

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

“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are”

— Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin
Celebrated French patron of culinary art

When I knew I would be leaving Singapore to pursue a tertiary education in the United Kingdom (UK), I mentally prepared myself for a new diet where bread and potatoes substitute rice, and sweet scones replacing savoury pork buns for breakfast, to name a few differences. Yet after moving, I mostly patronize restaurants serving Asian cuisines whenever possible and maintain largely Singaporean/ East Asian-inspired meal plans, even if it does not taste as perfect. The motivation behind these efforts lies in the food's emotional symbolism as a reminder of 'home' while assimilating into this small university town. After all, as per the quote at the start, my preference for East Asian and Singaporean foods will always make me a Singaporean at heart regardless of where I am. Simultaneously, constant reminders of home ease the heartaches of building a new life abroad as home will never be too far away — in my stomach, to be exact.

A lifelong “foodie” (someone interested in trying different foods) and budding anthropologist, my time overseas has clearly demonstrated that a cuisine's unique flavours and ingredients tell consumers about how sociocultural concepts of comfort and belonging are defined by a particular human society in a culinary sense. (Locher et. al 2006) These epiphanies piqued an interest in how others who (may) share similar circumstances perceive the role of food in their experiences of assimilation, specifically the Chinese/ Hong Kong (HK) diaspora in the UK. This is especially because many of the communities have contributed to the British culinary

scene through long-standing food and beverage (F&B) business ventures, establishing East Asian and inspired fusion cuisines as highly intrinsic to the overall 'British cuisine'. (Slater 2015)

This paper presents an ethnographic report on the anthropological exploration into the various ways that food aids Edinburgh's Chinese/ HK diaspora communities in navigating processes of assimilation, and the subsequent meanings ('materiality') attached to it.

Methodology

Research was conducted in two complementary parts: a literature review and ethnographic fieldwork.

This specific topic of the uses of food during assimilation is under-researched. Hence, for the literature review and analysis, I utilise existing papers and academic sources relating to the research focus within relevant topics comprising the discipline of social and cultural anthropology. These areas are the anthropology of immigration, the anthropology of food, the medical anthropology of mental health, and the anthropology of the Chinese living in the UK. Additional sources referenced in this body of work include news articles, blog posts and YouTube videos.

Fieldwork was conducted in Edinburgh through in-person interviews, primarily within the space of restaurants frequented by the Chinese/ HK diaspora in the city. Subjects' names, details of their profiles and names of restaurants are kept anonymous for confidentiality.

A Brief Contextual History of the Chinese/ HK Diaspora in Edinburgh and the UK

According to records, many Chinese (from the mainland) have immigrated to the UK since the late 1700s. Throughout the 1800s and 1900s, conflicts such as the two Opium Wars and two World Wars saw the first waves of immigrants from ports in major cities such as Guangzhou,

Shanghai and Tianjin. In recent years, immigrants from all different parts of China have moved and set up Chinatowns in cities like London, Liverpool and Birmingham (Benton and Gomez 2008, 24). Establishing these enclaves paved the way for the diaspora communities to grow their social capital and generate economic capital through F&B catering businesses and the birth of quintessential British Chinese cuisine.

As for the diaspora from HK, the UK has always been viewed as a favorable destination for emigration due to the history of their colonial partnership (Ye, 2021). Immigration from HK has been experienced in three waves. The first two waves occurred after internal political changes caused by autonomy issues with China. After China implemented new security laws, the third wave followed when the UK government introduced the British Nationals (Overseas) (BNO) residency pathways to citizens (Home Office 2024). While Edinburgh is not as popular as cities like London, the community of HK immigrants has grown exponentially due to the pathway. Like their mainland Chinese counterparts, many members of the diaspora have found themselves undertaking lower-paying elementary jobs although they possess qualifications for managerial positions; many have also started F&B businesses or been employed in such ventures.

Unfortunately, the benefits they reap from moving to the UK are short-lived. Throughout March and April 2024, the Home Office implemented new laws surrounding immigration visas (Cleverly 2023). Many of these clauses have made it extra difficult to settle normally, such as a raise in the sponsored baseline minimum salary (Skilled Worker) from £26,200 to £38,700, as well as banning social care workers from bringing dependants (i.e. partners and children) on their visas. Consequently, this has caused extra stress as these laws threaten to destroy social fabrics of family and community through physical separation. (Otte 2023)

Literature Review

This section summarises the findings of this review. Many of the anthropological resources relevant to this body of work fall under the following topics: acculturation, food in the processes of assimilation and acculturation, food habits and patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic and the culture of Chinese/ HK families from Scotland. In Bell's (2011) study on Hong Kong Chinese families in Scotland, countless meanings relating to sustenance and culture are attached— such as traditional cuisine lunches being an identifier of one's immigrant identity in a classroom setting, and the type of food you prepare for a guest indicative of how you view them (109; 129). On eating habits, Capellini and Yen (2013) found that at especially at the start of the assimilation process, Chinese students with strong ethnic ties to home consume food from there to maintain their ethnic identity amidst many changes in their life. Lastly, in a global study about eating habits during the pandemic, it was found that Chinese participants' first strategy to resolve anxiety was to stock up on extra food; it can be said that food offers some kind of emotional security (Yen et. al 2021)

The most intriguing research angle I became aware of was the view that all Chinese/ HK immigrants work in the F&B industry is a limiting stereotype (Benton and Gomez 2008, 109; Bell 2011, 54). Kershen (2002) found that historically within the context of earning a living, multiple migrant communities' ability to maximise economic capital through F&B was restricted by the weaponisation of their diets which are foreign to the British (221). Moreover, the view that their place in society is in kitchens and restaurants added to these xenophobic stereotypes. Such an outlook can create mixed opinions on the significance of food to one's individual journey of assimilation. Moreover, in recent years, many businesses have been afflicted by racially motivated attacks (Adamson et. a 2009). Hence, I made this a key aspect of my fieldwork investigation as it provides insights on how the Chinese/ HK experience with food is situated within the greater society.

Despite being based largely on the preliminary findings above, I also anticipated this scope to be widened through the introduction of new knowledge during fieldwork.

Food as subsistence: Human, cultural and economic survival

As elaborated on in the sections above, many members of the Chinese/ HK diaspora communities participate in the activities of and build a livelihood surrounding the F&B catering industry in the UK. With respect to food being present in the lives of some subjects in this manner, they tend to view food in two ways: as a stepping stone to a successful career regardless of what industry ends up being their vocation, and as a rite of passage in some sense.

In one subject's words, employment in the F&B industry is viewed as a first step towards starting and finding one's career as it is "easier for [immigrants] to get a job in Chinese restaurants"; the same was said about starting F&B businesses, albeit the act of doing so being difficult to begin with. This lines up with the history of Chinese catering in the UK, where since the end of the Second World War, a continued demand for exotic non-British cuisines saw a surge in Chinese and Indian restaurants being opened (Featherstone and Tamari 2007). Hence, starting out in a lucrative business venture makes the most sense. According to another subject, other reasons include the economic prospect of being able to get high-quality, quasi-authentic Chinese/ HK cuisine for free. However, it was noted that the younger generation are more likely to leave the F&B industry and pursue careers in other areas.

In addition to the ease of getting a job in the Chinese F&B catering industry, getting an employment stint is like "a regular stage of life" in the immigrant experience. As this outlook is shared by quite a few subjects, I was able to ask about whether they thus feel that as immigrants, being employed in F&B is a stereotype that harms them. While many acknowledge the existence of this stereotyping, the consensus was divided into two 'positives': it is either the opposite, or true to a limited extent. This can be attributed to a multitude of opinions which

are also dependent on everyone's life goals. For some, based on numerous success stories surrounding immigrants who started food businesses, there is the view that F&B businesses are sufficiently lucrative to provide a stable income. Despite these limiting perspectives on their place in society, this shows that it is outweighed by the generated economic capital. Alternatively, others believe that integrating traditional Chinese/Cantonese cuisine and British Chinese cuisine has "spiced up UK cuisine" (i.e. improved the variety). Perhaps, this is a reframing of the stereotype as a measure of sociocultural merit. Nonetheless above all, food is clearly a promising venture for economic security.

Food as emotional support: A gentle reminder that distance is only metaphorical

A second purpose of food, which has been mentioned a few times throughout the paper, is to provide emotional comfort during the lows of the assimilation period.

A few subjects raised notions of bonding with fellow immigrants and/ or international students through sharing food that reminds them of home, and vice versa. On observations about food and bonding, close to everyone I have interviewed has spoken about patronising eateries and restaurants serving food from home, together with fellow immigrants from the same region and/or country. The reason behind this is that between all of them, there is a shared longing for the same 'home'. Hence, being together and eating comfort food is a simulation of their 'home' environment — the closest they can get during this time.

A couple of responses stood out to me as they referenced the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global lockdown. Since many of them were unable to return home during this period, they relied heavily on self-made or restaurant-produced comfort food dishes. One subject said that a big source of support during the lockdown was his mum's cooking and local takeaway catering services. In a similar vein, another subject said that she was forced to learn to cook home food by herself due to the eventual closure of said eateries. Especially in times

where one is unable to return their home country, food is evidently a vessel containing all hints of 'home' to bridge the physical gap through a temporary, metaphorical bridge.

Food as a universal language: Overcoming communication and cultural barriers

The most surprising discovery of fieldwork was the perception of food as a love language which has the potential to cross cultural and obstacles caused by varying first languages.

With respect to the occurrence of bonding through sharing food from home and how this overcomes potential communication barriers, some have noted that congregating for the same purpose of savouring warmth and familiarity from home flavours has opened a space to share about their struggles. An example of a visual food symbols which aids this organic process is that of the traditional Chinese hotpot, where the "big size" of a hotpot symbolises a "big family or community". This in turn elevates their social relations through shared empathy and openly agreed expectations of how they are comforted in times of homesickness. Subsequently, within this small group/ community, they find a support system that is inherently suited to their needs.

Drawing on my own anecdotes as an international student, I found that in social events (specifically potlucks) where foods from multiple cultures are served, I have grown closer to new and old friends because in some intangible, unspoken way, they have come to understand an intimate part of my identity: what flavours have nourished me and empowered me throughout my life and continue to do so. Like this anecdote about potlucks, some of my subjects have experienced this during constructing during their university days. Notably, one subject elaborated on how during lectures, she and her classmates (from all backgrounds) would introduce and exchange their favourite foods (i.e. snacks and pastries) with each other as gestures of friendship; she has come to appreciate Scottish food as a result. Besides her peers, food has also helped to build relationships with her Scottish professors. For example, knowing that one of her professors really enjoys coffee, she brought him a cup after noticing he seemed

to be going through a tough time. In her own words, “food really helped [her] to connect with [her] lecturers, classmates and neighbours.”

From these findings, it is plausible to conclude that during periods of the assimilation process when one grows their social network, food propels the progress a few steps forward as an embodied language of what we hold close to our hearts.

Reflections: The researcher’s positionality, its implications and other dilemmas

Having completed the research project, I find importance in discussing reflections on the researcher’s positionality. As a Singaporean international student of East Asian (Chinese) ethnicity myself, I commenced my research with the mindset that my interviewed subjects’ experiences with food and assimilation would bear considerable similarities with mine. While that was true to an extent, there was newfound difficulty in knowing where I stood in relation to my subjects and the context I investigated.

The insider/ outsider classification dilemma: Navigating the blurred lines between shared traits in lived experiences

With regards to the similarities, descriptions of initial unease, anxiously anticipating preconceived fears of alienation resonated strongly with me. Additionally, given existing overlaps between Singaporean and Chinese cuisines, we sometimes seek similar types of comfort foods.

Due to such intersections, I further contemplated the academic validity of this ethnographic work. Since both researcher and subjects are physically separated from ‘home’ (Asian societies that are places of origin and familiarity), this means that all parties experience Edinburgh as a comparatively unfamiliar ‘field’ as ‘non-natives’. Subsequently, complications arose from some subjects establishing the city as their new ‘home’ or secondary ‘home’; as a non-immigrant, I am inclined to continue perceiving it as the ‘field’. Yet, if our life trajectories run parallel to the other, am I considered an insider or outsider? In that same vein, if the sub-culture

in question is then not entirely different from mine, is it truly anthropology? (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:3) Upon further reading, I decided to reframe the similarities as opportunities to appreciate the “differences within” us from indicators of a lack of “differences between”: the “researcher-subject” disparities referenced above. (Moore 1988, cited in de Valle 1993). As Voloder (2008) aptly theorises, my liminal identity of being both insider and outsider can enrich my analyses as I can employ objective vocabulary to demystify perspectives which I can empathise with. (33)

Conclusion and Notes for Further Impact

In conclusion, this study investigates the research question of what are the various ways that food aids the Chinese/ Hong Kong diaspora communities in Edinburgh in navigating processes of assimilation.

The answer is that food is used to construct an identity that is amicable with the new sociocultural environment in processes of assimilation. Notably, this is observed in three ways. Firstly, and most visibly, they establish themselves through prominence in the British F&B industry. Initially, this specific group of the Chinese/ Hong Kong demographic was the primary focus of research — upon further consideration, immigrants who are patrons rather than employees were also included to enrich the findings of this study. Besides employment in the F&B industry, all subjects expounded on food as an emotional coping mechanism during stressful times and periods of physical separation from their homeland (i.e. COVID-19 pandemic). Lastly, food also serves as a medium for communication, which is especially useful for exchanges between cultural backgrounds and different language capabilities.

Reading between the lines of the project’s research goals and motivations, this study also aims to create awareness of the ongoing struggles faced by this migrant community. From their legacy and continued impact on the F&B industry alone, they deserve to be respected and

valued as much as natives and citizens are. Hence, the findings of this paper can be used to create strategies to alleviate the burdens of the Chinese/ Hong Kong diaspora community. One possible avenue for this is through collaboration with non-profit organisations like The Hong Kong Scots and ESA to design programs and spaces dedicated to safe mental health discussions. Tangentially, similar outcomes could be achieved through policy initiatives to improve public mental health infrastructure to ensure mental health services are included in their rights to free healthcare — especially for asylum seekers. While these are steps to make appreciation and respect systemic, it is imperative that these are embodied in day-to-day interactions with the community as a starting point.

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