

# DEPICTION OF CHINESE FOOD AND ITS CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE IN THE WORKS OF MAXINE HONG KINGSTON AND AMY TAN

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## Abstract

Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan foreground the anthropological and cultural elements of food, its preparation, and people's eating habits. In their works the Chinese characters very often sit together and eat the same food. Such assemblies, the Chinese believe, strengthen the relationship among the members in a family. It is a means to retain cultural identity. Also eating the same kind of food sitting at the same table is a cultural act. If it is happily served and actively eaten without any murmur, the scene is something to be cherished and remembered. Chinese women use food as a medium to assert themselves and to revive and give a new lease of life to their age-old conventional habits and customs.

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Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan foreground the anthropological and cultural elements of food, its preparation, and people's eating habits. In their works the Chinese characters very often sit together and eat the same food. Such assemblies, the Chinese believe, strengthen the relationship among the members in a family. It is a means to retain cultural identity. Anne Murcott observes: "What people are prepared to take inside their bodies reflects their social identities, and their membership of social groups. To view eating habits as a matter of culture is to understand that they are a product of codes of conduct and the structure of social relationships of the society in which they occur" (204).

Generally, the varieties of food served during a family celebration and the way they are served reflect the tradition and culture of the country to which the family belongs. When people migrate from one country to another, they take their food habits along with them to the new land. They are connected to their ethnic group through their food culture and they find happiness and solace while sharing the same food and thoughts. The Chinese characters of the two novelists also do the same. During Chinese New Year Celebrations, Suyuan Woo and her daughter Jing-mei go to the market and buy some crabs for dinner. The mother explains that the feisty crabs are the best quality and also warns her daughter not to choose the dead crabs. She tells her: "Even a beggar won't eat a dead one" (*JLC* 200). This alerts Jing-mei and she chooses the crabs by checking whether they are alive or dead. She says: "I lifted one crab this way, only to find one of its legs had been clamped onto by another crab. In the brief tug-of-war, my crab lost a limb" (*JLC* 200). The shop owner compels them to take the broken crab. But in Chinese culture "A missing leg is a bad sign on Chinese New Year" (200). During dinner time when the crab dish is passed on the dining table only two crabs are left to be chosen by Suyuan and Jing-mei. Of the two, one is the crab with no leg. When Jing-mei is about to choose the defective crab, her mother warns her: "No! No! Big one, you eat it" (*JLC* 202). Parental love, care and concern are exposed even while food is served on the table.

Generally, the Chinese sit around a round table, pass the dishes and pour drinks for one another. Sarah Sceats opines: "Eating is a fundamental activity. . . . the primary source of pleasure and frustration, . . . Food is our center, necessary for survival and inextricably connected with social function" (1). Also eating the same kind of food sitting at the same table is a cultural act. If it is happily served and actively eaten without any murmur, the scene is something to be cherished and remembered. Huntley depicts such a beautiful and delicious picture found in *The Kitchen God's Wife*:

At each dinner, family members and friends of all ages gather around tables loaded with traditional celebratory dishes, and children climb onto the laps of their elders to demand assistance with chopsticks. Interspersed with the jollity and congratulations. Winnie and Helen carry on with what appears to be their habitual behavior at family dinners—arguing about the food . . . (95)

These pictures highlight the differences between the first Chinese immigrant generation and its American born children. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie and Helen make the best *jiao-zi* or steamed dumplings and chicken dishes, but their daughters lack their mothers' culinary skills in cooking traditional Chinese food. Winnie recalls the painful moments of her childhood. She is abandoned by her mother and longs for her love. Though she has stayed for twelve years in her uncle's house she feels that she does not belong to his family. In her anguish she laments how she is treated with indifference by her uncle's family at the dinner table.

Every time I returned to my uncle's house, I had to act like a guest, never asking for things, waiting instead for someone to remember what I needed . . . I knew they did not love me the way they did Peanut and my boy cousins. It was like this: During the evening meal, Old Aunt or New Aunt might say to Peanut, 'Look, your favorite dish.' They might say to the little boys, 'Eat more, eat more, before you blow away with the wind.' They never said these things to me. (KGW 111-12)

Chinese women use food as a medium to assert themselves and to revive and give a new lease of life to their age-old conventional habits and customs. Huntley rightly says: "Food imagery plays a significant role in each separate narrative of the novels, linking past and present and future, bonding families and generations, expressing community – and providing a linguistic code that facilitates the retrieval of personal histories from oblivion" (*Amy Tan* 58). It is natural that women consider the taste of food they cook as a mark of pride if everyone enjoys eating it. Throughout the dinner party given during Bao-boa's engagement, Winnie and Auntie Helen "argue in Chinese over whether the pork is too salty, whether the chicken is overcooked, whether the Happy Family dish used too many water chestnuts to cut down on the ration of scallops" (KGW 34). Lindo Jong also feels happy when her husband eats the dish she has prepared: "How much happier could I be after seeing Tyan-yu eat a whole bowl of noodles without once complaining about its taste" (*JLC* 56). Again the four ladies in *The Joy Luck Club* host parties for a reunion: "The hostess had to serve special *dyansyin* foods to bring good fortune of all kinds—dumplings shaped like silver money ingots, long rice noodles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons, and of course, many good-luck oranges for a plentiful, sweet life" (23).

Kingston and Tan discuss assimilation and cultural traits in terms of food after their mixed up marriages in the novels. The Chinese find it difficult to assimilate white man's cultural traits especially when they go in for intermarriages. Winnie in *The Kitchen God's Wife* is attracted towards an American, Jimmy Louie, to whom she openly proclaims the fact that she does not like American food which is served in a party. Even though she tries to eat it, she finds it distasteful and disagreeable. She says:

I tried them all, three kinds of taste. The first was a soft dumpling, named for its color, brownie—so sweet it made my teeth ache. The second was the necklace food lining the tree, popcorn. It was very dry and scratchy, and my mouth watered, trying to find a flavor. And then I ate a little cracker with something awful on top. (KGW 302)

Ying Ying St. Clair in *The Joy Luck Club* is fond of rice – the staple food of the Chinese but her husband Clifford St. Clair, an English Irish American, is fond of "his five slices of bacon and three eggs sunny-side up every morning" (150). The novels of both Kingston and Tan are heavily larded with food imagery, which besides differentiating the food habits of the mothers and daughters, differentiates the same habit of the new generation daughters and their American consorts. However, food habit, in their works never becomes a subject for any kind of quarrel between the Americanized daughters and their husbands.

The difficulty in the assimilation of white culture is seen among the Chinese mothers and the American born daughters. The mothers cook and eat Chinese food whereas the daughters, being born and brought up in America, do not take interest in learning to cook Chinese food. When Winnie calls her daughter Pearl to learn to cook Chinese dishes, she refuses. Winnie says: "I tried to teach you these same things when you were growing up. But you never listened. You said, 'It's boring. Too much trouble. I'd rather eat McDonald hamburgers instead'" (KGW 114). Jintarat Florey points out:

All the mothers want their daughters to have better lives than the mothers had in Pre-Communist China. But as time passes, their daughters grow up assimilated into American culture, drinking ‘more Coca-Cola than sorrow,’ and their relationships with their mothers grow distant. (34)

During Pearl’s cousin Bao-bao’s engagement, Pearl’s daughter Cleo tries to eat Chinese food with chopsticks. Winnie feeds jellyfish to Cleo which she once offered to her daughter Pearl, but it tastes “like rubber bands!” (KGW 33). Cleo shrieks and wails and the half eaten jellyfish dribbles out from her pouting lips. Auntie Helen consoles her by offering “fragrant beef” (33) exclaiming that it tastes like the American dish “McDonald hamburgers” (33). Generational conflict and distance are brought into the texture of the novels quite convincingly and impressively by both Kingston and Tan.

The daughters who figure in the novels sometimes want to please their mothers. They take them to Chinese Restaurants as they are fond of Chinese food. Waverly Jong takes her mother to a Chinese Restaurant “Four Directions” to soften her mother’s mood so that she may agree to her proposal of marrying Rich, a Caucasian. Her plan ends in smoke, because the restaurant does not give importance for cleanliness and the chopsticks served there are greasy. The mother asks for hot soup but the one that is served in the restaurant is “not even lukewarm” (JLC 166). The daughter therefore comes out with another plan. She arranges a meeting between her mother and Rich at her home. Knowing that her mother is very much fond of Chinese food, she drags her aunt Suyuan Woo to prepare one soup and four dishes for them. Rich, after tasting the food pretends that it is “the best Chinese food he has ever tasted” (JLC 176). It is to be noted herewith that a dinner table unites families, friends and relatives and also solves clashes which may arise among the members of a group.

During preparation of food, the Chinese bring to their minds their dead parents and their cultural activities. That the Chinese are much fond of eating frogs is known worldwide. Tan takes extreme pleasure in describing the chopping and the frying of frogs. In her *The Hundred Secret Senses* she shows how Big Ma enjoys this culinary art.

Big Ma would make a big hot fire. Du Yun would reach into the bucket and grab a frog . . . She would turn the frog on its back and – quick! – stick the sharp end of a pair of scissors up its anus – szzzzzzzz! – slicing all the way to its throat. Her thumb would dip under the slit, and with one fast tug, out slid a belly full of mosquitoes and silver-blue flies. With another tug, at the frog’s throat, off slipped the skin, snout to tail . . . Then chop, chop, chop, and the frog lay in pieces, body and legs, the head thrown away. . . . In twelve minutes, twelve frogs and skins flew into the pan and crackled in oil, so fresh. (250)

Tan highlights the tasty parts of a frog saying “The skins were the best, soft and full of flavor. Second best I liked the crunchy small bones, the springy ones just above the feet” (251). Tan is only rewriting the anthropological and the cultural food habits of her ancestors. Frog-eating habit is used by Tan as a symbolic act to show how the Chinese are greatly affected by dislocation and also by death. The skinning of the frog reminds Buncake the scene of the death of her father and mother. To her it is a horrifically distressing scene – the “tearing of skin from flesh” (250). It reminds her of her parents who were mercilessly killed as she was watching the butchery sitting on a tree. Since then, as she had promised her mother that she would never open her mouth to say anything about it.

Kingston too writes about the method and selection of cooking and eating Chinese food in *The Woman Warrior*. Wei Pang “shot and cooked rabbits and birds, but he could also eat scorpions, snakes, cockroaches, worms, slugs, beetles, and crickets” (89). The narrator’s mother cooks “raccoons, skunks, hawks, city pigeons, wild ducks, wild geese, black-skinned bantams, snakes, garden snails, turtles that crawled about the pantry floor and sometimes escaped under refrigerator or stove, catfish that swam in the bathtub” (90). Moreover the narrator’s mother explains that her people “buy into a monkey feast” (91) when they have money:

The eaters sit around a thick wood table with a hole in the middle. Boys bring in the monkey at the end of a pole. Its neck is in a collar at the end of the pole, and it is screaming. Its hands are tied behind it. They clamp the monkey into the table; the whole table fits like another collar around its neck. Using a surgeon’s saw, the cooks cut a clean line in a circle at the top of its head. To loosen the bone, they tap with a tiny hammer and wedge here and there with a silver pick. Then an old woman reaches out her hand to the monkey’s face and up to its scalp, where she tufts some hairs and lifts off the lid of the skull. The eaters spoon out the brains. (WW 91-92)

The above quoted passage faithfully brings out the significant role food plays in the cultural life of the Chinese. Pigs, frogs and monkeys have been used by them to make traditional dishes and they adhere themselves to this cultural practice observing all proprieties and neatness. Even in their new American situation, both the Chinese and their children do not in any way forget to follow their traditional and cultural food habits. By depicting such habits, the two novelists try to achieve a distinct cultural identity for their characters.

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