



# Who's Afraid of Chop Suey?

By Charles W. Hayford

**T**he career of chop suey turns out to be a Cinderella story in reverse: chop suey is the ugly sister whose foot will not fit into the glass slipper. Chop suey rose from obscurity in the late nineteenth century to become one of America's national dishes and one of the main ingredients in the spread of Chinese restaurants in North America during the years when Chinese families and entrepreneurs spread Chinese cookery outside China by adapting to new conditions and inventing new forms. By the end of the twentieth century, if you include franchise chains such as Panda Express and P.F. Chang's, there were more Chinese restaurants in the United States than McDonald's, Burger Kings, and KFC outlets combined.<sup>1</sup> The humble dish played a key role in their success, yet "chop suey" became an insult, a put-down for things which are mixed together when somebody thinks they ought to be pure. But who gets to decide which is which?

Talk about chop suey is full of the fear that it is not "authentic." As early as 1912, the *San Francisco Call* reported that chop suey

*does sound Chinese. There is all the mystery of the orient in its composition. . . . But the truth remains, chop suey is not Chinese. There is no chop suey in China. A traveler in the East made this discovery. He tried to find chop suey in Peking. Later in Hong Kong. At one cosmopolitan place in Shanghai he found a sign, "American style cooking. Chop Suey."*<sup>2</sup>

The website Urban Legends reflects the popularity of this way of thinking even today: "Not everything offered on a Chinese menu is authentically Chinese," for chop suey is "purely American" (as if an authentic dish could not be both American and Chinese).<sup>3</sup> But, shouldn't the objection be that it doesn't taste good, not whether it is or isn't "authentic?" To be sure, if much Chinese-American restaurant food is too sweet, too salty, too soupy, and deep fried, this is more the fault of the customers than the dishes.

## Where Did Chop Suey Come From?

Chop suey was not "invented" in the sense that Thomas Edison "invented" the light bulb in a flash of inspiration, at a particular time and place. As a dish, chop suey is simply a variation on a standard south China stew—*zap tsui* in Cantonese or *zacui* in Mandarin, which means "random mixture." Generally, the stew included meat and vegetables (almost always including celery and bean sprouts) in a sauce thickened with starch. Since it was a country dish and not a restaurant item, the travelers who looked for it in Beijing and Shanghai would not have found it.

The origins of the American version are surprisingly hard to pin down, and the stories are more like myths than history. One set of claims is Californian, perhaps from anonymous cooks in a miner's camp or chefs in San Francisco restaurants. Still another myth perhaps arose from fears that Chinese might retaliate for racist harassment:

*an angered Chinese cook mixed together the day's garbage in a bit of broth and presented it to San Francisco restaurant patrons who'd earned his ire. Not knowing any better, those being insulted loved the dish, and much to the amused bewilderment of their tormentors, returned time and again to order it. Chop Suey, therefore, is a mispronunciation of "chopped sewage."*<sup>4</sup>

Another set of claims, as if to compensate for its actual origin among commoners, associates the dish with the 1896 visit to America of Li Hongzhang, China's leading diplomat and most powerful official. One variation on this claim is that chop suey was invented by his cook, another that it was Li and his cook, and yet another by a New York restaurant that Li visited after hours when the cooks were caught off guard and didn't have the ingredients for a "proper" meal.



Li Hung Chang never misses the Sunday Journal. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA. Source: <http://tiny.cc/wju0c>.

## Urban Chinese had eaten in restaurants as early as the Song dynasty. Restaurants were places where you could choose from a menu, not just accept what the host put on the table.



Left: Entrance to the Chinese Temple and Theater at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition.

Source: The University of Chicago Archival Photographic files at <http://tiny.cc/t07ov>. Credit: Archival Photographic Files, [apf digital item number, apf3-00088], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

It is not strange that chop suey should have no clear time and place of origin since the beginnings of Chinese food in America are mixed. The 1848 Gold Rush brought Chinese workers to California, giving Americans their first direct experience with large numbers of Chinese. Chinese cooks in the mining and railroad camps prepared the quick and cheap food their customers wanted using the materials available—beans, eggs, steak, and coffee. After the American Civil War, California state law forbade Chinese from owning land, while vigilantes and lynch mobs forced Chinese into cities where there were not many ways to earn a living except for laundries and restaurants.

San Francisco also boasted several upscale Chinese restaurants that used fresh produce from local Chinese farmers and fishermen, and they imported other ingredients from China. Their customers were mostly Chinese and a few adventurous white Californians. Affluent white families had Chinese cooks, who were cheaper than their rivals from other ethnic groups and who made better Western meals. Smaller eateries provided cheap food for Chinese workers, sometimes in basements where trestle tables also served for beds after the meal was done, and Chinese ran restaurants in outlying urban neighborhoods or in small towns, just as today, where they calmly served pork chop sandwiches, fried rice, and apple pie.

Western scholars say that the restaurant as a social institution was invented in France following the 1789 Revolution, when the breakup of aristocratic kitchens liberated chefs to meet the demands of the middle class. This is misleading, because urban Chinese had eaten in restaurants as early as the Song dynasty. Restaurants were places where you could choose from a menu, not just accept what the host put on the table, and this act of choice meant you had to appreciate the experience of eating and making conscious decisions. In the nineteenth century, neither the United States nor China had a great many restaurants. American travelers ate at inns, and city people either ate at home or in boarding houses.

In the late nineteenth century, middle class America underwent “a revolution at the table.” Large numbers of Americans moved off the farm, lived in cities, and ate out. New “foodways”—styles and habits of cooking and eating—were needed to meet hectic urban schedules. Breakfast, for instance, eventually became a new meal with special foods, and lunch became a meal with new dishes for city office and factory workers who didn’t have time for the midday dinner that had been typical on the farm. Some new foods were for recreation, even to be eaten quickly while walking around on the street.

By the 1890s, Americans began to look abroad for these new foods. The 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition seemed to symbolize that the US was ready for a world role. The Chinese government sponsored a restaurant, though few of the dishes were Chinese. Over the next few years, many new foods were invented or adapted, and many were named as if they came from abroad, with little concern for cultural authenticity. The ice cream cone and ice cream sundae, peanut butter, and the potato chip were American born and raised, but other dishes were presented as somehow foreign, preferably from Europe. Promoters of many of these unfamiliar dishes preferred to explain their origins through myths and colorful yarns rather than through scholarship. Americans wanted to show their success and exceptionalism by attracting the world’s best and most edible food: the frankfurter or wiener (changed during World War I for patriotic reasons to “hot dog”) and the hamburger were named after European cities. Other dishes invented in America were presented as ethnic: Swiss steak, lobster *Americain* (which the French wrongly insisted was *Armoricaïn*), Belgian waffle, French fries, Russian dressing, cioppino, and vichyssoise showed the way for later arrivals such as pizza, chicken vesuvio, and saganaki.<sup>5</sup>

Americans wanted to eat out, and Chinatown entrepreneurs stepped into the vacuum. Chinese-Americans, legally denied the right to own land, gathered in Chinatowns, and many started restaurants.



New York Chinatown, April 12, 1910. The Port Arthur tea house at 9 Mott Street in New York's Chinatown. George Grantham Bain Collection. Source: <http://tiny.cc/hn7nq>.

Their restaurants were independent and competitive but were so interconnected that they could beg, borrow, or steal “best practices.” Successful new ideas spread quickly and at low cost. Chinatown leaders formed leagues and chambers of commerce to enforce standards that made their restaurants clean, well decorated, and reasonably priced in order to appeal to families as an affordable luxury.

The restaurants also had to come up with a standardized menu that would reassure their new middle class customers—no dog, snake, internal organs, or chicken feet. They hit the jackpot with chop suey. This dish, which was not so much invented as rebranded, had been there all along, waiting for entrepreneurs who were canny enough to connect the old dish with the new demand. This stew could be produced in large batches by local cooks who had little training, presented as exotic, and sold for a reasonable price. Li Hongzhang had no more to do with it than did hungry Gold Rush miners.

### The Chop Suey Revolution

By the turn of the twentieth century, there was what historian Samantha Barbas calls a “chop suey craze.” Thousands of white Americans “paraded like zombies” to Chinese restaurants; in New York Chinatown alone there were soon more than one hundred chop suey emporiums. In a few years, factory cafeterias were serving it (sometimes one hundred gallons a day), and by the 1920s, women’s magazines printed chop suey recipes for home cooks. Louis Armstrong recorded the popular song “Cornet Chop Suey.” Fashionable ladies served it with egg foo young and leechee nuts at their luncheons and mahjong parties. The United States Army cookbook included a recipe, and prison kitchens turned out chop suey by the gallon.<sup>6</sup>

Chop suey had become a national dish, but the nation was the United States, not China. Like ketchup and the soybean—earlier imports from China—chop suey was probably not thought of as coming from an actual place that the popular vision still saw as dirty and dangerous. Chop suey helped to slide



Record label for *Cornet Chop Suey* by Louis Armstrong. Source: Website of the Chinese in Northwest America Research Committee at <http://www.cinarc.org/Chop21.JPG>.



Chop suey restaurant on Clark Street, Chicago. c. 1905. Source: Website of the Chinese in Northwest America Research Committee at <http://www.cinarc.org/Chop16.JPG>.



Postcard of San Francisco Chinatown street.  
(Courtesy of Charles W. Hayford)

Chinese-Americans into a racial niche, sometimes ludicrously called “Mongol,” alongside the smiling black “mammy,” the stingy Yankee, the humorously drunken Irishman, and the spaghetti Italian.

Chop suey became most popular in the Midwest where the Chinese-American population was lowest. In 1920, a white graduate of the University of Wisconsin and his Korean-American business partner founded the La Choy Company. The name “La Choy” was an inventive mixture of the French sounding “la” and the Chinese sounding “choy.” The company put chop suey in cans with a success that continues to today. In 1932, Trader Vic’s restaurant in San Francisco, run by an Italian family, had the further inspiration of proclaiming that Chinese food had nothing to do with China at all and was actually *Polynesian*. Their crab rangoon, a further masterpiece of misdirection, contained no crab and had no connection to Rangoon but allowed the restaurant to sell many sweet and colorful cocktails with little umbrellas in them.

In the 1920s, Chinese restaurants in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and other major cities were built in the grand architectural style, developing exotic but tasteful Chinese decorative themes. They also developed a set of dishes that came to be called “Cantonese,” though in fact most American Chinese came from Toisan, a county upriver from Canton. This fusion Chinese-American restaurant cuisine adapted south China dishes to create a hit parade whose play list included sweet and sour pork, egg drop soup, chow mein, egg foo yong, moo goo gai pan, won ton soup, and egg rolls.

Throughout their history, these restaurants have been so competitive and close to each other that each successful innovation goes viral. At some point, a now-nameless genius hit upon the idea of splitting the menu into two columns from which the customer chose “one from column A and two from column B.” Diners could choose without fear of being surprised. The menu choices included lots of salt and fried stuff and sweet and sour pork galore. Restaurants across the country put up the same Chinese lanterns and painted walls the same shade of red. After the war, somebody noticed little cookies in a Los Angeles Japanese bakery and had the inspiration of fabricating predictions and making up sayings of Confucius to put into them—fortune cookies! Somebody thought of putting hot food into what were once called “oyster pails”—Chinese takeout! Somebody dreamed up the idea of putting food onto a steam table and letting customers serve themselves—Chinese buffet! Somebody started taking orders over the phone and bringing the food to your front door—Chinese delivery!?

What happened to chop suey? Chop suey was snubbed like Cinderella’s ugly sisters.

## Chop suey is perfectly authentic—authentic Chinese-American.

### The Fall of Chop Suey

World War II made China an ally and Chinese culture romantic. Congress repealed the restrictive immigration laws, though it kept the quota for Chinese to a minimum. Liberals like Eleanor Roosevelt and Pearl S. Buck argued that America needed to refute Japanese charges of imperialism and racism by becoming more fair and open. This cultural internationalism, although strongest in a small group of trendsetters, included an interest in cooking. The first systematic Chinese cookbook came in 1945. Buwei Yang Chao's *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese* not only invented the terms “stir fry” and “pot stickers” but gave elegant and effective recipes—no chop suey. After the war, the popularity of chop suey led to a loss of glamor. Chop suey was now American, and when authenticity became the test, the shoe no longer fit.

The immigration reforms of 1965 meant that chefs from Hong Kong and Taiwan could come in greater numbers, and an audience of Chinese eaters soon immigrated with them. In 1972, Richard Nixon went to shake hands with Zhou Enlai in Beijing and got chopstick lessons. When the president ate Peking duck, the traditional set of “Cantonese” restaurant dishes went the way of the hoop skirt. The 1975 edition of the most widely used American cookbook, Irma Rombauer's *The Joy of Cooking*, still retained “Chop Suey or Chow Mein” and commented (somewhat misleadingly)

*These vaguely Chinese dishes which can be made with cooked pork, chicken or seafood differ in that Chop Suey is served over steamed rice, and Chow Mein over fried noodles. Both are—like some of the old Chinese porcelain patterns—strictly for export. To get the feeling of true Chinese food, read Mrs. Buwei Chao's delightful How to Cook and Eat in Chinese.*

The next edition had no chop suey.<sup>8</sup>

Americans once again “paraded like zombies” to Chinese restaurants. They frequently rejected Chinese-American dishes as not “authentic,” that is, as American, not Chinese. Just as an interior decorator might offer a suite of furniture whose colors and design would not clash, the web of restaurant owners developed a suite of dishes that once again offered a safe adventure. This group of dishes was labeled “Mandarin Cuisine,” a category which does not exist in China but which does reassure us of predictability. A menu where you found hot and sour soup was also sure to list mu shu pork, Old Mrs. Ma's bean curd, and kung pao everything else. These dishes are found in different regional cuisines in China but not grouped together. Other new hits, such as General Tso's chicken and tung ting shrimp were invented in Manhattan. Fair enough. The new suite of food made a lot of people happy and could be good, sometimes very good indeed, especially in areas with a new Chinese population.

But was Mandarin Cuisine any more “authentic” than the Chinese-American classics? To my mind, “authentic” is a dodgy word that creates cultural borders and sometimes polices them to enforce class distinctions. To say simply that chop suey or other dishes are not “authentic” is to assume without discussion that there is some eternal Chinese food and that “Mandarins” should cook it, not Chinese-Americans. In fact, chop suey is perfectly authentic—authentic Chinese-American. Would you rather eat careful sweet and sour pork or thoughtless Peking duck?

Americans are now comfortable enough with cultural mixing to put aside worries about authenticity and to say that American Chinese created another regional Chinese cuisine. There are regional cuisines in China such as Sichuan, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Taiwanese, so why can't there be regional cuisines outside China? The Chinese who emigrated to Southeast Asia mixed Chinese methods with Indian and Malay styles to develop a distinctive regional Chinese style called *nonya* cooking. Chinese restaurants in Korea date back to the nineteenth century and originally catered only to Chinese but in the twentieth century invented dishes to appeal to Koreans.

And the process isn't limited to Chinese food. The “pizza effect” created a demand for pizza in Italy, which had been common in only a few places before Americans went there and demanded what they thought was “authentic” Italian cooking. British imperialists in South Asia created a distinctive type of Indian cookery that they carried home with them—curry. A realistic British government minister declared a few years ago that the English national dish was chicken tikka masala that was, like chop suey, inspired by the East but made distinctive in the West.<sup>9</sup>

Still, I come to bury chop suey, not to praise it. “Authentic” can be a lazy and distracting word, but it is often a shorthand way of saying that the food was produced *by* people who know how to cook *for*



Photo of the historic Far East Chop Suey restaurant in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles. (Photo: David Roberts, 2007)  
Source: <http://tiny.cc/7bzl>.



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people who care what they eat. Chop suey does not often meet this test. But let's tip a hat to Cinderella's much maligned sister: the profits from chop suey supported many Chinese-Americans through times of racism and oppression, sent their children to college, and energized competitive innovations in food and new restaurant practices that spanned the globe. Chop suey was in fact the entry drug for many—including me—who got their first glimpse of new food horizons on the menu of a chop suey emporium. Some Asian-Americans now embrace the cultural fusion of chop suey as an important part of their heritage. When the Chinese American playwright David Henry Huang rewrote the musical "Flower Drum Song," he included the song "Chop Suey."

If, as is doubtfully alleged, "you are what you eat," and Americans eat chop suey, then isn't America a chop suey nation? ■

#### NOTES

1. Jennifer 8. Lee, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (New York: Twelve, 2008), 18–19, 266–272. Lee points out that P.F. Chang's has no Chinese in its higher management (P.F. stands for "Paul Fleming" and the "Chang" was chosen because it fit nicely on the signs).
2. *San Francisco Call*, Wednesday, October 9, 1912 (accessed July 15, 2011).
3. Urban Legends, consulted June 14, 2011, <http://www.snopes.com/food/origins/chopsuey.asp>.
4. Ibid.
5. Waverley Lewis Root and Richard De Rochemont, *Eating in America: A History* (New York: Morrow, 1976), 276–278; see also Harvey A. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 183–193.
6. The following paragraphs draw on Samantha Barbas, "I'll Take Chop Suey: Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Change," *Journal of Popular Culture* 36 no. 4 (2003): 669–686.
7. Lee, *Fortune Cookie Chronicles*, 38–48, 139–142.
8. Irma Rombauer, *The Joy of Cooking* (Indianapolis: Bobb-Merrill, 1975), 257.
9. E. M. Collingham, *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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