINESE AMERICAN RESTAURANT BUSINESS

On December 4, 2007, the Taiwan government sponsored Din Tai Fung, a steamed dumpling house in Taipei, to hold a gastronomic demonstration in Paris as a diplomatic event to promote its “soft power.” Though the cooking show was held by a pro-independence regime, the restaurant actually featured Shanghai cuisine rather than native Taiwanese food. With franchises in Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Australia, mainland China, and the United States, Din Tai Fung was probably the most famous Shanghai dumpling house in the world. Its international reputation exceeded that of many of its counterparts, such as Nanxiang Bun Shop in Shanghai. Media reports in Taiwan claimed that the New York Times rated it as one of the ten best restaurants in the world in 1993. Din Tai Fung’s success is an illuminating example of how the Chinese restaurant business became a global phenomenon following the growth of Overseas Chinese communities, especially in the United States.

The Chinese restaurant business has a long history in the United States. The first Chinese restaurant, Canton Restaurant, was established in San Francisco in 1849. From the mid-nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth, Chinese restaurants in America were mostly Cantonese in flavor, as early Chinese immigrants mainly came from the Pearl River Delta area in Guangdong Province. After years of adaptation, Cantonese restaurants were thoroughly Americanized, catering mostly to non-Chinese customers. Cantonese cuisine, though long regarded as one of the finest regional flavors in China, eventually became a cheap, popular ethnic food in America with a dozen famous fast-food-type dishes such as chop suey and egg foo young, which were hardly known in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or mainland China. Chinese food in America reflected the racial status of Chinese Americans. The Chinese restaurant business, like the laundry business, was a visible menial-service occupation for Chinese immigrants and their descendants.

Ethnic food also reflects immigration history. After the 1965 immigration reform, new waves of Chinese immigrants arrived. Between 1965 and 1984, an estimated 419,373 Chinese entered the United States. Post-1965 Chinese immigrants were far more diverse in their class and cultural backgrounds than the earlier immigrants had been. Many were educated professionals, engineers, technicians, or exchange students. Their arrival fostered a new, booming Chinese restaurant business in America, especially in regions such as the San Gabriel Valley in Southern California and Queens in New York, where Chinese populations concentrated.

Accordingly, food in Chinese restaurants in America began to change. Unlike chop suey houses, most contemporary Chinese restaurants in America featured more self-defined “authentic” Chinese food. In areas with large Chinese populations, they served mainly Chinese customers. And they did not call themselves “Chop Suey House” or “Chow Mein Garden”; rather, they claimed culinary identities as Hunan, Sichuan, Mandarin, or Shanghai restaurants. There is actually no authentic Chinese national food, as Chinese cuisine is divided into a variety of different regional traditions. Each regional cuisine has its own unique flavors and famous dishes based on local cultural traditions and climatic and ecological conditions. Din Tai Fung in Southern California, for example, features Shanghai cuisine, with steamed dumplings as its specialty.

SHANGHAI DUMPLINGS

Shanghai cuisine includes a number of famous dishes, such as steamed meatballs, sweet-and-sour spareribs, Shanghai stir-fried noodles, crispy chicken, and da zha xie, a special crab found in the Changjiang (Yangtze) River. However, the most famous Shanghai delicacy is xiao long bao—little steamed dumplings. Steamed in bamboo baskets, the dumplings are buns filled with thoroughly ground pork or minced
crabmeat mixed with green onion, salt, and other ingredients, chicken soup being the most important one. They are served with vinegar with shredded ginger soaking in it. A customer is supposed to take a bite, suck the soup when it cools down a little bit, and then dip the dumpling in vinegar. Well-made steamed dumplings should be able to hold in the soup until they are bitten.

Elegant steamed dumplings have been a delicacy in Shanghai since the nineteenth century. As dumpling houses compete on quality and price, authenticity is a selling point. Many stores therefore claim to be descendants of the first dumpling houses in Shanghai and to represent the original flavor. The most famous dumpling house in Shanghai is Nanxiang Bun Shop, which has a history of over a hundred years in Yu Yuan Park and is a well-known name across the country. During lunch- or dinnertime, local customers and tourists often line up for a seat or a table. In fact, it has become a comparison point for other dumpling houses in Shanghai and other areas. Historically, Shanghai cuisine, like any other big city’s food, has been influenced by food traditions in its surrounding areas, such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces. Both are known for their fine cuisines and culinary traditions. Steamed dumplings, for example, have long existed in Yangzhou in Jiangsu Province and Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province. They are still popular in these cities today.

However, when “authentic” Chinese food replaced Americanized Chinese food, few people realized that many regional-flavored Chinese restaurants in America were in fact started and run by immigrants from Taiwan, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. The first waves of Chinese immigrants to America after passage of the 1965 Immigration Act came from Taiwan instead of mainland China, which did not have a diplomatic relationship with the United States until 1979. Even more significantly, there was no cultural or economic contact between Taiwan and mainland China from 1949 to the early 1980s. What enabled Taiwanese immigrants to bring various Chinese regional cuisines and dishes to America is more than a food history: it is also a sociopolitical history.

Many Taiwanese immigrants (or their parents) were originally from mainland China. Their journey to the United States was a remigration. Regional Chinese cuisines in Taiwan were actually made and developed according to the collective memory of mainland Chinese there. When Shanghai, Hunan, or Sichuan cuisines followed Taiwanese immigrants to America, they had already changed and evolved. Food transmission from Taiwan to America was also a remigration process. The authenticity of Chinese cuisines has become defined flexibly by the Chinese diaspora. That is, this authenticity is assessed based on the varying experiences of the Chinese populations consuming each cuisine. The presence of numerous Chinese regional-cuisine restaurants in America reflects a complex but interesting transnational migration experience of Taiwanese immigrants.

THE RISE OF REGIONAL CHINESE CUISINES IN TAIPEI

In 1949, about two million mainland Chinese followed the Nationalist government to Taiwan after its defeat by the Communist government. Their arrival greatly changed the social landscape of Taiwan, including the food and restaurant market. Many mainlanders and their families settled in Taipei, which became the new capital of the Nationalist government. The city quickly grew into a metropolitan area that housed all major government institutions, several universities, museums, theaters, and luxury hotels. In the following decades, numerous restaurants popped up featuring a variety of Chinese regional cuisines. The Nationalist government named many streets after Chinese cities, made Mandarin the standard dialect spoken in schools and public institutions, and followed a political agenda to create another China in Taiwan. Meanwhile, the mainland Chinese themselves had to readjust and start a new life. To make a living, many mainlanders entered the restaurant business, in which places of origin could be used as cultural capital.

In the 1960s, Taipei became known as a capital of Chinese cuisine. Numerous regional-flavored restaurants and food stores selling all kinds of dry fruits, cookies, snacks, and other food items quickly spread in the city. In Chinese food history, it was not unusual for a big city to have a cluster of restaurants representing different regional cuisines. In cities like Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, the restaurant market often included a variety of different regional cuisines and was usually translocal. However, the translocal restaurant business in Taipei reached an unprecedented level in Chinese food history. No other Chinese city had ever had so many regional-flavored restaurants and food stores as Taipei did after the Nationalist government retreated there in 1949.

Shanghai cuisine was one of those that became popular in Taiwan. Among the Nationalist followers were some wealthy merchants, officials, and their families from Shanghai. Hengyang Road in Taipei became a “little Shanghai” in the 1950s when mainlanders from Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu Provinces settled and started restaurants and food and other retail businesses there. Many changes have taken place since then, but tourists today can still find a pharmacy/general store called Wu Zhong Hang, established as early as 1950. It has carried Shanghai-flavored snacks and other commodities for more than sixty years. There are also a couple of long-time Shanghai-cuisine restaurants on the same street. By the 1970s, there were many Shanghai-cuisine restaurants in Taipei.

The best-known Shanghai-cuisine restaurants were located to the east of Zhonghua Road in the Xi-Men-Ting (西門町) area. This is one of the most famous shopping plazas in Taipei and has had numerous restaurants and stores since the 1950s. Some Shanghai-cuisine restaurants, such as Three-Six-Nine, originated in Shanghai and were particu-
larly attractive to the wealthy merchants, government officials, and wives from the Shanghai area, reminding them of the old days in the most prosperous and westernized city in China. As anthropologist E. N. Anderson pointed out, Three-Six-Nine in Shanghai and other famous restaurants, such as the Winter Garden, in the 1930s catered to warlords and international bankers, serving banquetts that could cost five to six figures in modern currency.8 “The Forever Yi Xueyan,” a short story by California-based Taiwanese novelist Bai Xianyong, vividly described how those Shanghai refugees spent their nights playing mah-jongg, window shopping in the Xi-Men-Ting area, watching Shaoxing (Zhejiang) regional operas, eating sweet rice ball soup at Three-Six-Nine, and recollecting their old life in Shanghai.9

THE MAKING OF DIN TAI FUNG IN TAIPEI

Though there was no social contact between Taiwan and mainland China for half a century, Shanghai and other regional Chinese restaurants still prospered in Taiwan. The collective memory of mainland Chinese and public imagination of what original Shanghai or other regional cuisines should be like allowed these cuisines to develop and thrive in Taiwan. Legends of their geographical origin, Taiwan consumers’ recognition and endorsement of various regional cuisines, and translocal tradition in Chinese restaurant markets all played a role in this cultural transmission. Chinese regional-cuisine restaurants could be run by either mainland Chinese or local Taiwanese. Many proprietors ran restaurants featuring cuisines that were not necessarily from their own regional cultural backgrounds.

Din Tai Fung’s founding owners, Yang Pin Ying and his wife, Li Pam Mae, for example, were not Shanghai natives. Yang was born in 1927 in Shanxi Province in North China. Li was a Hakka Chinese born in Taiwan. In the 1940s, Yang Pin Ying first enlisted in a local warlord army, where his uncle on his mother’s side served as a company commander. Soon he tired of his military life and wanted to go to Taiwan, where he had another uncle on his mother’s side. When Japan surrendered at the end of World War II, it returned Taiwan to China after fifty years of its colonial rule. Yang wanted to explore better economic opportunities in Taiwan, as the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists did not extend there yet. So he left Shanxi and traveled to a number of cities until yet another uncle, in Qingdao, helped him get a ship ticket from Shanghai to Taiwan in the summer of 1948. The Nationalist retreat from the mainland in 1949 and its continuous confrontation with the Communist government made his stay in Taiwan permanent.

With the help of his aunt-in-law in Taiwan, Yang became a delivery boy for the Wang family’s food oil business in Taipei. The Wang family came from Shanghai, as did Yang’s aunt-in-law.10 Through diligence and hard work, Yang was soon promoted to store manager and got to know the oil business network as well as Shanghai culture. Many merchants in the business came from Shanghai. Yang got to know his wife, Li Pam Mae, when she also worked for the Wang family’s oil business. Unfortunately, the store went bankrupt in a few years. Yang started his own oil business in 1958 and named its store Din Tai Fung, which differed by only one word from the former Wang family business’s name. Whereas most Chinese restaurants were called “garden” (yuan) or “house” (lou), Din Tai Fung sounded more like a general merchandise store. The business did not do well, so in 1972, Yang wanted to try the regional-cuisine restaurant market, which was thriving in Taipei. Advised by a Shanghai restaurant friend, Yang found a Shanghai chef as a partner and began to sell steamed dumplings.

Competition was intense. The Shanghai chef soon left, and the restaurant had to hire a local Taiwanese chef who also knew how to make steamed dumplings and other Shanghai snacks.11 When the dumpling business became stable, the Yang family permanently closed the oil business and focused on the restaurant with the same name.

Most restaurants in Taipei were small businesses in which family members pooled their time and energy. Though Li Pam Mae was a Hakka from Taiwan and not from Shanghai, she played an important role in running the restaurant. Hardworking and talented, she was also multilingual, speaking the Taiwanese (or Southern Fujianese) dialect, the Shanghai dialect, and Japanese.12 Her friendly and warm personality helped the restaurant retain a stable team of chefs and employees. A recent fictional TV series about Din Tai Fung, produced in Taiwan, featured Li as a prominent character in the family business.13

Din Tai Fung’s success in the competitive translocal food market shows how different Chinese regional food traditions became rooted in Taiwan. Though neither Yang nor Li was a Shanghai native, they learned the trade through a lot of hands-on learning, consultation, and experimenting. Kneading flour to get the right texture for the dough, for example, was a long and tedious job. They gradually developed the use of semirisen flour, which was different from the nonrisen flour used in Shanghai. They also learned to use ground pork that came from freshly slaughtered pigs, a special brand of chicken broth, and other local ingredients. The ingredients were repeatedly tried and modified. The flavor of the dumplings continuously improved to meet the taste of Taiwanese consumers. The key ingredients were precisely controlled by Luo Lunbing, a pioneer assistant of the Yang family. Only Luo and Yang Chi-hua, the elder son of Yang, knew the recipe.14 Like the dumplings of Nanxiang in Shanghai, the Din Tai Fung dumplings held the nicely flavored soup inside until they were bitten; they tasted delicious. But their flavor could be subtly or considerably different from that of Nanxiang’s dumplings. Din Tai Fung served Taiwan rather than Shanghai.
customers and was competing vigorously with other local Shanghai-cuisine restaurants. Unlike other cities, Taipei had hardly any Shanghainese chefs, as there was no social contact between Taiwan and mainland China. Din Tai Fung eventually became the best-known Shanghai steamed dumpling restaurant in Taipei and was often regarded as a comparison point for other dumpling houses like Nanxiang. But the authenticity of Din Tai Fung’s steamed dumplings was localized in Taiwan’s translocal Chinese restaurant market.

Word spread by mouth only, as Din Tai Fung did not advertise. Sales soared and customers came in crowds. The restaurant expanded from four tables to three hundred seats in a narrow four-story building on Hsin Yi Road. During the weekend, there could be fifty to a hundred groups of guests waiting in line, and the wait could be as long as an hour and a half. The authenticity of Din Tai Fung’s dumplings as Shanghai cuisine was obviously established. Many Nationalist leaders became loyal customers. The list of elite fans included, for example, the late General Chiang Wei-guo, son of the late President Chiang Kai-shek; Jiang Xiaowu and Jiang Xiaoyong, grandsons of Chiang; former Nationalist president Lian Zhan; former defense minister and primary minister Hao Bocun and his son, Taipei mayor Hao Longbin; and many other officials from Shanghai or Zhejiang and their children and grandchildren. Interestingly, pro-independence Taiwan government leaders like Li Denghui and Chen Shui-bian never ate in the restaurant. When Ang Lee, one of the most famous Chinese American directors, made his movie Eat Drink Man Woman, Din Tai Fung’s steamed dumpling was a visible food item on the dining table of the main character, Chef Chu. Yang Chi-hua’s cooking skills actually earned him an appearance as a double for Chef Chu. When filming how to roll the wrap, put in the filling, fold the wrap, and pleat the edge in stylish fashion, Lee asked Yang to shave the hair of his hands so they would look like those of Chef Chu. In 2000, Din Tai Fung became an incorporated company with 50 percent of its stock owned by outside investors, and hired a professional management team that master-planned a central kitchen in Zhonghe City, streamlined supply sources, and manufactured most of the food items except for the handmade dumplings. According to one resource, the restaurant rolls out fifteen million steamed dumplings annually and in 2007 reported revenue of 700 million New Taiwan Dollars, about U.S.$21.63 million. In addition to the flagship store, the restaurant established two branch stores at Zhongxiao East Road and another branch at Xinyi Road in Taipei. More importantly, the business went global. As mentioned before, after several decades of hard work and continuous improvement, Din Tai Fung established franchise stores in Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, and Australia. In the near future the store may expand to New York, London, Paris, or Dubai, as all those metropolitan cities have a number of internationally recognized authentic Chinese restaurants.

Din Tai Fung’s authenticity was sometimes challenged. After all, it was a Shanghai dumpling house that was established and prospered in, and expanded from, Taiwan. During a gastronomic demonstration in Japan in 1986, a local chef from China was hired to help Yang Chi-hua. The chef came from Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, where steamed dumpling has long been a native delicacy. The chef made the dumplings a little bit bigger than required. Yang immediately noticed the difference and asked him to do the work again. The chef insisted that his own way was right, but Yang threw all the dumplings away. The chef finally did what he was told. Yang noticed and cared about every detail of his product, and whether the flavor or size of Din Tai Fung’s dumplings truly matched those of their Shanghai or Yangzhou counterparts was almost irrelevant. Their authenticity was based in Taipei.

Few people in Taiwan had actually tasted the original flavor of steamed dumplings in Nanxiang or other famous dumpling restaurants in Shanghai. In fact, most customers in Taiwan had no idea if Yang and Li were Shanghai natives or not. They probably did not care as long as their dumplings tasted good. It was Taiwanese taste and judgment rather than Shanghai customers’ that shaped the flavor of Din Tai Fung’s dumplings and endorsed the food’s authenticity. That was also probably true for other famous Chinese regional-cuisine restaurants in Taiwan. Cultural preservation and reproduction became simultaneously cultural reinvention. In other words, the flavor of Din Tai Fung’s Shanghai dumplings was being localized. Taiwanese consumers’ collective memory about Shanghai steamed dumplings, circulated as legend among them, allowed Din Tai Fung to maintain certain core elements in its cookery. But the dumplings’ authenticity as a Shanghai cuisine was essentially developed in Taiwan.

DIN TAI FUNG IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Din Tai Fung opened a franchise store in Arcadia, Southern California, in 2000. In contrast to its franchise stores in other metropolitan regions, which are usually run by hired managers, the Southern California store is owned and managed by Frank (Guohua) Yang, the second son of Yang Pin Ying and Li Pam Mae. The Yang family story and restaurant business provide an informative example not only of how different Chinese regional food traditions spread to the United States and other parts of the world, but also of how they had been transplanted and developed first in Taiwan. Shanghai and other regional restaurants were first translocal eateries in Taiwan and then became transnational in America, since Taiwan both received immigrants from mainland China and sent emigrants abroad.

Frank Yang opened a Din Tai Fung store in Arcadia with careful consideration. He had promised his father not to enter the restaurant business when he migrated to the United
States. His father had advised him that the hours were too long and too hard. In fact, Frank worked for thirteen years as a garment inspector before opening his store. But he noticed that at least two restaurants had used Din Tai Fung’s name for their businesses since his arrival in America. Some immigrant restaurant operators were tempted to take advantage of Din Tai Fung’s reputation as an authentic Shanghai restaurant in Taipei. Frank realized that he had to open a store himself so that others would not use its name again. As mentioned above, Din Tai Fung in Taipei was incorporated in that year and established many chain stores across the world. The business had already gone global, and it should not miss the market in California, where many Chinese Americans worked and lived.

Yang’s store became an immediate success. The restaurant quickly attracted many local Taiwanese customers. Located in Arcadia, a city where many middle-class or wealthy Taiwanese immigrant families lived, the store obviously had Taiwanese customers in mind when it opened. Since its opening, however, it has become popular with many local residents, Chinese and non-Chinese, as the most authentic Shanghai dumpling house in Southern California. In its opening year, though it served two thousand dumplings a day, the waiting line was always long. During the weekend, it took at least thirty to forty-five minutes to get a table. Sixty years earlier, Richard and Maurice McDonald had opened the first McDonald’s Restaurant in Arcadia, moving it to San Bernardino three years later. Today, Arcadia’s population is over 37 percent Chinese; many of these came from Taiwan and have heard of and been to Din Tai Fung in Taipei. A customer recollected how years ago she saw a waiter carry a disabled customer to the third-floor dining room in the old Taipei store because there was no elevator. She also insisted that the dumplings in the Taipei store tasted better than those in the Arcadia store. Nevertheless, the Arcadia store was still important, as it reminded Taiwanese customers about their life in Taiwan.

Authentic flavor was also important to Frank Yang. He did not want to ruin the reputation of his family business and disappoint his fellow Taiwanese immigrant customers. In fact, his elder brother was concerned about the quality issue when Frank Yang decided to open the store. Competition in the Chinese restaurant business in Southern California was intense. Many restaurants were operated by struggling immigrants who could not find decent jobs and became self-made cooks. Food quality and hygiene conditions were often issues. Failure could affect Din Tai Fung’s reputation in Taiwan because the contemporary Chinese American community was transnational. Taiwanese immigrants in Southern California had frequent cultural and social contact with their friends and relatives in Taiwan. Frank worked very hard to maintain the original flavor and quality of the dumplings. Din Tai Fung milled a special combination of medium- and low-gluten flour to get the right texture for the dough. The secret of its dumplings is actually the appropriate mix of flours so that the wrapper is transparently thin yet resilient. Frank Yang continued that cooking tradition. He also ordered custom-made stainless steel steamers built in Taiwan to match exactly the shape and size of the bamboo steamers used in Taipei. (To his regret, the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services forbade using bamboo steamers.) In spite of his efforts, Yang still felt that the flavor of his products was only 80 percent like that of the Taipei dumplings.

Yang’s diligent effort to maintain the Taipei standard was more than the spirit of entrepreneurship. Authenticity was an emotional issue for Yang and his Taiwanese customers. Food was not only an expression of ethnic resilience but also a cultural comfort for immigrants when they settled down in their adopted country. Din Tai Fung and other brand-name Taiwan restaurants made Taiwan immigrants in Southern California feel at home and gave them a sense of community. However, the original flavor that Frank Yang tried to retain and the authenticity that the Taiwanese customers were concerned with was based not on dumplings in Shanghai but on the products of its Taipei flagship store. In 2000, there were several dozen Shanghai restaurants in the San Gabriel Valley. Some were operated by Taiwanese and others by immigrants from mainland China. But none of them could offer the same kind of steamed dumplings that Din Tai Fung served or had the same international reputation.

As the Chinese population grew rapidly in the San Gabriel Valley, some local American residents observed that “the newcomers have simply transplanted their culture and way of life to the suburbs of Los Angeles”; that “the newly arrived immigrants no longer feel compelled to join the larger community. Instead, they are content to retreat into their own insular world.” This observation was only partially right. Din Tai Fung was an example of how Chinese food culture was transplanted to America piece by piece following the Chinese immigrant boom. Both historically and today, few immigrant groups completely assimilate into mainstream America, especially in food culture. Many would like to maintain their traditional diet. With restaurants like Din Tai Fung, immigrants from Taiwan did not feel culturally deprived. However, immigrants and their families frequently went beyond ethnic boundaries in dining out and tried other American restaurants. There is no doubt that Chinese American customers in general, especially suburban middle-class professional immigrants and American-born Chinese, patronized American-fast-food or sit-down restaurants more often than Din Tai Fung or other flavored Chinese restaurants.

Meanwhile Din Tai Fung attracted non-Chinese clients as well. Shortly after Frank Yang opened his store, it became one of the most famous Chinese restaurants in Southern California. Mainstream newspapers, journals, and TV channels featured the restaurant in their food coverage. The number of non-Chinese customers has grown steadily for Din Tai Fung’s variety of juicy, handmade steamed dumplings.
During the weekend lunch or dinner hours, the restaurant typically has seven to eight tables of non-Chinese guests out of thirty to forty tables. The customers often include Chinese American college students or young professionals eating with their non-Chinese friends. To serve the increasing number of customers, the restaurant recently opened a new store in the neighboring plaza just behind the old store. The restaurant functions as a bridge for anyone who is interested in Chinese culinary culture and getting to know more regional flavors of Chinese food.

Like some of the trendy restaurants in America, the old store has an open kitchen. Through the glass, customers can watch chefs or kitchen helpers standing around a big chopping block, working as a team. Some are swiftly tugging off dough into numerous small, rounded pieces of similar size. Others are skillfully rolling dough out into thin, round wrappings, using finger-thick wood rollers. Still others are filling the wrappings with thoroughly ground pork or crab ingredients. Finally, someone else molds them into elegant dumplings ready to be steamed. Among the kitchen staff, waiters, and waitresses are immigrants from Taiwan, mainland China, Mexico, and South America. Many immigrants join the local menial-service job market when they first arrive in America. The open kitchen and the immigrant workers reflect the way that many restaurants—Chinese and non-Chinese—operate in the United States.

As a country of immigrants, America has continuously had its culture enriched through waves of new arrivals. Ethnic food has existed in America since it was founded. Immigrants kept bringing in new flavors and new cuisines, giving restaurant clients endless options. In fact, there is probably no such thing as American national food, unless we count McDonald’s. As food historian Donna R. Gabaccia has pointed out, what unites American eaters culturally is not what they eat but how they eat. “As eaters, all Americans mingle the culinary traditions of many regions and cultures within ourselves. We are multi-ethnic eaters. What makes the United States multicultural is not so much as many separate culinary traditions as it is Americans’ desire to eat a multi-ethnic mix of foods, and to make this mix part of themselves.” Consumers’ preference for multiethnic food is an important expression of their identities as Americans. Meanwhile, culinary culture is not static. It is bound to be influenced and changed by the tastes and preferences of the local customers. For example, Din Tai Fung’s Arcadia store offers “pork fried rice” and “pork fried noodle,” which are very similar to chow mein or other food items familiar to American customers in cookery and taste.

Din Tai Fung is not the only restaurant transplanted from Taiwan. Hundreds of Chinese restaurants in the San Gabriel Valley either are chain stores with flagships in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or mainland China, or are affiliated to stores in those areas, using the same names and cooking the same kind of food. A & J Restaurant (Banmu Yuan) in Alhambra, Good Time Café (Hao Nian Dong Taiwan Xiaochi) in Arcadia, and Dragon Mark Restaurant (Yitiaolong Beiping Miandian) and Yung Ho Restaurant (Yonghe Doujian Canting) in San Gabriel were all from Taiwan. While operating the American stores independently, immigrant entrepreneurs want to use the brand names because the original stores have already established reputations back in the home areas. The original names represent the authenticity of their food. They may initially appeal only to homesick Taiwanese customers. But if the restaurants are good, they will attract mainland Chinese and other customers who like Chinese food. As immigrant customers eat and debate if the food is authentic enough, they feel less isolated in America and realize that they are part of a social network connected through food and grocery stores; Chinese banks, real estate, and other financial services; newspapers, radio, and TV. Their American experience is not straight-line assimilation. While adapting themselves to mainstream American culture at work, they can live their own cultural life elsewhere. The multicultural American society they are living in is not a totally strange world because it includes their culture as a component.

**DIN TAI FUNG IN CHINA**

As mentioned above, Din Tai Fung reached a turning point in 2000: it stopped being a family-owned business and became an incorporated company with 50 percent of its stock owned by outsiders. During this year Din Tai Fung also established stores in China. Surprisingly, it chose to open its first mainland chain store in Shanghai, the birthplace of steamed dumplings. This choice was both challenging and logical. Though the city had many dumpling restaurants, it also had a booming Taiwanese community. When the relationship improved between Taiwan and mainland China in the late 1980s, thousands of travelers, businessmen, professionals, and students from Taiwan, as well as Taiwan immigrants from North America and other parts of the world, rushed there to build factories, open business offices, establish joint ventures, invest in the local economy, or attend school. “Two-way trade between Taiwan and China in the year 2000 came to US$32 billion, accounting for 11 percent of Taiwan’s total export. Estimates of Taiwan investment in the mainland range from $40–$100 billion as of mid-2001, making Taiwan the fourth largest investor in China. Taiwan’s investment is especially heavy now in the Shanghai area. . . . Every day, some 10,000 Taiwanese business people enter the PRC.”

For these returning or remigrating Taiwanese immigrants, the United States was not necessarily their final destination or the only location of their cultural, social, and economic activities. Din Tai Fung’s opening in Shanghai could be seen as part of this “reverse migration” by Taiwanese immigrants. By 2000, over three hundred thousand Taiwanese were working and living in Shanghai and forming their own networks,
community organizations, and even school system. Many of them were probably the Nationalist expatriates driven away from mainland China in 1949, or their descendants. In a reverse and circular migration pattern, they were back to their cultural roots and began new chapters of their careers or businesses. When Din Tai Fung opened in Shanghai, it not only “returned” to its symbolic home but also became part of the booming Taiwanese community in Shanghai. As a brand-name Taiwan restaurant, it joined the Taiwanese remigration movement to mainland China.

Opening a store in Shanghai would be a challenge for Din Tai Fung because the city was the very birthplace of steamed dumplings. The famous Nanxiang Bun Shop has a history of over a hundred years in the local restaurant market. In 2003, it was reported to serve an average of three thousand customers per day. Many other local dumpling houses are competitive in price and quality. To prepare for the competition, Din Tai Fung’s master chef Shao Guanglong allegedly tasted dumplings from all famous Shanghai restaurants. He was still confident in establishing a store in Shanghai.

Located in a high-end mall and charging much more than most of the local steamed dumpling restaurants, Din Tai Fung’s store in Shanghai is trendy and upscale in decoration. Unlike chop suey, which also returned to China in the 1940s but failed miserably, as it only fit the taste of American patrons, Din Tai Fung’s dumplings are not foreign food to the Chinese. Meanwhile, it has an international fame that other local Shanghai dumpling restaurants do not. Its authenticity is clear and simple: the restaurant offers brand-name Taiwan-made Shanghai dumplings. Its global reputation, especially among Overseas Chinese communities, has enabled Din Tai Fung to survive as a high-profile and upscale restaurant in Shanghai. According to a report in 2003, some 30 percent of Din Tai Fung’s customers were local people. By 2009, it had opened three stores in Shanghai.

Din Tai Fung has also successfully opened stores in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Australia, where Chinese food is popular and Chinese populations are large. As early as 1996, with a franchise agreement with Takashimaya, a Japanese department store, Din Tai Fung opened five chain stores in Japan. Shortly thereafter, Shanghai steamed dumplings became trendy in Japan. Din Tai Fung attracted many enthusiastic Japanese patrons. As a global enterprise, it has developed a modern operation standard in a Chinese restaurant. In addition to its flavor, tastefulness, and good service, Din Tai Fung has established a standardized hygiene, food preparation, and cookery procedure that many other Chinese restaurants fail to develop. Chefs at each new location in Japan need to complete a rigorous three-month training in the Taipei kitchen to create the original recipes. Din Tai Fung’s stores in Shanghai have Japanese tourists due to its reputation in Japan. Din Tai Fung has also opened stores in Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Tianjin, and Hong Kong.

All its chain stores in mainland China are high-end sit-down restaurants well known among local, tourist, or Western customers, especially Chinese American professionals and students working and studying in China. Many young Chinese white-collar, middle-class patrons come to the restaurant on the recommendation of their Overseas Chinese or international friends. With its competitive edge and international reputation, Din Tai Fung has begun to impact the Chinese steamed dumpling business. Many steamed dumpling restaurants in China, for example, have imitated Din Tai Fung in having open kitchens. Din Tai Fung’s success in China has further boosted its reputation as authentic Shanghai cuisine.

Din Tai Fung is of course not the only Chinese restaurant transplanted from Taiwan to America. Immigrants from Taiwan have opened and operated many regional-flavored Chinese restaurants in the United States. Like Din Tai Fung, A & J Restaurant (Banmu Yuan, or Half-acre Farm), Yonghe Doujiang (Forever Harmony Bean-curd Milk), San-Liu-Jiu (Three-Six-Nine), Lu Yuan (Green Garden), Jiazhou Niu Rou Mian (California Beef Noodle), and a number of other Chinese American food enterprises have established chain stores in China.

Banmu Yuan was established in 1971 in Taipei during the restaurant boom in Taiwan and soon established chain stores in several counties and cities there. In 1984, it opened branch stores in Los Angeles and San Jose. In Taiwan, Banmu Yuan was known for its authentic northern Chinese food, such as steamed buns or breads, noodles, and baked pancakes. A few years after it expanded in California, Zhang Taike, the owner, met Zhao Bingsheng, another immigrant from Taiwan, on a business trip and asked Zhao if he would be interested in joining the business and opening a chain store in mainland China. Zhao was interested because his father was a northernner from Shandong Province. Though he had never been to China, he had always been interested in going and wanted to explore his opportunities there. In 1994, the first branch store of Banmu Yuan opened in Shuangyu Shu, Haidian District, in western Beijing. This was a university area where many middle-class and professional Chinese lived. As one of the earliest Taiwan restaurants established in Beijing, Banmu Yuan attracted the attention of many local media, and its guests included Chinese movie celebrities like Zhang Yimou and Gong Li. By 2007, Banmu Yuan had opened twenty-seven stores in Beijing and Shanghai. It has also opened a store in Maryland and another one in Virginia. Similarly, Yonghe Doujiang and Jiuzhou Niu Rou Mian each have hundreds of chain stores in China. Those immigrants from Taiwan never expected that their modest American restaurant businesses could develop into such huge chains in mainland China.

Zhao Bingsheng met his wife in Beijing. She also came from Taiwan and worked for a Taiwan company there. She had originally planned to stay for three months, but the mar-
riage made her settle down in Beijing. Zhao also invited his aging father to join him in Beijing from Taiwan. It seems that he established a home away from home in Beijing. The global economy and rapid economic growth in China made many Chinese Americans transnational citizens. Their life and work often involved more than one location and culture—America and Taiwan, Hong Kong, or mainland China. The immigrant boom has marked the beginning of the globalization of Chinese communities and food culture.

When Din Tai Fung, Banmu Yuan, and Yonghe Doujiang opened stores in Shanghai, Beijing, and other metropolitan cities in mainland China, authenticity in Chinese food became an even more complex issue in cultural representation. Returning to the birthplace of steamed dumplings, can Din Tai Fung claim its dumplings as authentic Shanghai cuisine? Who represents the best Shanghai dumplings: an internationally famous brand name or a native store a hundred years old? As transnational businesses in China, Din Tai Fung, Banmu Yuan, and Yonghe Doujiang have a culinary identity different from their business identity and status in the United States. In China, they are not struggling ethnic food businesses depending or surviving on cheap prices, ethnic customers, or immigrant or underpaid family labor. Instead, they are brand-name, high-end chain restaurants with international reputations and higher hygiene standards. Many middle-class or professional customers in mainland China prefer them to other local restaurants because of their California and Taiwan background. Their transnational Chineseness did not make their culinary identity marginal in China.

CONCLUSION

Through its fame, Din Tai Fung has established new definitions of what Chinese food is. Though featuring a Shanghai cuisine, it transplanted its dumplings, its flavor, and even its service style from Taiwan. For half a century, Taiwan had no cultural contact with mainland China. Din Tai Fung's Shanghai dumplings and other Chinese regional cuisines in Taiwan were essentially developed according to the collective memory and expectation of what they should be like. Din Tai Fung's authenticity as a Shanghai dumpling house was recognized and defined by customers in Taiwan rather than those in Shanghai. As a result, the food it serves could have gone through subtle or unsubtle changes from its counterparts in China. Such authenticity, though, did not prevent Din Tai Fung from going global as a famous Shanghai-cuisine restaurant. In Din Tai Fung, we see both continuity and discontinuity in Chinese food culture.

Chinese cuisine is now a global food, and Chinese restaurants can be found in almost every city in the United States. New York City and Southern California probably have more options in regional flavors of Chinese cuisine than midsized cities in China. In any metropolitan city or area in the world, there could be a few Chinese restaurants that local customers assume to be more authentic and established than others. Authentic Chinese food, however, consists of a variety of regional cuisines, and the Chinese restaurant market in China is usually translocal. Din Tai Fung and other famous Overseas Chinese restaurants have made a significant contribution to Chinese food history in successfully evolving from translocal to transnational businesses.

As the Chinese restaurant business goes increasingly global, the culinary identity of restaurants like Din Tai Fung, Banmu Yuan, or Yonghe Doujiang has multiple dimensions. It is simultaneously local and national, Taiwanese and Chinese, translocal and transnational. Without being a Shanghai delicacy, steamed dumplings would not have supported a prosperous business in Taiwan, and Din Tai Fung's food would not have attained international fame. Through Din Tai Fung's history, we can see how Chinese diaspora communities have continuously enriched the meaning of Chineseness, making it increasingly difficult to define and interesting to explore. In this historical context, we may conclude that authenticity in Chinese food culture is a flexible validity and a fluid concept.

NOTES

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2. Nanxiang is actually a suburb to the northwest of Shanghai city. In the late nineteenth century, a small restaurant owner, Huang Mingxian, in Nanxiang became famous for his delicious steamed breads and dumplings. Other restaurants in Nanxiang imitated his products, which gradually made the whole town famous for making steamed dumplings. Huang was later invited to open restaurants in Shanghai, and his dumplings became popular throughout the city. Nanxiang Bun Shop in Yu Yuan Park is still a major attraction to both local and tourist customers today.
3. I have not found such a report in the New York Times from 1993
4. The first mention of Canton Restaurant was in Daily Alta California, December 10, 1849.


11. Ibid., 42.

12. Ibid., 34.

13. Ibid., 42.


15. Ibid., 93.

16. Ibid., 8–10.


23. Ibid.


31. Ibid.

32. Tong, “An Honorable House.”


