

Mediating authentic “Chineseness” and “Western palates”: Chinese restaurant menus in Toronto

Across that shiny expanse, the menu will be passed back and forth, a text that not only mediates the separation between server and patron, but is also read over and over again, presented over and over again—a simple, pedestrian exchange that carries within it the possibilities for something more. (Cho, 2010, p. 51)

For many ethnic restaurants in North America, menus have an important function: they create a sense of authenticity to attract diners to try a new type of cuisine (Kim & Baker, 2017). It is often through menus that ethnic restaurants navigate the ambivalence of maintaining authenticity while catering to customers from other cultures—so-called Western palates (Skibinsky, 2020). The same can be said about Chinese restaurants in Canada. Chinese restaurants have existed in Canada since Chinese people first immigrated in the 19th century (Cho, 2010). Some Chinese restaurants in Canadian small towns had to alter their menus and dishes to maintain their “Chineseness” while accommodating customers who were unfamiliar with Chinese food (Cho, 2010). Although some studies have examined restaurant menus (Mihalache, 2016), limited research has specifically focused on Chinese restaurants and menus in metropolitan cities like Toronto.

Theoretically, this article is guided by the concept of mediation. In traditional communication studies, mediation is a concept that describes how mass media can change people’s behaviour (Thompson, 1995). As such, media help mediate the difference between different people and form a functional society (McQuail,

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1987; Ross, 2012). Borrowing this concept, I want to examine how Chinese restaurant menus mediate the difference between authentic “Chineseness” and diners from other cultures (to whom I will refer as “Western diners”) who might not be familiar with Chinese food. To that end, this article will examine the menus from two Chinese restaurants in Toronto—Bright Pearl Seafood Restaurant and Swatow—to investigate how the menus found in these restaurants are presented as authentically Chinese without scaring off new diners.

APPRECIATING RESTAURANT MENUS: THE NEED FOR DIASPORIC EPISTEMOLOGY

Some scholars have analyzed translations in ethnic restaurants’ menus. Specifically, some researchers critiqued restaurant menus for their poor translations and failure to explain a dish’s cultural origin (Li,

2019). Indeed, from a scholarly perspective, restaurant menus should be professionally translated to inform customers about the food being served. At best, restaurants should try to incorporate dishes’ cultural origins to demonstrate authenticity. However, I want to problematize this perspective. To hire a professional translator, restaurateurs need to pay extra money, on top of all the logistical costs associated with printing, designing, and delivering the menus. Many owners of these small Chinese restaurants are immigrants (Cho, 2010). They are hard-working individuals who moved to Canada to lead a new life and provide a better future for their families. Taking these contexts into consideration, should researchers criticize these restaurant owners for the efforts they have spent on their menus?

To fully appreciate restaurant menus, I propose that researchers adopt diasporic epistemology. One characteristic of diasporic epistemology is that truth and knowledge emerge relationally by recognizing “the Self in relation to, and together with the Other” (Robertson & Mocanu, 2019, p. 12). This epistemology emphasizes that scholars should think in the shoes of the subjects being examined. Employing this epistemology gives a full picture as to why restaurateurs designed their menus the way they did. Informed by diasporic epistemology, I will now discuss the menus of Bright Pearl Seafood Restaurant and Swatow.

MENU 1: BRIGHT PEARL SEAFOOD RESTAURANT

Bright Pearl Seafood Restaurant could be found in the Hsin Kuang Centre—a popular shopping mall in Toronto’s West

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Chinatown in the 1980s. The restaurant is permanently closed because the building is undergoing redevelopment into an office building.

Bright Pearl's menu (available at the Harley Spiller Menus Collection at the University of Toronto Scarborough [UTSC]) incorporates a maple leaf symbol in its logo to tame the exoticness of Chinese food and increase Western diners' willingness to try Chinese dishes. The logo includes a maple leaf alongside the restaurant's Chinese and English names (UTSC, 198-?a). The maple leaf, often seen as the national symbol of Canada, signifies that Chinese cuisine is a part of Canada's food culture. Whether Chinese, Italian, Greek, or French, such cuisines are merely different branches of Canadian cuisine. By employing a maple leaf in its logo, the menu creates a feeling that Chinese food is familiarly exotic, making people who might typically reject Chinese cuisine more open to trying it.

The menu also includes English and Chinese characters. However, for the Chinese menu specifically, the restaurant decided to write a portion of it by hand (UTSC, 198-?a). This decision could be attributed to the need to attract new diners. Handwritten menus have been found to communicate authenticity effectively to diners who resist trying new cuisine (Yu et al., 2020). At the same time, printing technology makes the menu appear modern. At the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese people were stereotypically perceived as dirty bodies who "routinely consumed rats, dogs, and other 'offal'" (Belasco, 2006, p. 14). This stereotype made people resistant to eating Chinese food because it was perceived as primitive and unhygienic. On the other hand, printing technology is associated with being modernized (Haveman, 2015). Therefore, printing some Chinese characters on Bright Pearl's menu helps combat this stereotype and adds a feeling of modernity to the restaurant. The combination of printed and handwritten characters allows Bright Pearl's menu to communicate authentic "Chineseness"

while eradicating the presumptions that Chinese food is backward and dirty.

MENU 2: SWATOW RESTAURANT

Swatow is a Cantonese restaurant in Toronto's Chinatown. The restaurant's old menu from the 1980s is available in the Harley Spiller Menus Collection at UTSC, and the new menu is available at the restaurant.¹

The translations on Swatow's menu reveal how language is a medium to attract Western diners. For some of the dishes, rather than translating their names from Chinese into English, the menu lists their ingredients. For example, item 33 is translated as "Yee Mein w/ Crab Meat" (UTSC, 198-?b). In Chinese, the dish is Hong Tao Yee Mein. A literal translation of this dish's name into English is "yee mein noodles of big fortunes." This dish is an example of how the menu does not translate a dish's name or its style. Rather, the menu lists its ingredients. One reason Swatow adopted this method of translation may be that diners in the 1980s were not very familiar with Chinese food. Therefore, the restaurant listed all the ingredients of a dish so that new diners would not be confused about what they would be served.

Swatow's menu also shows how *food combos* can help new diners become familiar with a new type of cuisine. One notable commonality between Swatow's old and new menus is that the "Special Combos" section is only in English, with no Chinese translation (UTSC, 198-?b; Swatow Restaurant Inc., 2021). The fact that this section contains no Chinese words suggests that it caters specifically to anglophone diners. These combos are the *safe choices* that Western diners can resort to if they have difficulty understanding the food items. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation further explains these food combos. Ahmed (2006) says that finding one's bearing in an unfamiliar space requires one to follow certain lines: "it is by following some lines more than others that we might acquire our sense of who it is that we

are" (p. 20). Swatow's special combos serve the same purpose as the "lines" that Ahmed refers to. By creating food combos and naming Chinese dishes in English, Chinese restaurants (and their menus) produce "lines" that new diners can follow as they explore a new type of cuisine.

A TOOL FOR COMMUNICATION

At first glance, the dishes served at Bright Pearl Seafood Restaurant and Swatow are dishes that can be found in many Chinese restaurants around the world. However, through restaurant menus, Chinese restaurants in Toronto appeal to Western diners to try Chinese food without compromising authenticity. Restaurant menus are not merely a piece of paper that tells diners what they can eat. Menus mediate the difference between Chinese food and Canadians from all cultural backgrounds, bringing them closer to one another in Toronto's foodscape. As a tool for communication, menus can help new diners find their bearings in an unfamiliar foodscape. Future research on restaurant menus and food culture should incorporate diasporic epistemology. Without this epistemological lens, it is easy to criticize restaurants and their menus for their shortcomings. However, if we use this lens to read the menus, we can better understand why restaurateurs design their menus the ways they do. 🍁

NOTES

1. Images of the Swatow Restaurant menu can be found on Sirved (n.d.), a menu-sharing platform.

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