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Cracking Open Fortune Cookies: A Window into the American Consumer

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There are over forty thousand Chinese restaurants in the United States – more than the number of McDonald’s, KFCs, and Burger Kings combined.¹ This may seem shocking, as chain fast food restaurants seem to be a metonymy for American eating culture. However, in manipulating Chinese food to cater to a consumer base much different than that found in China, Chinese restaurateurs created a seemingly new cuisine that appealed en masse to American residents. Despite economic hardship and hostility towards Chinese immigrants, a flourishing food culture was born in America. In studying the changes made to traditional Chinese food, many aspects about the American consumer are brought to light. In particular, the disparity between the American and Chinese palate, different regional resources, and differing philosophies in China and the US are apparent in the variations present in “American” Chinese food, as exemplified by fortune cookies. Although there are several American Chinese dishes and desserts that differ from those found in China, fortune cookies in particular offer a unique window into the flavor and cultural influences at play that make both fortune cookies and

¹ Lee, J. 8. (2009). *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese food*. New York: Twelve. Pg 9.

Chinese food so ingrained in American culture. The sweet and buttery taste, the messages that reveal a fortune for future success, and the lucky lottery numbers all point towards aspects of American society that have influenced the development of Chinese food in the States. Deep rooted American philosophies such as the “American Dream” and capitalism, as well as selectivity for fried and sweetened foods, have been manifested in the creation of this American cookie and entrenched in American Chinese food culture, begging consideration of American consumerism and analysis of the outside influences conditioning foreign foods brought into the United States.

Although the topic revolves around the role of fortune cookies in Chinese food and America, these cookies are *not even Chinese*. I have been eating Chinese food my entire life, and yet it never occurred to me that the crunchy, vanilla wafers that consistently came with every check had no direct affiliation with Chinese culture. Even the most “authentic,” “hole in the wall” Chinese places served them. How had these cookies become so ingrained in Chinese cuisine in America, and if they were not Chinese, where did they come from? Even this seemingly simple question appears to reveal an enigma. A long, controversial history about the true origins of fortune cookies reveals no concrete answer. One Chinese family from Los Angeles and a Japanese family from San Francisco both claim they invented the cookies.² The Jung family and the Hagiwara family were so stubborn that their case was presented before a judge in a mock trial in the Bay Area in 1983. Although the decision ruled in favor of the San Franciscan Japanese family, the public speculates that an unfair bias of a “hometown advantage” influenced the decision. Ultimately, this case was unsuccessful in determining the cookie’s true

² Harvey, Steve (2008) “L.A., S.F. Won't Like Cookie's Message.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times.

ethnic origins, yet the trial was still significant in that it was made clear that the cookies were American born.

To further delve into the origins of the fortune cookie, one must first understand the history of Chinese food in the United States and why it came about. Chinese food has become a ubiquitous part of American culture, with restaurants permeating every state in the United States. However, Chinese food wasn't always this widespread. Following a long history of institutional racism, mutilation, lynchings, and government efforts to hinder Chinese immigration through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese immigrants struggled to stay afloat in America. Economic hardship in China after the Opium War of 1839 was the impetus for many Chinese families to send members to America in hopes of acquiring wealth to send back to China to ease their fiscal adversity.³ Chinese immigration, however, went beyond the need for money. America was a symbol of liberty from life's constraints, something "higher than monetary prosperity."⁴ In a time where hardship was a way of life, the American Dream of everyone succeeding despite their background was a beacon of light for poor Chinese families, a message of hope in the midst of a crisis. A passage from James Truslow Adams' *Epic of America* clearly elucidates the social appeal of America to those who seek a better life:

The American Dream, that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as a man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.⁵

³Luo, Leo. "The History of Chinese Immigration to the U.S." The History of Chinese Immigration to the U.S. Alterna.

⁴Ibid.

⁵ Adams, J. T. (1931). *The Epic of America*. Boston: Little Brown.

This idea that anyone in America could become successful was very different than Chinese society at the time, where China's economy severely restricted social mobility and status to the elite government officials.⁶ The opportunity to rebuild one's life in the United States, both socially and economically, was full of promise for struggling families in China, especially after news of the California Gold Rush in the mid 1800's broke, bragging to the world the infinite riches of the States. However, with limited English and harsh job competition with Americans and European immigrants, working class Chinese immigrants had little choice but to work in restaurants and laundry services, roles that were traditionally reserved for women⁷ and thus had minimal disturbance in the employment scene.

These early Chinese restaurants were originally made to serve other Chinese customers, thus the food's original, distinct flavors and ingredients were initially largely preserved. In efforts for their businesses to survive in the hostile economic and social environment, Chinese restaurateurs created new dishes and changed old ones to appeal to American tastes. To stay afloat, "Chinese cuisine took an American influence to make a business out of it. [...] If you give them real authentic Chinese cuisine, Americans can't accept it."⁸ Because of changes made to the cuisine, the popularity of Chinese food in the US began to skyrocket. During World War II, San Francisco became a busy area for soldiers and sailors to get their American Chinese food fix, with classic Americanized dishes such as chop suey, chow mein, egg foo yong, and fortune cookies.⁹ These servicemen were then so used to having fortune cookies as a part of their Chinese dining experience that they began demanding for their presence in Chinese restaurants

⁶Chen, Hongsheng, Xingping Wang, Guo Chen, and Zhigang Li. (2018). "Upward Social Mobility in China: Do Cities and Neighbourhoods Matter?" Habitat International. Pergamon.

⁷ Lee, J. 8. (2009). *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese food*. New York: Twelve. Pg 57.

⁸ Ibid, pg 83.

⁹Ibid, pg 41.

when they returned home in the Midwest and the East Coast. Just ten years later, fortune cookies had become so widespread that Americans were consuming 250 million fortune cookies a year.¹⁰ Fortune cookies quickly became a staple of American Chinese food, an American addition to Chinese cuisine that clearly appealed to the American consumer.

If these fortune cookies were American, why had they become such a well-known aspect of Chinese cuisine? One can even go so far as to say that fortune cookies are particularly *not* Chinese. Not only do most Chinese meals not include dessert,¹¹ the desserts they traditionally offer use little sugar and fat, instead relying upon “red bean and lotus, peanut and sesame, soy and almond”¹² for desserts that are more savory than typical Western sweets. In contrast, in 100 grams of cookie, there are 45.4 grams of sugar and 2.7 grams of fat.¹³ The crispy, sweet cookie is unlike anything found in Chinese desserts. This points towards a disparity in the American and Chinese palate. Through more research, it is evident that fortune cookies are just one way in which Chinese food was marketed differently towards American consumers to appeal to their palate. Jennifer Lee, an American-born Chinese writer, points out several differences in American taste that hints toward a stubbornness of the American palate as intolerant of foods that differ from the norm. For example, Lee declares that among other restrictions, mainstream Americans would not eat anything with appendages or extremities (no tongue, feet, claws, or ears), anything not opaque (no jellyfish or sea cucumber), anything rubbery or gelatinous (fungus and tripe), anything outside of the range of an acceptable color palate (nothing too black or

¹⁰ Lee, J. 8. (2009). *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese food*. New York: Twelve. Pg 41.

¹¹Dunlop, Fuchsia. (2019). “The Art of the Chinese Dessert.” Financial Times. Financial Times.

¹² Lee, J. 8. (2009). *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese food*. New York: Twelve. Pg 40.

¹³“Nutritional Information, Diet Info and Calories in Fortune Cookie.” Calories in Fortune Cookie - Nutritional Information and Diet Info. fitbit.

white), and, finally, any food that entails chewing and then spitting out inedible parts (no chicken feet, fish with bones, or shrimp with shells).¹⁴ Instead, the average American opts for things more predictable and “safe,” such as fried, salty, or sweetened foods. This shift is seen in many American-born Chinese dishes, such as chop suey and General Tso’s chicken, where fried meat and starch thickened sauce are used to enhance a salty dressing. The fortune cookie masterfully combines the sweet and fried, with a predictable, consistent vanilla flavor that is sugary yet buttery at the same time. Chinese workers were able to use this knowledge of the American palate and adapt a signature, American-born dessert that perfectly tops off a large and hearty Chinese meal.

There are countless other examples of foreign foods introduced into America that show a similar trend of changing the flavor or production to better suit the American palate. Jane Fajans discusses the change of the acai berry as it migrated from the Amazon in Brazil to America. In Brazil, these small, dark berries are used for a wide range of purposes, from aiding in the treatment of digestive problems and skin problems to serving as a healthy, lightly sweet snack or juice.¹⁵ As increased demand for acai production skyrocketed due to a large market for health foods in the United States, issues with large scale agriculture and manufacturing led to a decrease in quality and availability for those local to the region.¹⁶ In the United States, the highly nutritive berry became a popular “superfood” to be included in granola bowls, energy drinks, and sorbets, the perfect new, exotic fad that appealed to the American craze for health and longevity. However, these American adaptations of the Brazilian fruit make Amazonian acai consumers

¹⁴Lee, J. 8. (2009). *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese food*. New York: Twelve. Pg 75-76

¹⁵Jane Fajans (2012) Açai: From the Amazon to the World. In *Brazilian Food: Race, Class and Identity in Regional Cuisines*, pp. 57-72. London: Berg Press. Pg 58.

¹⁶Ibid, pg 61.

feel that they are “‘inappropriate’ ways that ‘disrespect’ the local value of the food.”¹⁷ A parallel can be drawn with Chinese food in America; mass production and a reconfigured menu calls into question the authenticity of Chinese food and the consequences of quality that come with such large production. The result of this differentiation is, in a sense, a creation of a new food: American acai and American Chinese food versus Amazonian Acai and original Chinese food. As Fajans exclaims, acai is essentially two different foods now: “the local ingredient that has historic and mythic properties and represents an embodied rootedness in the local environment; and the exported fruit is viewed as a superfood and miracle drug, its food properties greatly undervalued.”¹⁸ Likewise, the changes imposed upon Chinese food in the US have essentially split the cuisine into two, with a very clear divide shown with fortune cookies, which are all but nonexistent in China. Clearly, fortune cookies are not special in a longstanding history of Americanization of imported foods. The emphasis of palatability over edibility has a definite impact on foods that enter from outside and which are then subject to American palates.

The extent of this impact brings into question the authenticity of foreign foods in the US and the implications of this authenticity on those a part of this food culture. It certainly makes sense that an altered, American version of Chinese food exists, given that many of Chinese restaurateurs are themselves American. Perhaps the lines between “Chinese” and “American” has been blurred by the integration of the cuisine into American culture. As Richard Wilk argues in his paper “Real Belizean Food: Building Local Identity in the Transnational Caribbean,” a culture’s food is a “potent symbol of personal and group identity,” yet as the “diets, recipes, and cuisines are in a constant state of flux”, this sense of identity remains constant, if not forged into

¹⁷ Jane Fajans (2012) *Açai: From the Amazon to the World*. In *Brazilian Food: Race, Class and Identity in Regional Cuisines*, pp. 57-72. London: Berg Press. Pg 64.

¹⁸Ibid, pg 69.

something stronger than it was before.¹⁹ From a flourishing Chinese food culture in America, I argue that there is not necessarily a loss in authenticity of the food itself, but rather, a creative rendition that offers new flavors to a more Western audience, and through these flavors, a taste of Chinese culture itself. Tommy Wong, one of four Wong brothers owning Trey Yuen, a Cajun Chinese restaurant in Louisiana, serves alligator meat in one of his dishes. He claims that “Chinese cooking is not a set of dishes. It is a philosophy that serves local tastes and ingredients.”²⁰ Perhaps the fact that Chinese food has so naturally adapted to the new American environment attests to its strength as a trans-national cuisine and culture – that despite radically different environments and ingredients, the Chinese culture stemming from these foods remains very strong, just as Wilk argues. While the Chinese have greatly influenced American tastes, I also argue the converse: that American culture and palate have influenced the Chinese people themselves, conditioning the creation of this new cuisine that suits the Chinese-American identity.

Fortune cookies are certainly a feature of this newly created Chinese-American cuisine, but aside from palatability, fortune cookies present distinctly American features that reveal a deeper appeal than simply taste. Perhaps the most interesting part about the cookie is its unique feature: the mysterious fortune enclosed within its crispy exterior. Breaking open this edible treasure chest reveals a message meant to uplift or indicate a direction the reader’s life will take. Typical sayings include “Good things take time,” “Don’t confuse recklessness with confidence,” and “Success will come to you soon.”²¹ Messages are usually wise, pithy guidelines for a

¹⁹ Rick Wilk (1999) “Real Belizean Food”: Building Local Identity in the Transnational Caribbean. *American Anthropologist* 101(2): 244-255. Pg 244.

²⁰ Lee, J. 8. (2009). *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese food*. New York: Twelve. Pg 22

²¹ Dutta, Soma. (2016). “25 Most Common Fortune Cookie Sayings.” Insider Monkey.

successful life or compliments that instill confidence in the reader. A combination of vagueness and the randomness of arbitrarily picking a cookie to open may make the fortunes seem silly or meaningless, yet fortune cookies are so widespread that I find this unconvincing. With some 3 billion²² fortune cookies made every year, there must be something about these cookies that appeals to millions of Americans enough to create a profitable market. The ubiquity of fortune cookies may highlight how positive experiences are central to American ideas of food and dining. The positivity and emphasis of success point toward a deep-rooted societal need for both reassurance and a quest to pursue a greater quality of life, be it through bettering relationships, acquiring more wealth, or living a happier life.

This deep-rooted American desire for success stems from (or, rather, is explained by) the aforementioned *Epic of America*, in which James Truslow Adams creates a foundation for the “American Dream.” The appeal in fortune cookie messages comes from the relationship between the fortunes and an inherent American value of success and happiness. These values utilized by fortune cookies are strongly tied to Adams’s passionate words of American wisdom that America is “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”²³ In interweaving threads of the American Dream into fortunes, Chinese fortune cookie manufacturers are able to appeal to Americans on an intellectual and emotional level. In essence, fortune cookies act in the same way that millions of motivational books do, but in addition to content that connects the reader with American values of personal growth, their catchy phrases, concise messages, and a vagueness that could apply any piece of advice to just about anyone, makes these cookies

²²Lee, Jennifer 8. (2008). “The Fortune Cookie’s Origin: Solving a Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery Inside a Cookie.” The New York Times. The New York Times.

²³ Adams, J. T. (1931). *The Epic of America*. Boston: Little Brown.

ubiquitous. One man named Mike Moskowitz, an avid fortune collector and inventor of an album designed to hold fortune cookies, brings to light an important aspect about the nature of the fortune cookies messages. He states that the short message is important because “if you could get one line of a piece of advice, then you can carry that one sentence or phrase with you when you have to confront split second decision making.”²⁴ And, reflecting on this statement, I myself have found this to be true. While the fortunes may be random, something about opening the cookie myself makes it feel personal. Why else would I have saved a fortune reading “If you wish to see the best in others, show the best of yourself” for several years? In finding a fortune I resonate with, I now have a short, distilled version of an important value that I can readily call to mind.

The constant outflow of positivity from the fortune cookies highlights yet another cultural difference between Chinese and American philosophies. When an American researcher told a Chinese man that fortunes were all positive, he replied with: “That’s unimaginable! Fortunes have to be good as well as bad. [...] Life isn’t all happy. You have to have bad messages and bad fortunes because that is how you change course to save yourself.”²⁵ This follows from the cultural practice where parents “criticize [their] children to make them better. [...] Here, you have to affirm your children’s self esteem.”²⁶ This Chinese philosophy of critique as a form of constructive feedback is much different from the American messages that appear on the fortune cookies. As highlighted, fortune cookies have nothing to do with old Chinese proverbs. Instead, the messages are “Western wisdom recycled for an American audience. The Chinese are just the

²⁴Lee, J. 8. (2009). *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese food*. New York: Twelve. Pg 278

²⁵Ibid, pg 285.

²⁶Ibid, pg 289.

middlemen.”²⁷ Such is the reason that fortune cookies have taken off in the United States but barely have a foothold in China and Japan: the cultural backing and appeal of the fortunes is distinctly American, making them special to the US and perhaps less meaningful for those countries in which constant affirmation is ingenuine and not as much a part of their culture.

Another very particularly American aspect of fortune cookies is the lottery numbers printed on the back of the fortune’s message. After an unprecedented 110 people won a share of the lottery instead of the expected 3.7, suspicious lottery companies began to investigate. The same story was told over and over again: “[I got it] from a fortune cookie.”²⁸ A fortune cookie had changed the life of 110, perfectly average Americans. To me, this is a strong testament to the direct association of fortune cookies with the American Dream; these lottery numbers and fortune messages encourage the idea, and make possible, that even the most average American can become successful. Upward mobility and success are so integral in American society that people are willing to play the lucky numbers. The lottery tickets and the fortune cookies both “represent hope – a better life.’ [...] If you believe in the potential of the lucky number, in the upbeat fortune, you will be happier. It’s a little bit of optimism packaged inside a wafer, an American import.”²⁹ Purchasing a ticket is an escapist pleasure, a “cheap permission to daydream”³⁰ about improving life by acquiring material goods. Playing the numbers given on the cookie is akin to a leap of faith, a trust that there is more truth to the cookies than a “silly” message written on it. While the cookie appeals to the palate in the mouth, the message appeals

²⁷Ibid, pg 291.

²⁸Lee, J. 8 (2009). *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese food*. New York: Twelve. Pg 7.

²⁹Ibid, pg 239.

³⁰Lehrer, Jonah (2017) “The Psychology Of Lotteries.” Wired. Conde Nast.

to the palate of the mind, giving consumers the ability to taste their most ambitious dreams by creating hope for a better life.

It is ironic that fortune cookies present so many aspects of the American dream yet they are served in Chinese restaurants, which arose from Chinese immigrants that had far less than a dream-like experience in the United States. As is described by Lee, “Death is only the lowest point in what is almost universally the miserable existence of a Chinese restaurant worker. [...] ‘What choice do we have when we don’t speak English?’ They are treated like farm animals or machines. Their purpose is simply to feed Americans.”³¹ What is a miserable working experience of a Chinese food worker is a tasty meal to the American consumer. Americans hold a privilege of choice to have such diverse cuisines to eat and experience, yet we don’t understand or acknowledge the consequences that come with this enjoyment. Van Esterick touches on this topic in his paper “From Hunger to Heritage Foods: Challenges to Food Localization in Lao PDR.” Van Esterick focuses on Lao river algae, a food that local residents use as a “hunger food,” or a food that acts as an insurance against food shortages. While “Lao farmers use these products as part of their seasonal subsistence strategies and as insurance against crop failure,” “North American chefs use them to experiment with new taste combinations and perhaps to attract new admirers,”³² and the export of the river algae has the potential to destroy what scarce amount the locals depend on. Americans have turned this hunger food into an upscale restaurant commodity, without realizing the effects this has on the Lao community or the disparity in meaning for the two cultures. Likewise, fetishization of Chinese food leads to a large gap

³¹Lee, J. 8. (2009). *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese food*. New York: Twelve. Pg 156.

³² Penny Van Esterik (2006) From Hunger Foods to Heritage Foods: Challenges to Food Localization in Lao PDR. In *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System*. Richard Wilk, ed. London: Berg. Pp. 83-96.

between the consumers and the creators of Chinese food. A heaping plate of food arrives without any hint of the hardships historically endured by Chinese immigrants; instead, a fortune cookie comes to remind Americans of their fortune and good comings, while the workers continue to suffer.

A similar story comes from the rise of sushi's popularity in the United States. Like the exclusion of Chinese immigrants in 1882, Japanese immigrants were subject to institutional racism with Roosevelt's enactment of internment camps to protect national security following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.³³ 117,000 people of Japanese descent, two-thirds of whom were native-born citizens of the United States, were forced into these prison camps for two and a half years.³⁴ Yet somehow this gap between the Japanese and American populations was ultimately surmounted, with Japanese cuisine entering the food scene and now totalling \$21.8 billion in the US market alone.³⁵ While the idea of eating raw fish seemed initially unpalatable to an American audience, it is now a sign of class and educational standing.³⁶ Much like the fortune cookie appeal to consumerism, so too has sushi been able to enter markets that have no direct correlation to food, such as sushi lip gloss and wasabi colored nail polish.³⁷ Also like the trend seen in the modification of Chinese food, several changes were made in Japanese cuisine to mold to an American audience. Sushi rolls in the US are much more elaborate and depend upon many ingredients aside from fish, while "authentic" Japanese sushi is much more simple, as chefs "prefer not to hide the flavors in rolls dripping with condiments and mixed vegetables."³⁸

³³ "Japanese Relocation During World War II." (2017). National Archives. National Archives and Records Administration.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Industry Market Research, Reports, and Statistics." IBISWorld. IBISWorld.

³⁶ Ted Bestor (2000) How Sushi Went Global. Foreign Policy 121: 54-63. Pg 56.

³⁷ Ibid, pg 57.

³⁸ "The Difference Between Authentic Japanese Sushi and Sushi Around the World." (2013) The Sushi FAQ. Sushi FAQ.

Examples of American sushi rolls include crunchy tempura rolls, California rolls, and Philadelphia rolls, all of which source cheaper ingredients from popular American staples such as avocado and cream cheese. The cuisines of Japan and China were both initially rejected in the US, and so too were their people. The food these immigrants brought with them can be seen as a national symbol of their country, and as this food became more integrated into American society, so did the people that share the same origins.

Fortune cookies represent an important example of how American eaters influence the foods that are introduced into the country. Fortune cookies are a quintessential example of a displaced food culture – it is a popular dessert that is now a metonymy of Chinese food in America and other parts of the world. While people may lament how Chinese food changed to cater towards an American audience, I argue that the “new” Chinese food, as exemplified by fortune cookies, represents a cultural shift that reflects the dynamic and necessarily fluid meaning of community and culture. Perhaps the integration of Chinese food in America can be seen as a proxy for the integration of the entire culture of people – from rejection of Chinese immigrants and food to the cuisine and culture becoming a large sector of the American identity. As such, in studying fortune cookies and “Americanized” Chinese food, not only can aspects of the American consumer be highlighted, but also what it means to be American. Fortune cookies serve as a reminder of the foundations of American philosophies laid down by James Truslow Adams, an example of the kinds of sweet, fatty foods that appeal to a Western palate, as well as a warning to pay close attention to where our food is coming from, and how the people that make this food, came to be there. Fortune cookies are sweet and crispy, yet their complex history and notions of culture leave food for thought that calls for a much longer time to digest.

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