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## "Safe Treyf"

### New York Jews and Chinese Food

By Gaye Tuchman and Harry G. Levine

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*"The concept of culture I espouse ... is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of laws, but an interpretive one in search of meaning." -- Clifford Geertz*

American sociologists and historians have long recognized that ethnic culture and identity have been created rather than inherited. People in traditional societies identified themselves by tribe, village, or region. In modern America, immigrants and their children were defined by others as an ethnic or national group, and usually came to define themselves that way as well.<sup>1</sup> Further, as Glazer and Moynihan pointed out in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, the process of cultural invention did not stop with the first generation:

"One could not predict from its first arrival what it might become or, indeed, whom it might contain.... In the second generation, and even more fully in the third generation, [ethnic groups] are continually recreated by new experiences in America." (P.5)

Glazer and Moynihan's flawed but perceptive study pointed out that in New York, and a number of other large cities, *the melting pot did not happen*.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the children and grand-children of immigrants retained and continually reshaped their ethnic cultures and identities.

Ethnic groups usually form their customs and practices from elements of their traditional cultures such as language, religion, wedding and funeral ceremonies, home

decorations, dress, music and food. As a result, specific ethnic cultural patterns often appear to be the "natural," inevitable, or only possible products of the traditional culture. Over time, it becomes harder for both outsiders and participants to recognize the created character of ethnicity.

In this article we explore the internal logic of ethnic cultural invention by delving into an unusual but by no means unique case: an American ethnic group that has incorporated into its culture an utterly alien practice -- something completely beyond the bounds of its traditional culture. We examine the way that Jews who immigrated from Eastern Europe to New York City, and especially their children and grandchildren, have incorporated Chinese restaurant food into their new Jewish-American culture. Indeed, New York Jews love Chinese restaurant food so much that they have made it a second cuisine.

Diverse observers have called attention to the phenomenon. A long line of Jewish "borscht belt" hotel comedians, from Buddy Hackett to Jackie Mason, created routines about Jews and Chinese food. *The New York Times* food writer Mimi Sheraton has pointed out that "the longstanding love affair Jews have had with Chinese food (particularly the slightly over cooked, mild-flavored Cantonese specialties) was a well-known fact of the restaurant business in Flatbush fifty years ago." The preface to *Mishpokhe*, a book about Jewish cousins' clubs, observes that "Jewish neighborhoods in New York and Chicago are often notable for having a large number of Chinese restaurants."

Chinese restaurateurs concur. Successful Chinese restaurant owners on the upper- west side of Manhattan and in Chinatown told us that the Jewish love of Chinese food was well known in the Chinese restaurant business. One friend who married into a large Jewish family told us his favorite joke: "According to the Jewish calendar, the year is 5749. According to the Chinese calendar, the year is 4687. That means for 1,062 years, the Jews went without Chinese food." The observations capture an important sociological truth: "Eating Chinese" is part of Jewish culture in New York City.<sup>3</sup>

How did this happen? How did Eastern European Jews in New York City come to adopt Chinese restaurant food? In their 2,000 years of migration, the Jews had previously adapted to very different culinary styles. But why in New York did Polish, Russian, Romanian, and Lithuanian Jews take to Chinese restaurant food over any other cuisine, including often their own?

Jews certainly like Chinese food for the same reasons given by people all over the world: it is available, delicious, and relatively inexpensive. Chinese restaurants are popular in Korea and Japan where they are cheaper than the native restaurant food.

Chinese immigrants run restaurants in Bombay, Sydney, London, Paris, and Havana. As 6-year old Ethan says, "The Chinese are good cooks." The Chinese have, in fact, developed a brilliant cuisine -- an outstanding cultural invention rich with regional variation. It's basic elements are over four thousand years old -- older even than Jews.

In short, quality, price, and proximity are some of the reasons why Chinese food became so important to New York Jews. But good-tasting, nearby, and economical food appeals to anyone who eats out. There was certainly other restaurant food in New York City for Jews to eat, including their own Eastern European foods. Why instead did they take so thoroughly to Chinese food?

Without an appreciation of the "webs of significance" and meaning that New York Jews have used to interpret Chinese food, their passion for this fare seems incomprehensible.<sup>4</sup> Like other enduring cultural patterns, the Jewish attachment to Chinese food has been caused by many things -- it has been "over-determined." However surprising, it is also intelligible.

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## THE MEANINGS OF CHINESE FOOD FOR NEW YORK JEWS

Our explanation of the attachment of New York Jews to Chinese food is rooted in the anthropological and sociological understanding that people assign great meaning and importance to cuisine and foodways. Everyone must eat, but the meanings of what, where, how, when, and with whom they eat are cultural inventions. In America, the food of one's ethnic group symbolizes tradition and community.

Over the years, New York Jews have found in Chinese restaurant food a flexible open symbol, a kind of blank screen on which they have projected a series of themes relating to their identity as modern Jews and as New Yorkers. These themes were not inherent in the food itself, nor did they arise from Chinese Americans' view of their own cuisine. Rather, Jewish New Yorkers, and to some extent other Americans as well, linked these cultural themes with eating in Chinese restaurants.

Three themes predominate. First, Chinese food is unkosher and therefore non-Jewish. But because of the specific ways that Chinese food is prepared and served, immigrant Jews and their children found Chinese food to be more attractive and less threatening than other non-Jewish or *treyf* food. Chinese food was what we term "*safe treyf*." Chinese restaurant food used some ingredients that were familiar to Eastern European Jews. Chinese cuisine also does not mix milk and meat; indeed it doesn't use dairy products at all. In addition, anti-Semitism, anti-Chinese racism, and the low

position of the Chinese in American society also (perhaps paradoxically) made Jews feel safe and comfortable in Chinese restaurants.

Second, Jews construed Chinese restaurant food as cosmopolitan. For Jews in New York, eating in Chinese restaurants signified that one was not a provincial or parochial Eastern European Jew, not a "greenhorn" or hick. In New York City, immigrant Jews, and especially their children and grand-children, regarded Chinese food as sophisticated and urbane.

Third, by the second and third generation, Jews identified eating this kind of non-Jewish food -- Chinese restaurant food -- as something that modern American Jews, and especially New York Jews, did together. "Eating Chinese" became a New York Jewish custom, a part of daily life and self-identity for millions of New York Jews.

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#### CHINESE, ITALIANS, AND JEWS IN LOWER MANHATTAN: From 1870 to 1940

Jews encountered Chinese food in the streets of lower Manhattan. Cantonese Chinese, Eastern European Jews, and Southern Italians all came to New York at about the same time -- between 1880 and 1920 -- and settled on the Lower East Side where their neighborhoods abutted one another. By 1910, about 1 million Eastern European Jews and 500,000 Italians lived in New York. The Jews constituted over one quarter of the city's population and the Italians about one sixth. There were many fewer Chinese -- about 7,000 by 1900.

Most of the Chinese came to New York from California after the 1880s. The Chinese exclusion acts, anti-Chinese riots, and other forms of racism forced immigrant Chinese to look for ways of making a living that did not place them in direct competition with whites. Many Chinese went into the restaurant business. The growing number of restaurants then needed to attract more non-Chinese customers in order to stay in business, and Chinese chefs tailored their dishes and menus for Americans.

In lower Manhattan, immigrant Jews opened delicatessens for other Jews, Italians ran restaurants for other Italians, and Germans had many places serving primarily Germans. But Chinese restaurants welcomed everyone. As a result, even in the 1890s both Jews and Italians usually felt more at home in Chinese restaurants than they did in each other's eateries.

Any immigrant family *could* eat at Chinese restaurants. But the experiences of our informants support the conclusion that as a group Eastern European Jews ate at

Chinese restaurants more often than other immigrants who came to New York at roughly the same time. Jews certainly ate more Chinese food than did the next largest group of immigrants, southern Italians. The very poorest Jews and Italians rarely if ever ate out, but first- and second-generation Jews ate out more often than did Italians of the same social class. When Italians did dine out, they usually went to Italian restaurants.

Jews and Italians took to restaurants differently because they came from different cultures, had different experiences before immigrating, and came to America for different reasons. Many Italians intended to work here for only a while. By 1920, more had returned to Italy than remained in the United States. Jews, however, had lived in various European countries as increasingly unwelcome and segregated strangers.<sup>5</sup> They had fled discrimination and pogroms as well as poverty. Most of them believed they had no choice but to make their home here. In addition, because a higher proportion of Jews than Italians had lived in cities before immigrating, they were more likely to be literate in at least one language. As a result, the Jews were not only more motivated to explore and adapt to their new urban environment, more of them possessed skills with which to do so.

Jews also appear to have been less attached to their food specialties than Italians were to theirs. Our Italian American informants ate and praised Italian food more than our Jewish informants ate and praised Eastern European Jewish food. The Jewish informants also tended to denigrate their ethnic restaurant food more than the Italian Americans did theirs. Some people we interviewed suggested that Jewish Americans actually may have had more gastronomical reason than Italian Americans to look beyond their own ethnic restaurants. Compared to Italian restaurant food, they observed, Eastern European Jewish restaurant food seems undeveloped. American Jews have never evolved what we might call a fancy tablecloth style of restaurant serving Eastern European food. The gourmet delicatessen with formica tables -- New York's Carnegie Deli, for example -- likely represents the pinnacle of the American Jewish ethnic restaurant. The growing number of Continental-style kosher restaurants in the New York area also testifies to the willingness of Eastern European Jews to abandon their traditional cuisine.

Today many Jews show more enthusiasm for Chinese restaurant food than for Eastern-European-style Jewish food. Women and men now in their late 60s and 70s stressed that they did not want to eat delicatessen very often because, as one 67-year-old secretary put it, "That we could eat at home." Frequently they choose to eat at a Chinese restaurant. A number of third-generation Jews spontaneously told us the same thing: "The first restaurant I ever went to was Chinese." We never found an Italian American who said that.

Jews looking for nearby, inexpensive restaurants could have patronized the Italians' places, but they faced obstacles. First, like Jewish delis, Italian restaurants did not as a rule seek out the patronage of people from other ethnic groups.

Second, because of competition for jobs, the anti-Semitic teachings of 19th-century Catholicism, Jewish distrust of European gentiles, and parental fears of intermarriage, Jews and Italians tended to be wary of each other.

Third, Southern Italian neighborhoods and restaurants frequently displayed Christian images. The crucifixes and pictures of Jesus, Mary, and the saints certainly made many Jews feel uneasy. However foreign Chinese restaurants were, the decorations were *non-Christian*: they did not raise the issue of Jews' marginal position in a Christian society.

As a result, for at least the first three decades of the 20th century, immigrant Jews and their children felt far more comfortable in Chinese restaurants than they did in Italian ones.<sup>6</sup>

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## SAFE TREYF

The Eastern European Jews did not immigrate as one people. They thought of themselves as Russian Jews, Polish Jews, Lithuanian Jews, Hungarian Jews, or Rumanian Jews. After fleeing Eastern Europe and arriving in the United States, many of these diverse Jews and their children also continued to flee from the parochialism of the *shtetl* and ghetto cultures they had brought with them. Jewish immigrants, and especially their children and grandchildren, were open to new secular and cultural experiences. Many were anxious to prove that they could behave in "un-Jewish" ways.

The British historian Raymond Williams pointed out that a culture spawns the terms of its own rejection. Rebels can disavow the strictures of a food-oriented culture by eating forbidden food. But a food-oriented rebellion cannot be accomplished with just any forbidden substance. It cannot be food that looks so like prohibited fare that it automatically triggers revulsion, nor can it be food that requires some expertise to eat (such as a whole lobster).

Wherever religious Jews had lived, kosher food was an elaboration of three dietary regulations derived from Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy: Do not eat "unclean" animals and fish; do not inhumanely slaughter animals; and do not mix milk

and meat. Eastern European Jews, whether religious or not, had been powerfully socialized in their dietary customs.

As a result, many immigrant, second-, and even third-generation Jews in America found it difficult to break away from these taboos, especially the bans against mixing meat with milk and against eating pork and shellfish. Jews yearning to be cosmopolitan might have dined anywhere in New York, but the restaurant food of other European groups did not mesh easily with the Jews' deeply ingrained culinary aesthetics.

At first glance, Chinese food also seems an unlikely choice for Eastern European Jews: Chinese cooking does incorporate pork, shrimp, lobster, and other forbidden items. Nonetheless, because of several distinctive characteristics of Chinese cuisine, Chinese food was actually unusually well suited for use by New York Jews seeking to demonstrate independence from the orthodoxies of traditional Eastern European Judaism. Chinese food was *safe treyf*.

As people we spoke with were quick to point out, Chinese cooking disguises the tabooed ingredients by cutting, chopping, and mincing them. Ancient Chinese texts refer to cooking itself as *ko p'eng* -- 'to cut and cook.'" Chinese food could be adopted by rebellious Jews because the forbidden substances were so disguised that dishes did not reflexively repulse and so undermine their ability to rebel.

Many of the Jews we interviewed appreciated this disguise. Several reported what was certainly a very common experience. They loved to eat egg rolls in Chinese restaurants because the pork and seafood tasted delicious, but were so minced that they could pretend these ingredients were not there. One middle-aged man said that when he thought he had pork in his mouth he instantly got a headache, but when he swallowed it the headache just as quickly disappeared. A woman in her forties recalled dining regularly as a child with her sister, mother, and grandmother: the girls ate spare ribs and sweet and sour pork, mother did not eat pork, and grandma pretended not to know *treyf* was on the table. One woman even reported that in the 1950s her aunt had three sets of dishes: one set for dairy meals, another for meat meals (as is traditional in kosher homes), and paper plates and plastic cutlery exclusively for take-out Chinese food.

Further, even non-religious or anti-religious first and second generation Jews had never eaten milk products with meat. Meat cooked with cheese was not simply unfamiliar to Jews, it was repulsive. German, Italian, French and other European cuisines do cook cheese and milk with meat. Chinese cuisine was therefore unusually well suited to Jewish tastes because, unlike virtually any other cuisine available in

America, traditional Chinese cooking does not use any milk products whatsoever. As anthropologist Marvin Harris pointed out, the Chinese, along with many other peoples from Asia, found milk by itself repulsive. (Chinese exchange students have sometimes boasted of their acclimation to American culture by noting they had learned to eat ice cream.)

Chinese cuisine also had gastronomic resonance for Jews. Both cultures favored chicken recipes and, as Mimi Sheraton notes, shared a preference for dishes seasoned with garlic, celery, and onions. The Cantonese restaurants frequently overcooked the vegetables somewhat -- just the way Eastern European Jews liked them. Jews could order sweet and sour dishes, vaguely reminiscent of their own sweet and sour tongue. They could order the ubiquitous Jewish cure-all -- chicken soup -- with either rice or *kreplach* (wontons). Jews were not beer or cocktail drinkers, and their religion had taught them to view wine as sacramental. But Eastern European Jews were used to drinking tea without milk, and Chinese restaurants always placed a steaming tea pot on the table. When drinking tea in Chinese restaurants, some Jews followed their traditional patterns: after the meal they requested a fresh pot and drank tea with lots of sugar.

Anti-Chinese racism also facilitated Jewish adoption of Chinese restaurants. In the process of adapting themselves to New York and American culture, some Jews absorbed disdain for the Chinese. People who were labeled "*kikes*" and "*sheenies*" learned to refer to Chinese Americans as "*chinks*." Two of our informants, whose mothers used to say "Let's go eat at Chinks," did not discover until adolescence or later that "*chinks*" was a disparaging and contemptuous term. They had thought that it simply referred to a kind of restaurant. A few people even insisted that their parents, who had learned their English on the streets, had not known that *chinks* was a racist epithet.

Philip Roth used Alex Portnoy to talk about the sometimes strange psychological consequences of living at the interstices of American racial and ethnic stratification. Portnoy suggested that eating in Chinese restaurants enabled his family to deny their lowly status in an anti-Semitic society by participating in the prejudice against an even more lowly group. Recall the monologue:

"Why we can eat pig on Pell Street and not at home is because ... frankly I still haven't got the whole thing figured out, but at the time I believed that it has largely to do with the fact that the elderly man who owns the place, and whom amongst ourselves we call "Shmendrick," isn't somebody whose opinion of us we have cause to worry about. Yes, the only people in the world whom it seems to me the Jews are not afraid of are the Chinese. Because one, the way they speak English makes my father sound like Lord Chesterfield; two, the insides of their

heads are just so much fried rice anyway; and three, to them we are not Jews but white and maybe even Anglo Saxon. No wonder they can't intimidate us. To them we're just some big-nosed variety of WASP." (p. 90)

We think Roth is right: American racism also helped Jews feel safe in Chinese restaurants. And once there, they sometimes behaved very badly. One doctor we interviewed recalled a childhood incident from the 1950s where her uncle repeatedly mimicked the Chinese waiter's accent to his face. Jewish Borscht Belt comedians and their fans also made insulting jokes about Chinese restaurants and accents -- especially about the Chinese difficulty with the "r" sound, including the ubiquitous line about ordering "flied lice."

This sort of contempt was by no means universal, as indicated by the doctor's embarrassment at her uncle's behavior. Most of the people we interviewed (not a random sample) grew up in families that regarded it as unacceptable to ever make derogatory or racist comments about the Chinese. Some said that as children they had never heard the Chinese referred to as Chinks, even in passing. But lots of Jews (and other ethnic New Yorkers) clearly did hear the Chinese referred to that way. And Jewish comedians, such as Buddy Hackett, even told their Chinese accent jokes on national television.

In short, the chopped-up *treyf*, the lack of any milk, the use of some familiar ingredients, the use of tea without milk, the low position of the Chinese in American society and the fact that they were not Christians, and perhaps even other factors such as the formality of Chinese manners, made Chinese restaurants and their food feel safe for Jews. Chinese food was *safe trey*

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## BECOMING COSMOPOLITAN

Jews felt secure in Chinese restaurants, but they were also drawn to these places for non-culinary reasons. Of all the peoples whom immigrant Jews and their children met, of all the foods they encountered in America, the Chinese were the most foreign, the most "un-Jewish." Yet Jews defined this particular foreignness not as forbidding but as appealing, attractive, and desirable. They viewed Chinese restaurants and food as exotic and cosmopolitan and therefore as good. Indeed, many Jews saw eating in Chinese restaurants as an antidote for Jewish parochialism, for the exclusive and overweening emphasis on the culture of the Jews as it had been.

People now in their seventies as well as those in their forties repeatedly used the word "sophisticated" to describe their early feelings about Chinese food. Many of these Jews felt that eating in this distinctively "un-Jewish" way showed that they were at least somewhat sophisticated, urbane New Yorkers. A number of the New York Jews we interviewed recalled their childhood awe in Chinese restaurants. As one man reared in Queens said, "I felt about Chinese restaurants the same way I did about the Metropolitan Museum of Art -- they were the two most strange and fascinating places my parents took me to, and I loved them both."

Chinese restaurants used exotic decorations, unusual wallpaper or paintings, lanterns, plates with foreign designs, and chopsticks. The Chinese waiters spoke a strange-sounding language and were of a different race. The entrees bore fantastic names: chow mein, moo goo gai pan, egg foo young, wonton soup. If, as cosmopolitans claimed, experiencing exotic food was broadening, then Chinese food was as far out as a would-be cultural explorer could get.

Jews are not the only people who have associated Chinese food with sophistication and escape from provincialism. One man reared in a small town outside of Seattle, Washington recalled that in the 1950s when his high school friends wanted to show that they were "artsy" or sophisticated, they would go to Seattle to a Chinese restaurant and then perhaps to a foreign movie with subtitles. In a monologue on his "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show, Garrison Keillor told of his beloved high school teacher who once visited New York City, an unusual vacation for someone from Lake Wobegon. The man returned with a Playbill from a Broadway show and a huge, red menu from a Chinese restaurant covered with that extraordinary Chinese writing. The Playbill and especially the menu symbolized for young Keillor the sophistication and adventure available in the world beyond his little town.

Many Americans and New Yorkers found in Chinese food a symbol of cosmopolitanism. But no other 20th-century ethnic group in New York valued cosmopolitanism as highly as did Jews, nor made it such an important part of group identity. The sociologists Steven M. Cohen and Samuel Heilman have pointed out that as Jews withdrew from traditional Eastern European Judaism, they created a modern Judaism that embraced and emphasized cosmopolitan and universalistic values. Especially in the second and third generations, Jews -- a people without a national home -- staked their new modern identity on cosmopolitanism: on being at home in the world. Along with attendance at theaters, concerts, museums, and universities, Jews regarded eating at Chinese restaurants as a sign that they possessed the sophistication and urbanity so central to both modern society and to modern Jewish culture. And, as many respondents spontaneously pointed out, eating Chinese was also more fun than

many of these other activities. (On the Jewish cosmopolitanism see: Cohen 1984; Heilman and Cohen 1989; also see Sklar 1955; Liebman 1973)

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## FORGING A NEW YORK JEWISH CULTURE AT THE CHINESE RESTAURANT

At Chinese restaurants, New York Jews frequently savored the exotic in the midst of their own community. The oldest New York Jews we interviewed reported that even as children they usually found (or believed) that their neighborhood Chinese restaurants were filled with other Jews. One 67-year-old woman said of the Chinese restaurants of her Brooklyn youth: "Everybody there was Jewish."

Whether going to Chinese restaurants with family or friends, some Jews used Chinese food to make themselves over as self-styled cosmopolitan Americans. However, in the very act of rejecting Eastern European Jewishness, Jews who went to Chinese restaurants together were helping to define Chinese food as an essential element in the lifestyle of modernized New York Jews. As they declared their independence from traditional Jewish culture and affirmed their identity as sophisticated New Yorkers, they also forged a new, urban, Jewish culture. This New York Jewish culture included elements from traditional Eastern European culture, such as an emphasis on family meals, intense dinner table conversation, love of an abundant table ("eat, eat"), and appreciation of a real bargain. It also included new items, such as a fondness for the Brooklyn Dodgers (the underdogs of baseball) and for Chinese food. Along with other factors, including the anti-Semitism in American society, Chinese restaurant food helped to turn the children and grandchildren of the jumble of immigrant Jews from many countries into New York Jews. Because the majority of Eastern European Jews lived in New York until at least the 1950s (Steven M. Cohen, personal communication), the New York way of being Jewish greatly influenced Jewish culture in America.

Many of the people we interviewed recalled with enthusiasm that in Chinese restaurants ordering was half the fun. The communal character of Chinese restaurant food, where every dish is shared, has allowed Jews to indulge their love of discussion and debate. Even when picking one from column A and two from column B on the menu, Jews conferred and dickered over what to order. A Protestant man from the Midwest married to a Jewish New Yorker reported that when he first went to Chinese restaurants with his New York Jewish friends he discovered that they discussed the menu "with an enthusiasm which eluded me."

According to the people we interviewed, if ordering was half the fun, the other half was eating. In Chinese restaurants, Jews ate off their own plates, they ate off the serving plates, and they ate off their friends' plates. They shared special tidbits. Although Jews might have eaten this way sometimes at home, in Chinese restaurants they did this regularly. A good meal, many said, required companions.

Our informants pointed out that Chinese food was not simply inexpensive, it was a bargain. One person we interviewed, still a great bargain hunter, recalled with some astonishment that in the 1930s her family regularly ate in a Brooklyn restaurant for 25 cents a person, "plus a nickel tip." A steak dinner cost at least four or five times as much. Our respondents said that as college students and young workers they had found that eating Chinese, especially in Chinatown, made for a cheap date and an interesting evening. It also demonstrated a sophisticated palate, a sense of worldliness, and good financial sense.

New York Jews now between the ages of 40 and 70 found that Chinese restauranteurs had followed them to uptown neighborhoods, the boroughs, and the suburbs. By the 1950s, Cantonese Chinese restaurants had become a New York Jewish family tradition. They welcomed children and even babies, and the menus sometimes explained that wonton soup was "chicken soup with kreplach." The column A and column B choices were called "family dinners"; the larger the group, the more dishes one could taste. On Sunday nights the restaurants in middle-class Jewish neighborhoods often had a waiting line. In some wealthy Jewish neighborhoods, such as sections of Great Neck, Chinese restaurants also had a line on the maid's night off. Chinese restaurants were so common in Jewish neighborhoods that sometimes Chinese American families went there for Chinese food. Sociologist Clarence Lo reports that his parents were scientists who, in the early 1940s, immigrated from China to Philadelphia. His family usually ate at Chinese restaurants in Jewish neighborhoods "because that's where the good restaurants were."

For immigrants and most first-generation Jews, Chinese restaurants were new experiences. However, our middle-aged and third-generation informants viewed them differently. When these Jews talked about Chinese restaurants they usually told us about their parents and family outings. They added that as adults eating Chinese food, they found that their present experiences resonated with a fondly remembered past. For them, Chinese food had become fused with their family experiences and their own social life -- part of what it meant to be a New York Jew. As Mimi Sheraton (1990) put it, describing Cantonese cooking, "These dishes, with their meltingly tender vegetables and soothing garlic overtones, are for me what Federico Fellini once described as 'the soft and gentle flavors of the past'" (p. 71).

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## JEWES, CHINESE, AND THE SHAPING OF NEW YORK CULTURE

In most cities in the world Chinese restaurants occupy a small specialized niche. In New York they are everywhere. A large industry has grown up to furnish Chinese restaurants and take-out places with their specialized cooking ingredients, utensils, plates, chopsticks, fortune cookies, and menus.

Certainly, New York Jews have eaten so much Chinese food because Chinese entrepreneurs and workers have established so many well-run restaurants. Peter Kwong points out in *The New Chinatown* that in 1980 some 450 Chinese restaurants crowded into lower Manhattan's Chinatown -- even more than in San Francisco's Chinatown -- and there are at least 1,000 more in the rest of the New York area. New York is the Chinese food capital of the United States.

But the reverse is true as well: Chinese restaurants flourished in New York because the large Jewish population provided a reliable base of customers who liked to eat out, who had the money to do so, and who wanted to eat in Chinese restaurants. As a result, New York City probably has more Chinese restaurants than any non-Chinese city in the world.

Chinese food seems fashionable in New York, something that almost everyone eats sometimes. "Eating Chinese" is a New York thing to do. New residents quickly become familiar with Chinese restaurants and cuisine. The neighborhoods of Italians, Greeks, Lebanese, Germans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, African Americans, and Japanese -- to name but a few -- all have Chinese restaurants in addition to their own ethnic ones.

In part, the recent increase in the number of Chinese restaurants in non-Jewish neighborhoods has resulted from the continued migration of the Chinese to New York. Manhattan's Chinatown has long been one of the most densely populated areas of New York. The growing concentration of residents has prompted Chinatown to expand into Little Italy.

Today, Queens and Brooklyn also have little Chinatowns, mainly in areas abutting the subway lines that pass through Manhattan's Chinatown. In almost every non-Jewish ethnic neighborhood, the group's own restaurants still outnumber the Chinese places. In most Jewish neighborhoods, however, Chinese restaurants outnumber Jewish delis. In most non-Chinese ethnic neighborhoods, the Chinese restaurants tend to be small and modest or simply storefronts selling only take-out food.

But neighborhoods with many Jews (or Chinese or Koreans) possess more Chinese restaurants and more large and fancy ones.

Chinese restaurateurs have never stopped expanding and innovating. Chinese restaurants offered "take out" long before MacDonald's, Pizza King, and Colonel Sanders' Kentucky Fried Chicken. In the 1950s and 1960s, as Jews prospered in the postwar boom, many Chinese restaurants began to deliver. After a hard day's work, or on a hot night, a rainy night, or a cold, snowy evening, families could eat Chinese food without going farther than the front door. Chinese restaurants had few competitors in this enterprise; none served meals as good. Only since the 1980s have other New York restaurants offered high-quality delivered or even take-out food.

Since the 1970s, a new influx of Chinese immigrants have arrived bringing the spicy cuisines of the North. As a result, new restaurants have sprung up serving Hunan and Szechuan food. Second- and third-generation Jews have taken to them en masse. One friend refers to a thirty-block stretch of Broadway on Manhattan's upper west side as the Szechuan Valley.

Chinese restaurants have even altered their interior design to keep up with changing fashion. In the 1940s and 1950s, Chinese restaurants featured exotic decorations and plush, sculpted booths. Contemporary Szechuan and Hunan houses often have a sleek minimalist style more in line with the aesthetic preferences of educated middle-class New Yorkers (a group that still includes many Jews). These places, with their international design style, are today as sophisticated and cosmopolitan as the older ones were in their time.

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## JEWS WHO DO NOT EAT CHINESE FOOD

Some Jews are no longer as attached to Chinese food as they had once been. A few Jews now in their forties told us that eating Chinese food actually had such strong associations with Jewishness that they avoided Chinese restaurants.

The largest group of Jews who have abandoned their intense involvement with Chinese food live in retirement communities in Florida. Many of these women and men, faced with the boredom and pleasures of perpetual vacation, regard the evening meal as the highlight of the day. Even those who still "eat Chinese" dine much less often at Chinese restaurants (or Jewish delis) than at other eateries. Instead, they frequent restaurants offering "Early Bird Specials" -- soup or salad, a main course, dessert, and a beverage for under \$8.00 if you are seated before 5:00 or 5:30 p.m. Chatting in and

around swimming pools, they exchange information about a topic that interests them all: the bargain restaurants they have found and when the line to be seated forms. As they are happy to explain to their visiting children, "With such prices, who needs to cook?" They are already secure in their identity as American Jews, they are establishing new identities for themselves as retired and as Floridians, and they are living in an area where Chinese restaurants are not as common as in the New York metropolitan area or as much of a bargain as the "Early Bird Specials."

Some Jews never took to Chinese restaurants, especially German-American Jews. In the late 19th century, German-American Jews in New York lived uptown, away from the immigrant Jewish and Chinese neighborhoods, and they tried to distance themselves from the Eastern Europeans. Many other German-American Jews lived in the Midwest and South and had not settled even temporarily in what was to become the American capital of Eastern European Jews. The German Jews who came to America before and after World War II remained strongly attached to German culture and food. However, when the German Jews moved into the same neighborhoods as the Eastern European Jews, they learned to eat Chinese food -- at least sometimes. A colleague whose family immigrated in the 1930s told us that her staunchly German Jewish mother frequently ate at Chinese restaurants on Sunday night as did her neighbors. But after 50 years in New York, this woman still eats only bland chicken chow mein.

Recent Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union and Israel have followed the patterns of the German Jews and of other recent immigrants from all ethnic groups. Israelis and Russians have each concentrated in specific neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens where they patronize restaurants serving their own ethnic foods: Middle Eastern specialties and Russian cuisine. However, these new Jewish ethnics are also learning to eat Chinese food sometimes, (and the Russians immigrants are also big fans of Japanese food, especially sushi -- which is a whole other story).

For those Eastern European Jews and their descendants living away from the Northeast coast, Chinese food has usually not been as important, often because it is harder to get. But the love of Chinese food remains strong for at least some Jews in large cities such as Chicago, and especially for Jews who moved away after a generation or two in New York. Former New Yorkers often complain that their new communities lack adequate Chinese restaurants. But many of these ex-New Yorkers do eat Chinese restaurant food when it is available: the powerful symbolic meanings still hold, and the food is still delicious.

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## "THE SOFT AND GENTLE FLAVORS OF THE PAST"

New York Jews did not develop their web of cultural meanings out of thin air. The values and habits that Eastern European Jews brought with them channeled change and invention along specific axes. As Giddens reminds us, social meanings are recursive. Historically constructed meanings become the raw materials for new cultural creations.

Long-standing webs of significance also set limits on what an immigrant or ethnic group can use to construct new collective activities and forms of identity. The tastes and smells of childhood are among our most powerfully evocative memories. They spur memory. They provide biographical continuity. For middle-aged Jews, childhood memory is captured, for example, by the comforting smell of the chicken soup their mothers prepared to celebrate a holiday or expel an illness.

We have suggested that Chinese food has also provided that biographical continuity for generations of New York Jews. Chinese food, especially Cantonese cooking (with its absence of milk and its use of chicken, chicken stock, eggs, garlic, celery, onions, sweet and sour dishes, and tea) resonated with Eastern European Jewish home cooking. More than any other restaurant food available, Chinese food was attractive to Jews in part because its ingredients were somewhat familiar, and because it did not instinctively repel. It was what we have called *safe treyf*.

Jews were also attached to Chinese food because they perceived it as sophisticated, non-Christian, and a bargain. In subsequent generations, these associations then became overlaid with memories of family meals in Chinese restaurants -- where, after 1950, New York Jewish families ate far more often than they did in Jewish restaurants. In different ways, for different reasons, for four generations of New York Jews, Chinese restaurant food has continued to be part of what Federico Fellini called "the soft and gentle flavors of the past."

Especially in large urban areas, ethnic and national culture is clearly mutable but not easily meltable. Sometimes, when people dress similarly and speak the same language, the differences are hidden or harder to see. Sometimes, as Zbrowski showed in his study of the way that different ethnic groups respond to pain, the cultural traits might not even be recognized by the participants themselves. As in the case of the Jewish adoption of Chinese food, the different patterns may be discussed in jokes and anecdotes. Nevertheless, however subtle or submerged, constructed cultural

differences remain Durkheimian social facts, enduring and real in their consequences, yet malleable to reinterpretation by future generations.

It might seem contradictory to emphasize both the relative unmeltable of ethnic cultures -- the tenacity of ethnic culture -- and the changing and socially constructed character of ethnicity and nationality, but the contradiction is only apparent. As Craig Reinerman pointed out, ethnic culture is tenacious precisely because it is so mutable. People change and create their cultures, but they do so in particular ways, frequently along already well carved grooves, establishing comfortable (if surprising) blends of old and new. In effect, all ethnic groups find their own versions of *safe treyf*.

Since the early 19th century, many observers have pointed out the homogenizing effects of modern society. Yet whatever its unifying tendencies, modernization contains strong tendencies toward cultural differentiation. These include both multiculturalism and the pastiche nowadays termed "postmodernism." Throughout the world today, cultural differences remain central in shaping such everyday "small" life experiences as eating, as well as "large" practices such as political symbols and rhetoric. In American cities with substantial immigration, immigrant groups find it impossible not to construct an ethnic identity because they are literally and symbolically captured in new ethnic ghettos.

Knowledgeable observers and even participants may not be able to predict the materials from which immigrant groups forge their new cultural combinations. For instance, how the diverse peoples from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, and all the other peoples today labeled "Hispanic Americans" will continually re-create their own ethnic identities and cultures. One can only be sure that because of discrimination in the United States, and out of their own various cultural traditions, "flavors" and experiences, these Spanish-speaking peoples and their children's children, will inevitably construct new ethnic "webs of significance" with their own internal logic. Some of these will probably appear as strange at first as the New York Jewish passion for Chinese food.

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## NOTES

1. The examples are legion: People from Sicily, Naples, Rome, Milan and Tuscany became Italian Americans; Navaho, Iroquois, and Cherokee became Native Americans; the descendants of Africans brought as slaves became African Americans; Cantonese, Taiwanese, and Fukienese became Chinese Americans; and Egyptians, Saudis, and Lebanese became Arab Americans. People have forged ethnic identities and cultures for many reasons: in response to discrimination and racism; because language, religion, or similar experiences enabled them to establish bonds of community and culture; and because, in America, shared economic and political interests dwarfed past differences.
2. Glazer and Moynihan's (1963) *Beyond the Melting Pot* has been properly criticized for its lack of attention to enduring and institutional racism, and to the structural character of contemporary urban poverty (see Valentine 1968). However, among the book's clear strengths is its unblinking acceptance of the inescapable cultural pluralism of American cities. From its title onward, *Beyond the Melting Pot* straightforwardly promotes what in today's terms would be called a multicultural understanding of American society.
3. Even the strictly kosher can eat Chinese food. For the past few years, Chinese restaurants have constituted about a third of the strictly kosher restaurants serving meat that advertised in "The Dining Guide" of New York's *The Jewish Press*.
4. We believe that an analysis of webs of significance requires both ethnographic and historical research. For a classic discussion of the relationship between history and sociology see Park and Burgess (1921). For a more contemporary analysis of the relationship between the two perspectives see Giddens (1984).
5. For a structural analysis of European Jews as the "classical example" of the stranger, see Simmel (1950, 402-8).
6. We do not wish to give the impression that in the early 20th century most Jewish immigrants ate in Chinese restaurants. To reiterate, most immigrants were quite poor, rarely ate out, and when they did they were more likely to go to a Jewish eatery (Rischin 1962). However, based on our interviews and historical research, we are confident that some Jews frequented Chinese restaurants *before* the 1930s, were more likely to go to Chinese restaurants than to the eateries of other non-Jewish ethnic groups, and were more likely to go to Chinese restaurants than were other immigrants at the time.

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## APPENDIX: Research Methods

Social scientists' discussions of methods usually focus exclusively on techniques used to identify and test hypotheses. We are including as well certain shared characteristics of our individual backgrounds and sociological orientations that helped turn our lifelong delight in Chinese food into a research problem that informed our approach. As Krieger suggested, we have found in conducting research in general, and especially in this project, that our visceral reactions to questions and data are often empirically relevant and theoretically revelatory. We believe, therefore, that briefly mentioning key biographical factors is both appropriate and useful in understanding the development of this project.

We were both first schooled in the sociology of culture by European émigré intellectuals and American-born ethnographers when we were undergraduates at Brandeis University in the mid-1960s. Our teachers and the intellectual spirit of Brandeis at the time immersed us in a broad, critical, anthropological, historical, and theoretical understanding of society and culture. Brandeis had been established in 1948, in the shadow of the Holocaust, primarily by American Jews, as a modern, secular, nondenominational university. It was also a place where students and professors talked openly and frequently about the meaning and experience of being Jewish in a modern secular world.

More than twenty years later, as colleagues at the City University of New York, we found ourselves exchanging jokes and anecdotes about the Jewish attachment to Chinese food. Our first conversations drew on our different New York Jewish backgrounds: one of us was reared in a religious family, the other in a secular home. The more we talked, alone and with our colleagues, the more we realized that our shared delight in humor and gossip could not account for our fascination with the topic. Some chats, we insist, are not idle.

Although we had individually researched very different empirical topics, the embrace of Chinese restaurant food by New York Jews raised a central sociological (theoretical and methodological) issue for us both: the importance of meanings, interpretations and symbols in culture and lived experience. We had inadvertently come upon a subtle but concrete example of the social construction of ethnic culture and identity - and we had lived in the middle of that phenomenon for most of our lives.

In previous writings, we had each combined historical and ethnographic research. Therefore, we marked the formal beginning of our joint project by researching the intersecting histories of Jewish, Chinese, and American cultures and foods. Much of this detailed historical research was edited out of this article many drafts ago, but it provided most of our major hypotheses and hunches as well as the frame we used to organize and make sense of our data.

For over a year we interviewed friends, relatives, and acquaintances about their experiences eating in restaurants and particularly their experiences with Chinese restaurants and food. Our selection of informants was often opportunistic. For instance, at social events we turned conversations to Chinese food and interviewed people about their experiences and backgrounds. After hearing what people had to say about Chinese food, we would ask them their backgrounds. When we felt that some groups whose experiences we believed relevant to our project were underrepresented, we consciously sought informants from that group. All told,

counting informal chats, over a hundred people told us about their experiences with Chinese food.

We sought to interview different categories of Jews and non-Jews who might have had different sorts of experiences with Chinese restaurants. Our Jewish informants included men and women reared in families with different sorts of attachments to Jewish identity (religious, ethnic, or political); people whose ancestors had migrated from all areas of Europe and from other continents; and people who grew up in the 1920s, '30s, '40s, and '50s in different areas of the country and who, as children, had belonged to different social classes. Our oldest Jewish informant was eight-two, our youngest, six. Because outsiders and newcomers to a culture might see more than would insiders, we interviewed non-Jews, especially those who had married Jews or those with many Jewish friends. We spoke with a number of Chinese Americans, Italian Americans, and Irish Americans. We interviewed Jews and non-Jews from many parts of the United States. Nearly all of our informants are middle or upper-middle class now. We stopped recording people's stories when our past experience with ethnographic research indicated that we had reached the saturation point. That is, we stopped taking informal notes when people relayed experiences comparable to ones we had already heard.

What we wanted to know also determined who we interviewed and when. For instance, when German Jews explained that fondness for Chinese food was specific to the descendants of Eastern Europeans and convinced us that the German and Austrian Jewish experience was simply different, we concentrated on speaking with people of Western European descent. When colleagues raised questions about the restaurant habits of Italian Americans, we interviewed members of that ethnic group. At one point, we hypothesized that Jews who had lived or passed through China might have introduced other Jews to Chinese food. We rejected this possibility after interviewing Jews who had lived in China, or whose parents had.

When we conducted interviews, we also explored New York metropolitan area neighborhoods, counted Chinese restaurants in neighborhoods that New Yorkers defined as being different in terms of class and ethnicity, and ate at Chinese restaurants in neighborhoods outside of our daily rounds, including *glatt kosher* Chinese restaurants in Queens and Manhattan and restaurants in the new Queens Little Asia, Afro-American neighborhoods, and working-class Hispanic neighborhoods. Wherever we went, we collected menus.

We focused primarily on New York Jews, particularly those from families whose members immigrated from Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th century and in the first two decades of the 20th century. Jews living away from the East Coast have not usually developed the same degree of attachment to Chinese food, often because it is not so readily available. But what we have found holds for at least some Jews in such large cities as Chicago and especially for those who moved away after a generation or two in New York.

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