

## *Searching for the Spice: On Chinese Diaspora's Food Practice in Helsinki, Finland*

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The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities – Hawaii 2017  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

In this research project, I examined the ever-changing interconnected relations between immigrants' identity construction, food practice and the broader social formations in their respective adopted countries. The main research questions were guided by this vision: Are food practices of Chinese diaspora in Helsinki facilitating the construction of a new, creolized, hybrid "Chinese-abroad identity"? To what extent, is such (re)constructed identity contested by and integrated into the broader socio-economic setting of Helsinki? My intended way to approach this project was to bring one essential daily practice of humanity to "actions", in a real-life scenario: food practice, with this concern, became my favored key to unlock "the identity codes of Chinese diaspora". This research project followed a pivotal inquiry centering the tension and contradiction which imbricates the structure of diasporic identity: creolization (multiculturalism) and homogenization (globalization).

After conducting two-month ethnographic fieldwork, I have concluded some preliminary findings. The diasporic identity is interesting for its complexity, the simplistic approach of stressing exclusively on the "rootlessness" and "aestheticizing" aspect of it does not facilitate the wholistic understanding of Chinese diaspora from a less ahistorical and less apolitical lens: diaspora is both ethnic-parochial and cosmopolitan, the tension between which creates and redefines diasporic identity and its community building process.

Keywords: Diaspora; Chinese; migration; food practice; transnationalism; globalization

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## **Introduction**

This paper is based on my two-month participant observation, during which I lived with a Chinese man and his family in the city of Helsinki, Finland. Cheng Liguang (my main informant) and members in his nuclear family, his son and his wife (Cheng Li'ao and Feng Yichan), are the protagonists of this paper. This research project, conducted at their apartment and the restaurant they own, discovered that although individuals' country of origin and current place of residence can position them within a diasporic community, their identity constructs, and senses of home and belonging deserve to be appreciated on an individual basis.

I am interested in employing participant observation methodology as a tool with which to make an exploration of one individual Chinese immigrant's lifeworld and life stories. By positioning the individual at the centre of this piece of culture analysis, I am attempting to understand — through the lens of transnationalism — the individuality and creativity embedded within the identity construct and the social engagement of Chinese immigrants. And furthermore, to what extent, and in what manner, are such individuality and creativity persevered and to what extent are they subject to generational alteration. In my interpretation they are capable of giving birth to a distinctive mode of identification that remains potently transnational. The aim of this paper is neither to elucidate a collective socio-cultural experience of Chinese immigrants, nor to pontificate theories and terminologies, such as transnationalism, in the hope of applying them universally to Chinese immigrants of two generations.

In this paper, I problematise a wide range of stereotypical and biased conceptualisations of individuals who travel and relocate beyond the borders of nation-states, especially those conceptions that relate to identity, the sense of belonging and home. By telling a story about a Chinese man who now resides in Helsinki, Finland, with his family, I intend to suggest that individual identity is created through daily practices instead of being assigned to an individual by any singular nation-state or a collective of individuals. Moreover, I also attempt to illustrate that the construction of home is sometimes rooted in intimate social relations within the domestic environment.

Through this paper, I am promoting the perspective of approaching 'identity' as a manifestation of individual agency: a person's desire and contention to (re)gain authorship over his or her respective life projects; a cry for individuality; a constant (re)creation of 'culture'. In addition, I am also proposing an alternative view of understanding the notion of home as desired social relations within the domestic environment, instead of the conventional perception of viewing home as a fixed physical location.

I write this paper and in doing so embrace the incompleteness of it; to honour the multitude and complexity of my main informant and his family's lifeway; to discard the conclusion while focusing on the process of analysis. After all, this paper is more of a project of invitation — an invitation to academic discourses regarding the immigrant's ever-changing identity, sense of home and life projects at large.

## Conclusion

### The “Authenticity” of Chinese Food.

What is “authenticity”? The term has many interpretations, and I am not in the disposition of offering a clear-cut, unambiguous definition. As Taylor (2001; 8) puts it: “There are at least as many definitions of authenticity as there are those who write about it”. Alternatively, I approach the notion of “authenticity” by asking the question, “who, motivated by what kind of agenda, deploys this term”.

Hanson’s (1989) research on the Maori oral tradition is scholarship that contributed greatly to the symbolic construction of culture. The conclusion of this work is that the culture of the Maori is invented. Hanson’s work raised enormous controversy inside academia. The reactions received regarding Hanson’s work lead to a conundrum about the representation of culture. Discussion regarding the notion of “authenticity” seemed to center on the question: what is the anthropological interpretation of the *invention* of culture?

Within the disciplinary field of anthropology there have always been criticisms in which the invention of culture has been seen as the deconstructive force in preserving *authenticity* and the *native* point of view. Consequently, the idea of authenticity is therefore equated with a “timeless” entity comprised of traditions, customs and beliefs (Handler 1986; Handler and Linnekin 1984).

Drawing on the opinions Clifford (1988), Handler (1984) and Wagner (1975), Hanson argues that the invention of culture should be understood as “the symbolic construction of social life” (Hanson, 1989). In Roy Wagner’s pioneering work exploring the invention of culture and the symbolic value of such invention (1975), the writer suggests the invention of culture as an omnipresent cultural practice, should not be viewed as standing in opposition to authenticity. Quite the contrary, the vitality of culture of any kinds — indigenous or Western — depends on constant modification and invention in order to incorporate the contemporary concerns of the time, instead of just a “passively inherited legacy” (Handler and Linnekin 1984; Linnekin 1983). On a similar note, Hanson has also opposed the analytical perspective that relegated culture to being “static” by stating that the “inventions are common components in the ongoing development of authentic culture...invention is an ordinary event in the development of all discourse” (Hanson 1989:899). I agree with Handler in that the term “authenticity” and its utilization in the discipline of anthropology as “a cultural construct of modern Western world” (1986:2). The problematic aspect of this conceptualization is that authenticity then is seen as “a proof of national being”. In complete contrast, I subscribe to the understanding that authenticity is a constant expression of the zeitgeist and of individual agency.

Some scholarship suggest that the concept of authenticity entails a broad range of meanings such as genuineness, originality, accuracy and truthfulness (Trilling 1972; Handler 1986, 2001; Lindholm 2008), which is the conceptualization that I am inclined to ally with in the setting of this specific ethnography. The utilization of the term

*authenticity* consolidates the expectation of a genuine, original, accurate and truthful representation. Therefore, I am not preoccupied with verifying whether the quest for authenticity elicits a latent invention of a new cultural practice. Instead, I am more concerned and curious about the uniquely situated deployment of authenticity as a theme or quality of self-expression. Authenticity, deployed in this chapter as a conceptualization, aids the deciphering of the intricate connection between food practice and construction of overseas Chinese identity. I argue that the identity of overseas Chinese is, to a certain extent, essentialized by the invention, modification and valorization of Chinese cuisines. It is precisely via manipulating food practice in his restaurant that Cheng Liguang embodies his vision of “self”. By examining why a specific individual intends to associate himself/herself with the concept of “authenticity”, I intend to accentuate the individual agency manifested in the process of cultural (re)production.

Cheng Liguang and his family are proud of providing authentic Chinese food in their restaurant. They told me they make sure all the specificities throughout the “making of Chinese food” are precisely executed according to traditional practice in Szechuan. From the selection of food materials, to the combination of ingredients, to habits of plating and final presentation. Their slogan — as clearly stated in the top margin of their menu — is to produce an “authentic Chinese gourmet” assortment. I asked Cheng Liguang what *authentic Chinese* means to him. He replied:

*“Something you don't change. One tiny bit off, the whole thing will go wrong. You don't use the shiny and fancy Finnish cookers to prepare Chinese food...you need the old wok...see that one...you need the layers of oil residue to get that 'smoky and fiery' (yan huo wei)...I grew up eating the same flavor...not exactly the same of course, you can't get all the fresh veggies here in Finland, but we work with what we have...we try our best to make it exactly like the taste that I remember from my childhood...”*

Relating to Cheng Liguang's perception of “ownership” to the restaurant, I would argue that Cheng Liguang intends to test and to verify the boundary of his freedom of expressing individuality in the restaurant. The manifestation of such constant “boundary-making” and potentially “boundary-expanding” project is interpreted by some — for instance me initially — as a stubborn characteristic of his. Although to Cheng Liguang this is a meditated, hence rational, decision that benefits him on a daily basis. The authenticity of Chinese food, in the eyes of Cheng Liguang, is not an homogenous and community-based desire for “establishing social cohesion”, but rather an expansion and development of creativity and personality. Authenticity, as a conceptualization, did not aid or benefit the operation of the restaurant. Rather, it is the deployment of “authentication” as a conceptual tool to increase the creativity that established and consolidated the socio-economic niche for this restaurant.

Cheng Liguang once expressed his initial struggle and the corresponding coping strategy for preserving the uniqueness of the venue as a “Chinese” restaurant to me. He told me:

*“It used to be easy...when we first got here, there were no Asian restaurants around, no...okay, there were a few Chinese places, maybe one Japanese place, but that was all...we just put some chopsticks on the tables, then the Finns they knew...they knew it was a Chinese place...Chinese characters on the billboard, and chopsticks on the table...you don't need to do anything else...That was enough to be a Chinese restaurant...Now you see, right? There are Korean places...What is Korean food anyway...they copied all the Chinese and Japanese food, and called it Korean. The Japanese places now are everywhere as well...They [Finnish customers] don't care, they just know we are all Asian restaurants, they think we are all the same...We need to show them the Szechuan flavor...yes, we used to cook food from all over China, Yuecai, Lucai, Chuancai and more...not any more, just Szechuan (Chuancai) now...so they remember this is the place for that...”*

Even though diverse Szechuan cuisines include a wide range of sensory properties, and it has been incorporating the traits and influences of other culinary branches and schools in China and abroad, the most well-known aspect is its spiciness. The spicy dishes served at the restaurants have increased continuously in the recent years, parallel to the increasing presence of Chinese and other Asian eateries in close proximity. I once asked Cheng Liguang whether one of the staples in his restaurant — “duojiaoyutou” (slow-cooked catfish head garnished with chopped red paprika) — has proper culinary lineage in order to be included as a Szechuan dish. Cheng Liguang told me:

*“Szechuan food and Chinese food are all influenced by one another...it is hard to tell...but as long as it is spicy...in my book, it is Szechuan food...spicy is the most important...even if it was not Szechuan, so what? I will add as much spice as I want...There you go...”*

The ability to modify the flavors of Chinese food brings joy and satisfaction to Cheng Liguang. Such joy is partially evoked by the freedom and liberty of individual expression. Once, Cheng Liguang, Feng Yichan, Cheng Li'ao and I were chatting around the table in the restaurant on a Saturday night. Everyone was relieved after the week's work and was looking forward to a day off. Cheng Liguang was also in a good mood. He rushed to the kitchen and returned with a small pot of left-over spicy sauce and dumped it all on his noodle soup. Everyone, me included, was amused by this endeavor. Cheng Li'ao started to mock Cheng Liguang for attempting the obvious overdose of spice. In the meantime, Feng Yichan was shaking her head suggesting disapproval, with a smile on her face. I was preoccupied merely with curiosity: “Can he actually eat that?” The question was hovering in my mind and I could not think of anything else. He dug into the soup and slurped the first mouthful. The bright red color of the spice grease covered his lips, Cheng Liguang stuck out his tongue after the mouthful and breathed with his tongue hanging out for a few seconds, before he went for the second mouthful. His face gradually turned red just during the first a few bits. I could see the veins on his neck popping out as well.

To me, it was excruciating to witness this process, since just by looking at the red color floating on top of the bowl, I could already imagine the intense spiciness of that soup. Not to mention the physical and expressional features of Cheng Liguang also confirmed my estimation. My mouth started to salivate during the process of Cheng Liguang eating his noodle soup; I had to swallow a few times during the time span of several minutes. Nonetheless, Cheng Liguang, without any hesitation or sign of intending to give up, finished his meal fairly quickly and symbolically put the chopsticks on top of the bowl with a solemn facial expression. Then he exhaled with satisfaction and patted his belly. "It is never too much spice...I could eat as much as I want to..." Cheng Liguang spoke to everyone around the table. Does Cheng Liguang have to eat the leftover spicy sauce? No, he almost never eats anything extremely spicy compared to other family members such as Cheng Li'ao and Feng Yichan.

Cheng Liguang ate the spice that night because the act empowered him: by physically integrating the "spice" that bestowed him the freedom of individuality and personality in Helsinki, Cheng Liguang is internalizing such a symbolic token of *personhood* and social-economic status. I noticed the struggle and blatant pain on Cheng Liguang's face while he was eating the soup. Instead of rejecting or avoiding the pain and the struggle, he accepts them. The pain and struggle appears to be a necessity that Cheng Liguang anxiously anticipates and wholeheartedly embraces. Through the process of enduring such hardship in daily life, such as this metaphorical act of consuming excessive spice, which his own body repels, Cheng Liguang embodied a societal condition that guarantees his individuality and personality. To Cheng Liguang, both preparing the increasingly spicy Szechuan cuisine in the restaurant, and consuming overly spicy leftovers, are acts of self-expression that have been sung repeatedly during his lived life, which without fail summons the fruition of the desired social positioning and economic benefit. The authentic Chinese restaurant of Cheng Liguang's is, in fact, not only an operation for "making a living", but also a place that constitutes and consolidates a one-of-a-kind personal identification for him. Perhaps, the authenticity of cuisines that is emphasized by the fact that the restaurant is not a preservation of the culinary traditions and conventions that were alienated from Cheng Liguang's life and dictated by *other* individuals and collectives of the past. But rather, it is a contestation and insistence on the cultural innovation based on personal lived experience: I could imagine the lengthy process throughout which Cheng Liguang continued to add and delete elements of what he used to eat in China.

A "personal twist" to "the known" and "the past" is the most *authentic* he could offer.

### **Transnationalism or Globalisation?**

"Why us?" was the question I repeatedly received at the initial stage of my fieldwork. Cheng Liguang, Feng Yichan and Cheng Li'ao, my primary informants, questioned my selection of them as the resource for my ethnographic data. Indeed, why them? With the contemporary facilitation of technology, online surveys and questionnaires are widely accessible to researchers. Why invest time in participant observation and daily conversations and interviews? Throughout the duration of the fieldwork for this research

project, I resisted the temptation to reach out to more individuals and instead invested my time and energy primarily in the family of Cheng Liguang. This conscious choice was made based on the phenomenon at hand — transnationalism. Because the term indicates “processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement,” (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc, 1995), long-term participant observation shows a methodological advantage no other technique could offer by affording a glimpse of the processes of times past. Immigrants are not individuals of the past, nor the future. They are individuals of the moment, they are people of fluidity, change and transformation. The nuances and fine-grained texture of the immigrant’s life story does not exhibit itself in any specific scenes or certain time frame. Instead, it perhaps could only be sensed and captured in the ‘flow of time’, in the motion, in its ephemerality. Hence, migration study calls for a method that is sensitive and attentive to hybridity, change and reconfiguration, not only in members of the collective, but also at an individual level. Ethnography is apt for this academic endeavour because it has the advantage of focusing on the interconnected-ness of cultural practice and the situated place, and on the synergy and conflict between individual disposition and the structural presentation, which Bordieu (1989: 19) describes as “habitus”. Only by living with this family, and not only for one or two days but for an extended period, could I feel confident to talk about their life stories and the ‘fluid’ and unique understanding of ‘self’, ‘home’ and ‘belonging’.

Research on the transnational movements of Chinese immigrants have addressed several prominent issues, such as transnational political involvement, social and political identity, gender relations and the process of initial adaptation to the receiving countries. Part of my research project is based upon these studies; nevertheless, I would attempt to explore the nuances of how overseas Chinese interact simultaneously with China, their new home, and various other social actors in their transnational social reality.

After getting to know individuals such as Cheng Liguang, Feng Yichan, and Cheng Li'ao, I could not isolate my scope of analysis to the analytical dimension of solely examining, “Where are they from?” “How did they get there?” Instead, I strive, and feel obliged, to enquire more about their lifeway as a continuum, an on-going, unfinished tale. I am not denying the informative quality that historical contextualisation on a macro scale has on effectively facilitating the understanding of the immigrant’s lifescape. However, I would like to have a peek into the daily practice of immigrants’ lives by asking questions such as, “What is life in Helsinki like for them?” and “How do they modify their daily cultural practice to serving their personal needs?” In this paper, I would lay an emphasis on analysing the temporality, individuality and hybridity of transnational immigrants’ lifeways.

The understanding of migrants’ lifeways, their identities and livelihoods in general within academia has changed drastically since the 1990s. An increasing number of migrants are investing efforts in maintaining connections with their respective countries of origins. By employing the apparatus of transnationalism, more and more researchers have engaged in battling the oversimplified notion that migrants tend to forsake their social, cultural, economic and political ties with their countries of origin in exchange for integration into

their adopted countries. (Basch et al, 1994: 7; Faist, 2000). Speaking from personal experience, I moved away from China indefinitely in 2010 and have lived abroad ever since. My complex and multifaceted connection and engagement with my country of origin consistently plays an important role in sustaining and conditioning my journey abroad. The maintenance of such connection and engagement with China is indebted to the modern technologies, which provide convenience and more accessibility for trans-border communication. Technology, nevertheless, is neither a necessity nor an indispensable element in maintaining transnational engagement: as early as 19th century, early immigrants to the new continent of North America had already established connections with their sending countries (Vertovec, 2009) without any modern cyber communication tools. Therefore, immigrants' trans-border social networking and engagement is by no means a contemporary, but rather an age-old phenomenon. Nevertheless, academia has shown growing interest in immigrants' transnational lifeways.

In this paper, I utilise transnationalism not only as a theoretical guideline but also as an analytical tool, in order to extensively explore the complexity of overseas Chinese living conditions in this era of globalisation. The theoretical apparatus of transnationalism would be apt in this academic endeavour for its close correlation with the conceptualisation of globalisation (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004). The idea of transnationalism has been studied in recent decades by scholars who are interested in the arena of social movement and mobility studies (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). The contemporary world is changing in terms of social, political, cultural and economic reality. 'Transnationalism' would correspondingly provide an innovative lens through which to examine the ever-shifting dynamic of modern society (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007).

Especially in the academic field of migration studies, transnationalism, because of its unique analytical strength, contributes to the exploration of the 'jungle area' where diaspora and globalization studies do not adequately have access. Globalisation studies focuses on ecumenical processes and on the pertinent economic-oriented incentives, as well as other capital mobility (Held and McGrew, 2007), while in other cases showing interest in the effects of one particular product that features a globalising rhetoric across one specific geographical region (Appadurai, 2001). The case of McDonalds and its domestication has been studied in both China and other East Asian countries using comparative studies to elaborate the local interpretation and response to this globalising phenomenon. (Watson, 2006). Watson's study illustrates the inherent dichotomy between the 'global' and the 'local' according to the assumption generated by globalisation studies. Similarly, when it comes to analysis of migration, should one deploy the globalisation theory? If so, the focus of the research would inevitably lean towards the examination of a 'global force' and its effect on immigrant movement in different localities. (Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 2008; Van Hear, 1998; Vertovec, 2000). I agree that it is crucial to recognise the significance of global forces in shaping the movements of immigrants in order to acquire a wholistic understanding of migration. Nevertheless, macro-level analysis would not be, by itself, sufficient in excavating the nuances of the temporality and hybridity of the movement of Chinese immigrants. Cheng Liguang —

my primary informant in this paper — and his family have lived in several countries in Europe, such as Germany and France, and now Finland. As narrated to me by Cheng Liguang, they had had sufficient means and capacity to settling down in Germany, but they relocated again. Based on his narrative, I would argue that his life journey of relocating from place to place has little to do with selection of a locality, but rather is a choice of self-fulfilment and ‘home-making’. The study of globalisation and its theoretical underpinning does not support my intention of scrutinising immigrants’ reasons for movement with emphasis on individual agency as adequately as the theory of transnationalism. Hence, it would not be the best approach for this particular paper.

In this research project, I deploy the concept of transnationalism in order to the explore multifaceted social realities of Chinese immigrants in Helsinki. I would involve the nation-state, the local diasporic community and, most importantly, individual immigrants in the discourse. I believe, in the context of this research project, transnationalism will be a crucial and resourceful tool in revealing the nuanced and detailed texture of migrants’ lifeways, the daily struggle of their existence, and the quintessence of their journey of relocation and displacement.

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