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Bites of Assimilation and Belonging: The role of food in the assimilation experiences of Edinburgh's Chinese/ Hong Kong diaspora

Allyson Grace Chai Yi Jing
Supervised by Dr Bridget Bradley

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Throughout March and April 2024, the Home Office of the United Kingdom (UK) implemented new laws surrounding immigration visas (Cleverly 2023). Many of the clauses — such as a raise in the sponsored baseline minimum salary (Skilled Worker) from £26,200 to £38,700 — are seen as steps to encode discrimination towards immigrants in legislation, who historically face racism, xenophobia and relegation to lower-paying jobs amidst other limitations imposed upon them.

Widespread anxiety about the feasibility of a livelihood has permeated many migrant communities, including the diaspora from China and Hong Kong in Edinburgh (Otte 2023). As an international student, I coped with the stress of assimilation through frequent consumption of comfort food. Given our somewhat shared trajectories, my personal experiences have piqued an interest in the perceived 'materiality' (meaning attached to object) of food in the diaspora's struggle with assimilation, especially in light of reinforced institutionalised biases.

AIMS

- To derive the meaning of food in the diaspora's processes of assimilation.
- To create awareness of the societal challenges faced by Edinburgh's immigrant communities.
 - Highlight the need for policies to protect this demographic and ease anxieties surrounding their new livelihoods.

METHODOLOGY

Literature Review:

Gathering and analysing existing academic papers and credible sources relevant to the diaspora within specific areas of anthropology (see right box).

Fieldwork:

In-person interviews with members of the Chinese/ Hong Kong diaspora, namely patrons of Chinese food and beverage (F&B) businesses and employees/ business owners.

RELEVANT AREAS OF ANTHROPOLOGY

- Anthropology of food
- Anthropology of immigration
- Anthropology of the Chinese in Britain.
- Medical anthropology of mental health

The role of food in the Chinese/ Hong Kong diaspora's assimilation: A versatile tool for constructing a "socio-culturally acceptable" identity

Employment within the F&B industry



"It's easier for us [immigrants] to get a job in Chinese restaurants"

"It's like a [regular] stage of life."

Historically, many immigrants turn to the F&B industry for their first endeavor to generate economic capital in the UK. This is because it is easier to get a job in catering due to the prevalence of Asian/ Chinese-run F&B businesses (Tamari and Featherstone 2006). Tangentially, my paper discusses the stereotypes surrounding the diaspora's prominence in the industry.

Source of emotional comfort



"During COVID [lockdown], I relied a lot on local Chinese restaurants and my mum's cooking."

"I learned how to cook home food by myself during COVID because all the local [Chinese] restaurants were closed."

During times of difficulty, the familiarity of specific tastes from one's place of origin provides a feeling of emotional stability through reminding them of their sociocultural roots. Especially in times when 'home' is physically inaccessible, the desire for comfort motivates one to find it in food.

A widely understood love language



"The big size of the hotpot servings symbolises a big family or community."

"My classmates will introduce and share their favourite foods with me"

"Food really helped me to connect with my lecturers, classmates and neighbours."

A refreshing perspective shared during fieldwork was sharing food as a means of communication in a variety of situations: strengthening friendships with fellow immigrants and cultivating social relations with peers/ people from other cultures.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that food plays a significant role in assimilation: it aids newly-arrived immigrants in organising their identities within their new sociocultural environment.

These findings provide insights on pertinent policy and infrastructure gaps that should be addressed to alleviate systemic difficulties for Edinburgh's Chinese/ Hong Kong diaspora (see right box). Additionally, I hope this paper has sufficiently shown their unparalleled contributions to the city's F&B scene and implore readers to foster a deeper appreciation for their labour and efforts.

FURTHER IMPACT

Leadership in Action (LiA)

In Edinburgh, the presence of a few non-profit organisations dedicated to supporting the diaspora community means there are collaborative opportunities to develop programs and open safe spaces for active support.

Public Health Policymaking

Evidently, there is a need to assemble readily accessible mental health support resources for this group. Moreover, this is also a window to improve the range of issues encompassed by mental healthcare.

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