

Food Consumption and Cultural Awareness: An Anthropological Case Study of Consumer Behavior at a Chinese Restaurant

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The United States is a multicultural nation consisting of many people from different nations with various ethnic backgrounds and multiple worldviews. One of the ways people of different backgrounds manifest their cultural values is via the consumption of food at various food service sites. Food consumption is a basic biological need; it is a fundamental behavior of human beings. However, it is suggested here that in addition to the primary purposes of eating to satisfy hunger and provide nourishment, food consumption also reveals differences among cultures, which can sometimes dictate or at least influence what people eat, as well as the manner in which they eat. This paper presents an observational study from an anthropological perspective of consumer behavior at an ethnic restaurant. The findings suggest that such a restaurant serves not only to satisfy biological needs, but also plays other roles in society. It also functions as a source of cultural information and as a social outlet. The authors will explore and present conclusions based on the cultural awareness and sensitivity of patrons of the restaurant in this case study.

INTRODUCTION

The consumption of food is a universal biological behavior shared by all humans, regardless of background. Though food as a means to satisfy a human need is the same no matter where, food and culture are interrelated. Using food, people of various ethnic backgrounds can engage in socialization with others. Ethnic restaurants serve as prime natural environments to observe the various decisions consumers make. Consumers' decision-making processes can vary according to different cultural backgrounds (Perner, 2010; Miller, 2009). Some of the most important components of culture include consumption habits of food and patterns of consumption, which make a significant contribution to decisions consumers make concerning food consumption (Mills, 2000; Tian and Wang, 2010; Wood and Muñoz, 2007). An individual's cultural background shapes what he or she eats, the manner in which the food is consumed, when it is appropriate to eat, and the significance of the food being consumed (Miller, 2009). Thus, behavioral patterns in ethnic restaurants comprise an important area of study for those interested in conducting research in the field of consumer behavior (George, 2001; Sriwongrat, 2008; Tian, 2001).

Anthropologist Margaret Mead, one of the pilot scholars and researchers of the relationship between food and cultures, indicates, "Food habits are seen as the culturally standardized set of behaviors in regard to food manifested by individuals who have been reared within a given cultural tradition. These behaviors

are seen as systematically interrelated with other standardized behaviors in the same culture.” (Mead, 1943:21). According to Mead, the manner in which food is prepared, handled, and consumed reflects upon the entire culture from which the individual comes.

Not only is there great variability in food consumption; there is even an *infinite* amount of variability. This variability results from differences in cultures, and it is precisely these variations and differences in consumers' cultures that make studying human consumption worthwhile and meaningful. Though food primarily functions as a form of quenching hunger and supplying nourishment, it can also serve as a means of promoting family unity when members eat together. It also functions to denote ethnic, regional, and national identity. Food can be utilized in many situations, ranging from social gatherings, to the development of friendships, or to assert influence upon others' behaviors. Anthropologists frequently incorporate observations of food habits as an important, at times even determining, factor in the study of cultures. When people come from the same culture, they generally share the same assemblage of food variables, but when cultures differ, so too do the assemblages of consumption variables (Muñoz and Wood, 2009; Tian, 2001; Witte and Tian, 2003; Wood and Muñoz, 2007).

The United States is among the most populous and influential nations of the world, with a population of roughly 310,135,000 as of September 1st, 2010, putting the population of the United States behind only those of The People's Republic of China and India, respectively. According to the U.S. Census Bureau Population Clock Projection, the United States gains one net international immigrant every 37 seconds, which propels the U.S. to be one of the most diverse nations in the world. Recent studies suggest that the domestic population of the United States has kept growing, becoming even more diversified than in previous decades. As indicated by the U.S. Census, the total population of the nation has increased from approximately 248,791,000 in 1990, to 274,520,000 in 2000, and finally, to 310,135,000, the present day estimate. This represents an increase of about 13.0% since 2000 and about 24.6% since 1990 (US Census Bureau, 2010).

In the modern United States, as lifestyles change and dining out increases, people begin to have more experiences in food consumption, dining in restaurants is growing in popularity and as an important form of food intake. According to the National Restaurant Association, on a typical day in 2010, over 130 million Americans will be food service patrons, constituting roughly 42% or more of the entire United States population. Eating out and sampling the variety of ethnic foods of restaurants in the United States has become a very popular form of nourishment, entertainment, and socializing, and thus this relatively new trend has become a popular cultural phenomenon for Americans (National Restaurant Association, 2010). This new trend generates two consequences, which are: 1) customers having different feelings about restaurants, and 2) customers developing higher expectations for their dining experience (George, 2001).

As of 2008, the U.S. Census reports that the total non-white population of the United States was about 34%. However, a study from the Pew Research Center suggests that by the year 2050, the white population will no longer be the majority; by 2050, the total non-white population will constitute 54% of the United States (Passel and Cohn, 2008). Additionally, another study estimates that the overall population will increase to over 400,000,000, with approximately 82% of the increase resulting from immigration from abroad. As a consequence of the increased ethnic population, not only will the United States become more diversified and pluralistic, but the entire nation will also include more national cultures being represented, leading to a new age of multiculturalism (Garcia, 2008).

In terms of marketing, to successfully conduct business in today's globalized world, one must understand consumer behavior via cross-cultural perspectives, especially as a result of multiculturalism. To coexist harmoniously, the population majority as well as the various ethnic groups must understand and mutually respect one another as well as adapt cultural values that may differ from one's own (Sam and Berry, 2010). Though there are many methods to accomplish this task, observing the types of foods consumed and manners in which they are consumed may be one of the best ways to understand cultures (Sriwongrat, 2008; Tian, 2001).

Multiculturalism in America is manifested by the rapidly expanding restaurant industry, particularly those serving ethnic foods. Because it has been established that observing food consumption is a

productive method of understanding cultures, and because restaurants, particularly in urban areas, often serve ethnic foods, it is assumed that restaurants are advantageous places to conduct consumer behavior research (Mano and Davis, 1990; Sriwongrat, 2008; Tian, 2001; Witte and Tian, 2003). Though eating establishments primarily serve as alimentary sources, and all provide food and/or drink to serve as nourishment, the intangibles of service are what differentiate one ethnic restaurant from another. To members of one culture, the function of a particular type of restaurant may serve a different purpose than to members of another culture. For example, consider the widely known fast food chain McDonald's. Recent literature suggests that the Chinese enjoy the quiet environment provided by the establishment and tend to stay long after finishing their meals to study, socialize, or engage in more conversation. In contrast, Americans view places like McDonald's as somewhere to eat quickly and inexpensively, satisfying their hunger without using a large budget (Tian, 2008).

Anthropologist Robin Fox asserts that food serves a profoundly social urge; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement comes together. Fox states that food serves as a method of social interaction among a multitude of different cultures, and will facilitate mutual understanding of one another. Chinese restaurants now outnumber American fast-food chains; by dining in one of the many available Chinese restaurants in the United States, people of other cultures may gain some appreciation or comprehension of Chinese culture. This is because one can begin to identify him or herself with others by consuming the same foods in the same manner (DeJesus and Tian, 2004; Fox, 2006; Vlisides et al., 2000; Witte and Tian, 2003).

Restaurants, in essence, all offer a means of satiating hunger. If there are often several restaurants within a particular area, what makes a diner select one particular establishment over another? Does the consumer select a restaurant essentially to nourish the body, or does the consumer select a restaurant for an overall experience, satisfying needs other than hunger? Richard Pillsbury (1998) suggests that in America, dining in restaurants demonstrates two trends that are mutually exclusive of each other. One trend is that of going to restaurants for "body food," in which the primary goal is to satisfy hunger. The other, more recent trend, is dining at restaurants for "soul food," in which not only a biological need is met, but also an entire, overall experience is provided. This is a complex phenomenon that the authors of this study aim to understand through finding the characteristics differentiate one particular ethnic restaurant from others.

In the following sections, the authors will demonstrate the connections and relations between food consumption, human interactions, and cultural interactions of consumers at an ethnic restaurant. First, a short introduction, followed by a discussion of the study, including a description of the restaurant chosen for study and methods utilized. Then, the paper will include a description of the participant observations and primary findings descriptive analysis. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of the findings and suggestions for food service management as well as for future studies.

THE STUDY AND THE METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research of consumers' cultural sensitivity and awareness within a Chinese buffet. To the anthropologist, culture represents a key component for an area of study, and many other facets of life and phenomena revolve around culture. Culture is not random. Rather, culture provides the basis for individuals to form an internal adaptive systems to help cope and adapt to new environments, both in terms of the physical realm and social domain (Muñoz and Wood, 2009; Wood and Muñoz 2007).

The studies of American consumer behavior at ethnic restaurants and consumer perspectives on ethnic food have become a major topic in the service-marketing field. There has been a large body of literature concerning studies of ethnic foods within the past decade yielding some intriguing results (DeJesus and Tian, 2004; Fox, 2006; Lee, 2009; Muñoz and Wood, 2009; Tian, 2001; Tiger, 2009; Wood and Muñoz 2007). Scholars Natalie T. Wood and Caroline Lego Muñoz (2007) observe that ethnic-themed restaurants are possibly the second most influential socializing agents of foreign cultures after mass media. According to their work, the media often depict foreign cultures in a stereotypical manner but the hospitality field can offer consumers a more detailed and accurate cultural insight.

There are currently more Chinese restaurants within the United States than all the mainstream fast-food restaurants combined. In fact, restaurants have influenced the American way of life so profoundly that Americans now consume approximately one-third of their daily calories outside the home (McEachern, 2010). This study considered several possible explanations for this phenomenon. One explanation is that Americans are now leaning toward healthier food choices. As stated by one Caucasian woman in her 50's indicates during informal interview: "There doesn't seem to be a lot of overweight Chinese people. Chinese food is healthier and better for you." Even though the food at this establishment is not necessarily healthy, Americans may perceive Chinese food as healthy, revealing sensitivity to health issues when selecting a Chinese restaurant.

Another possible reason for this phenomenon is the wide influx of immigrants of various ethnic backgrounds. The study by the Pew Research Center, as previously indicated, has found that within the near future, non-Hispanic whites will no longer be the majority. This change aligns with the rapid increase of Chinese restaurants in the United States (Passel and Cohn, 2008; Lee, 2009; Tiger, 2009). Socially, the influence of minorities, including Chinese communities, proves critical in relation to politics, community development, and economics. People of Chinese heritage are one of the major ethnic minorities represented in the United States population today; they also comprise a large percentage of American business. In California there are approximately 110, 000 Chinese-owned firms. New York has over 57, 000 Chinese business firms, and Texas has over 13,000 firms (Golden Venture, 2007). The study of restaurants, in addition to providing data about consumption patterns of consumers, also provide places to observe the interactions that take place among servers, kitchen staff, other workers, and consumers. Accordingly, many studies related to consumer behavior and human culture can be tested at ethnic eating establishments (Tian, 2001).

Context and Description of the Restaurant

For the purpose of anonymity in this study we have called the restaurant chosen for observation Cān Tīng. Cān Tīng is located in the city of Buffalo, New York. The authors selected this particular restaurant for several reasons. Cān Tīng is owned and operated by native Chinese people, but the customers are all of varied ethnic backgrounds, including Caucasians, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. In addition, the restaurant is located in a heavily trafficked area, easy to drive or walk to and carries a good reputation among the authors' friends and colleagues. Thus, by selecting Cān Tīng there is easy access to a multitude of people of different backgrounds, and the interactions among various ethnicities and among customers and employees can easily be observed.

Cān Tīng is situated in a strip mall adjacent to a major, heavily trafficked road. Within the same complex, there is a large movie theater, an Office Depot, a dance studio, and a Weight Watchers office. At the time of this writing, there was a vacancy in the strip mall available for rent. Directly across the street there is another plaza, which hosts a McDonald's restaurant, a produce franchise of Aldi's, a Pep Boys® auto shop/mechanic, and a Home Depot store. The parking lot of the strip mall provides good accommodation for the customers to the restaurant as well as to the customers of other retailers and services within the same plaza.

Based on our estimation and the interviews with the front desk staff, Cān Tīng serves about 2,000 customers per week, earning approximately \$15, 000 in business revenue. The busiest days of the week are Fridays and Saturdays; the least busy days are Tuesdays and Wednesdays. It is in service 7 days a week, and opens at 11:00 a.m. every day. On Fridays and Saturdays, the restaurant's operations close at 10:30 p.m., on Sundays and weekdays the restaurant closes at 10:00 p.m. The entire restaurant is a smoke-free environment. The peak lunch times are between roughly 12:30 p.m. and 1:30 p.m., while the peak dinner times are between roughly 5:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Lunches cost \$5.75 from Monday through Saturday, and cost \$6.25 on Sundays. Dinners cost \$7.50 from Monday through Thursday, and cost \$9.75 on Friday through Sunday, which is when the establishment offers crab legs and other seafood. The prices stated above do not include the cost for beverages other than tea and water. Lunch lasts from 11:00 AM to 3:30 PM, and dinner is from 3:30 until closing.

The establishment has plenty of space to seat people, with several small tables in discrete areas. Quiet traditional Chinese music plays in the background, at times scarcely audible over loud conversation. Based on the authors' personal knowledge, music is an important factor of Chinese culture. Thus by playing this gentle music in the background, the restaurant attempts to make the dining experience more authentic. For the buffet area, there are four stations. One consists of traditional Chinese food, such as General Tso's chicken, orange chicken, beef with broccoli, etc. Another is a buffet station of more "junk food" style, consisting of items such as French fries, fried dough, etc. There is also a salad station and finally a dessert station. Much of the buffet area of traditional style Chinese food seems to be heavily meat-concentrated. The authors noticed that there were only 3-4 entrees entrées not containing some form of meat.

The restaurant officially employs a staff consisting of 11 employees and several additional temporary helpers. The majority of the employees are of Chinese origin; half are university students and immigrants from China. Most of them are at least proficient in English-especially the workers who directly interact with customers-and can communicate freely with patrons. The manager of the restaurant is from China, and employs people who come directly from China as well. The manager does not interact a great deal with the customers, but observes the buffet area. When a particular dish is close to being finished, the manager will grab another bin of that dish to replace it. This is especially true on days when the buffet serves crab legs, because crab legs tend to be what consumers eat most quickly. In addition, whenever he sees a mess, such as food spilled on the floor, he cleans it up himself.

Through discussions with a few of the employees, the workers' schedules at the restaurant vary. Some workers only work two evenings a week, while others work nearly every day. The waiters' incomes are solely dependent upon the tips customers leave behind. They do not receive any sort of base salary. However, the restaurant owner provides food and shelter in exchange for their services. These workers live in the owners' house and, according to one of the workers, are fed by the restaurants' cooks. The vast majority of the employees of the restaurant do not have access to cars, but one loyal customer who has been dining at this establishment for nearly a decade usually drives them around.

Methodologies

The authors incorporated an anthropological approach in this study to explore cultural phenomenon via descriptive examination. Personal observations and detailed study of a living culture results in the account of a cultural system, termed "ethnography" (Miller, 2009; Tian, 2000). Most of the data collected were qualitative and analyzed as such. This study is an observational qualitative examination of cultural awareness and sensitivity displayed by consumers. The authors had four main research questions to which they sought answers: Did patrons decide to dine at this restaurant primarily to satisfy their hunger, to experience another culture, or for both those reasons combined? Do the customers feel any more enlightened about Chinese culture and customs after their overall experience at the restaurant? Does level of education influence one's comprehension and appreciation of the ethnic restaurant or decision to consume food at an ethnic restaurant? Do the consumers' ages influence their cultural awareness or not?

In seeking answers to these questions, the authors have employed traditional anthropological methods, including participant-observation, formal and informal interviews. For a period of about one and a half years, the authors carried out participant-observation at this restaurant as regular customers, visiting the restaurant at various times, lunch and dinner, on different days during the week, including weekdays and weekends. The authors conducted the formal interviews with the permission of the owner from early August to mid-September 2010. Customers of the restaurant were observed and their behaviors in the restaurant, such as how they interacted with one another and the restaurant staff, with whom they sat and where, and how long they stayed, among others, were recorded for analysis.

To facilitate the interview, seven open-ended questions were designed to collect respondents' views on the restaurant and the Chinese food culture, about what made them decide to eat at this establishment, and what they liked or disliked. Meanwhile, a questionnaire containing 20 questions was used, which included three sections. The first one was to gauge respondents' knowledge of Chinese food and culture, then their opinions on the restaurant. The second section asked questions on five-point Likert scales, with responses

ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” These questions gauged the consumers’ perceptions of the restaurant’s authenticity and their knowledge of Chinese culture. The third section included questions of demographics, such as occupation, age, level of education. Usually the interview of one customer would take about 20 to 40 minutes right in the restaurant after the customer finished eating. To avoid causing interviewee uneasiness, we decided not to record what the interviewees said. Instead, we quantified the information they presented during interviews.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF INTERVIEWED CUSTOMERS (N=53)

Category	Male		Female	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<i>By Education:</i>				
High School	7	29.2	8	27.6
College	12	50.0	17	58.6
Post-Graduate	5	20.8	4	13.8
<i>By Occupation:</i>				
White-collar	5	20.8	10	34.5
Blue-collar	8	33.3	3	10.3
Student	9	37.5	12	50.0
Not employed	2	8.3	4	13.8
<i>By Marriage Status:</i>				
Married	8	33.3	11	37.9
Single	14	58.3	14	48.3
Divorced/Widowed	2	8.3	4	13.8
<i>By Ethnicity:</i>				
Caucasian/White	6	25.0	14	48.3
African-American/Black	4	16.7	7	24.1
Asian	2	8.3	3	10.3
Hispanic	12	50.0	5	17.2
<i>By Age:</i>				
19 or younger	6	11.3	7	13.2
20-39	10	18.9	11	20.8
40 and older	8	15.1	11	20.8

Sixty-four customers in total were randomly contacted for interviews. Out of these individuals, 11 refused an interview. The reasons for refusing include 1) not being interested, 2) in a hurry to leave, 3) not wanting to be disturbed while eating their meal. The numbers of males and females who rejected the interview were approximately equal. In total, we formally interviewed 53 customers and the respondents included a diverse array of people. Among them 29 were female and 24 were male; in terms of education, 15 of the respondents were high school graduates, 29 received college education, and 9 were educated at a post-graduate level; 20 Caucasians, 11 black, 5 Asian, and 17 Hispanic. In terms of occupations, the largest group was students, followed by white-collar workers and then blue-collar workers.

The distribution of ages was very even, with those between 20 and 40 making up the largest group. Based on the observations and interviews, the respondents were categorized into three age groups, namely from zero to 19, from 20 to 39, and from 40 and up. Those who are in the second category are usually young adults who do not bring children but the customers old enough to have a family often do bring

children. Thirteen respondents were in the first category, 21 in the second, and 19 in the third. Nineteen respondents were married, 28 were single, and six were either widowed or divorced. By occupation, 15 were white-collar workers, 11 were blue-collar workers, 21 were students, and six were unemployed at the time (see Table 1. for detailed demographic structure information of interviewed customers).

In addition to the 53 interviewed customers, three employees of Cãn Tĩng were formally interviewed, including a young hostess, the front desk worker, and the manager, who is a member of the owner's family. All these three employees were proficient in English to communicate freely. The questions we asked them include: What kind of customers do you like most and why? What kind of customers do you dislike and why? What improvements, in your mind, need to be achieved to better satisfy your customers? What has happened in your restaurant that impressed you most and why?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participants in this study are referred to as “cultural participants,” because they are a part of a consuming culture—that of restaurant goers. Although anthropologists have not yet been able to come up with a singular, universal definition of culture, the concept of culture is a key concept in anthropological study of business. People's behavior is often dependent on the particular context of the culture they are in (Miller, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the cultural participants are the customers and the staff; however, the authors focus more on the consumer domain.

Consumers as Cultural Participants

Previous anthropological studies on food consumption suggest that food intake is not the only reason for American customers come to an ethnic restaurant, although it is an important reason. It is an integrated decision process influenced by opinions by significant others, the consumer's ideas of trying something new, and experiences dining at different restaurants, which include restaurant choice, greeting, ordering, dining, and interacting with service staff. The experiences of dining at a particular ethnic restaurant may lead consumers to a greater awareness of ethnic culture represented by that particular restaurant. Observations are an excellent method for studying such cultural awareness and interaction (DeJesus and Tian, 2003; Sriwongrat, 2008; Tian, 2001). The purpose of our participate observation is to gain a profound understanding of different individuals who visit Cãn Tĩng on the basis of gender, occupation, age and ethnic background.

The consumers and their consumption behaviors at this particular restaurant vary from situation to situation; for example, males differ from females, highly educated from less educated, dinner customers from lunch customers. One interesting observation is that in family groups, a parent, typically the mother, helps to choose the food on behalf of their children. This observation is common in ethnic restaurants and suggests that American children who come to the restaurant with their parents may be unfamiliar with the taste of ethnic food unless they have training in or education about ethnic food, which tends not to be the case.

Cãn Tĩng reaches its peak from about 6:00 PM until 7:30 PM. Differences in peak times were not observed between weekdays and weekends. The restaurant peaks for lunch from about 12:00 to 1:30 pm during weekdays and 12:30 to 2:00 in the weekends. During lunch periods on weekdays, from Monday to Friday, the type of consumers came in greater numbers than most of the other patrons were those who work nearby and come to have a convenient, inexpensive midday repast. As was mentioned previously, this restaurant is located on a major commercial street, adjacent to many locations of blue-collar workplaces, such as the Pep Boys auto mechanic shop across the street. In addition, the wide availability of parking space made eating lunch at this establishment more convenient. In many cases, workers on their lunch break came into the restaurant still in work uniform and with nametags attached, usually with a group of colleagues or coworkers.

In one case when the authors approached one customer among a group of customers in their working uniform to conduct an interview, the group took quick glances at one another and then responded: “I'm sorry but I have to go back to work soon, I have a customer at work waiting for me, we're on our lunch

break right now.” Apparently, these customers mainly came for their lunch and thus belong to “body food” type of consumers. They are in a rush, eat quickly, and are eager to leave. Those who arrived in uniforms, with their name tags still attached, usually came together and sat together but spoke very little to one another. The workers probably selected to eat at this establishment just for convenience and affordable price. They are repeat customers, who eat quickly then return to work. It is unlikely that they select to eat at Cãn Tĩng for a cultural experience (see Table 2 for more observed events and analyses).

TABLE 2
SELECTED EVENTS OBSERVED AND INTERPRETATIONS

Dates/ Meal Observed	Description of the Behavior/Observation	Meanings and Interpretations	Managerial Implications and Suggestions
Sunday, Aug. 22 nd , 2010 Dinner Time 5:30 pm	A Chinese family of four was seen with a teenage Caucasian male. The guest appeared to be a good friend, and the mom was observed taking several pictures of her son with the Caucasian male using her camera phone.	It is likely that the two parties (the Chinese family and the white male) have not been in contact for an extended period of time and wish to commemorate the occasion by taking photos.	From what it appears, this restaurant seems to be a hospitable environment in which relationships are rekindled. The staff are apparently doing well by being welcoming toward the guests.
Tuesday, Aug. 31 st , 2010 Lunch Time 11:30 am	It was observed that the parking lot was relatively full and contained primarily economy-class cars.	Most of the customers of this particular restaurant appear to be of the middle class, attracted to the restaurant for the reasonable prices and convenience.	The prices asked by the restaurant are very affordable, so keep offering the foods at these prices.
Thursday, Sept. 2 nd , 2010 Lunch Time 12:00 pm	Three teenage girls were seen sitting at a booth, while their parents and guardians were seen eating together at a booth next over.	Both the young generation and the older generation appreciate the food, and seize the opportunity to socialize with one another. However, the younger patrons want to congregate exclusively among themselves, while the older members of the party would rather dine with people their age.	When parties arrive with equal numbers of younger people, such as teenagers, and older people, such as the teenagers' parents and guardians, offer them seats in the sections of the restaurant where there are two tables next to each other but distant enough for the different age groups to socialize among themselves.
Friday, Sept. 10 th , 2010 Dinner Time 5:00 pm	An African-American family was observed while selecting the foods they wanted from the buffet. The young child remained seated at his table while his father brought him food.	Young children perhaps cannot reach the high buffet tables, or are unsure of what to select to eat for themselves. Thus, they have their parents or guardians select their foods for them.	Perhaps offer a section of foods that particularly appeal to young children.
Friday, Sept. 10 th , 2010 Dinner Time 5:30 pm	A waitress was seen sweeping the floor right next to a table as the customers were still eating.	During interviews, among the complaints registered by respondents was that the staff sweep or clean while eating. The customers feel annoyed and slightly offended by this action.	It might be a better idea to clean in between meals, such as the down time between lunch peak and dinner peak. In this way, the disturbances customers feel while the staff members sweep may be minimized.

Sunday, Sept. 12 th , 2010 Dinner Time 5:00 pm	A waitress accidentally spills some drink on a female customer, about 18 or 19 years old. The waitress simply smiled and went to get another drink. The customer complained a great deal about the incident to the author during an interview.	According to one respondent of Chinese background, in China “to apologize so openly in public is a big deal-you lose face when you do so.”	Train workers to more readily apologize to their mistakes in an effort to minimize conflicts between patrons and staff members.
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On September 6, 2010, two elderly women from a suburb of Buffalo had their lunch at the restaurant. The authors interviewed them who explained that they were on their way to the Buffalo Zoo and were in the mood for some Chinese food. They informed that the area in which they are from has several Chinese buffets, and they are frequent customers at one particular one. However, all those buffets were closed on Labor Day and they decided to come to this restaurant in Buffalo instead. One of them told the authors: “We love Chinese food because it not only tastes good but also looks good. The Chinese restaurants in our neighborhoods have created a unique cultural atmosphere that impresses residents very much. Although this is the first time for us to visit this one, we are familiar with the contents of Chinese food and culture; we know we will be satisfied.” This case suggests that, at least for these two customers, they came to Cān Tīng for their desired ethnic food on that day.

During an informal interview, Mr. Zhang, a man of Chinese background in his early 50's offered his insights to the reasons for selecting an ethnically Chinese restaurant to eat. This was during a dinner on a Sunday evening in mid-August, and he was with his family and his son's friend who was white. He said food consumption and eating habits reflect a person's cultural background in which he or she grew up. Although he has lived in North America for more than 20 years, he said his food habits remain the same: “American food is delicious, but my stomach craves Chinese food. If we need to eat out we tend to go a Chinese restaurant we are familiar with, I can fully adapt to the US society but not to food consumption habits and styles.”

On the other hand, an African-American woman in her late 30's expressed some of her views regarding the Chinese food of Cān Tīng restaurant. When asked whether she felt the food was authentic Chinese, she stated, “The food is pretty real Chinese food, but it is Chinese food presented in an American way. I have noticed from watching movies with Chinese people, they tend to eat together by sitting around a round table. At this buffet, the tables are set up for a more individualized setting.” What she is referring to is the collectivism of Chinese food culture, in contrast to the individualistic emphasis of the United States food culture (Herrmann-Pillath, 2009; Perner, 2010; McEntarffer and Weseley, 2008). This customer apparently has some degree of understanding about Chinese food in terms of Chinese culture and customs.

The Interactions between Consumers and Service Staff

Though this study is primarily concerned with consumers and their behavior within the Chinese buffet restaurant, it is necessary to evaluate the employee domain and the interactions between guests and staff members. A restaurant cannot function without both customers and staff, so a high quality staff is necessary for the restaurant to be conducive to making profits and doing business (Mill, 1998; Walker and Lundberg, 2001). Moreover, because this restaurant is a buffet-style establishment, direct interactions between the employees and patrons are not as apparent as in traditional à la carte restaurants, where the waitpersons record the guests' orders. However, these interactions must not be neglected in the analysis.

On one occasion of a Friday evening at 6:00 p.m. in September 2010, Cān Tīng served 49 customers in the establishment, 25 were white, three were Asian, and 21 were black, in total occupying about 15 tables. Upon entering the restaurant, the patrons walk through a short corridor decorated with traditional Chinese décor. The patrons are then greeted by a young hostess, usually a Chinese-American female, who smiles warmly and asks how many members there are in the patrons' party, and then brings them to an

appropriate seating area. After the consumers arrive at their seats, they are greeted by a waiter or a waitress who in turn asks if they want anything to drink and serves the customers drinks as per their orders. Then, the patrons are free to serve themselves at the buffet as they wish. As indicated, based on our observations, customers are generally members of the working class.

Unlike dinner and weekend customers who are usually not in a hurry and often come with a group of friends, the weekday lunch customers arrive hungry and ready to be seated. The process of seating customers seems to be somewhat mechanical and is done quickly because servers know that guests are hungry and want to quell their hunger soon. When the guests arrive at the restaurant, they are greeted by a hostess or server who asks them, "How many [are in your party]?" Then the hostess or server takes them to an appropriate table. As Xiaomei, a young teenage hostess, says, "Most people would like to get to their seats as fast as possible." The workers at the front desk are for the most part fluent in English, so communication with them is rarely an issue. Not all the waitpersons are as proficient in English, however, according to a staff member there, "they all understand what they need to know, like 'What would you like to drink?'" However, it is interesting to note that customers, during the interviews, only once complained about difficulties in communicating.

According to Xiaomei, "most people who work here are immigrants...communication isn't usually that big of an issue because it's a buffet, but sometimes workers won't be able to understand the customers and can't get their points across, but it's not very common. Also, it depends on who you're talking about. People working in the kitchen can't speak any English. The waitresses are proficient enough for the restaurant, while people like me and others at the front desk speak completely fluently."

Xiaomei also explains that the "waiters and waitresses wait until they see their [the customers'] plates are filled with mostly desserts or fruits before giving them the check." While this seems to be a good idea in terms of speeding up the process of serving customers, interviewees frequently state they feel uncomfortable with this practice. This will be examined in more detail in the following section, labeled "Findings, Discussions, and Analysis." In terms of tipping, Xiaomei believes that "because this is a buffet, perhaps customers feel that tipping the waiters and waitresses isn't as important because it's self-service. However, it's in fact harder because there are so many plates to clean up. Generally, workers here dislike those customers who eat large portions and make huge messes and leave small tips." According to a front desk worker during an interview, "one of the toughest problems is sometimes the poorly educated minorities do not pay for food and run away. This is not racism-it's true."

Occasionally, the workers find patrons who behave churlishly. In an interview with Hong Zhang, one of the front desk workers of the restaurant, she stated that there was on one occasion, a repeat customer who left one penny as the tip, and instructed the waitresses to split it amongst themselves. Hong Zhang says that sometimes the service personnel feel insulted by meager tips, and assert that they do not want the tips because to accept them would be insulting and demeaning. The front desk worker who was interviewed stated that the customers she likes most "are those with education" because they are less likely to steal food or run off without paying. Hong Zhang understands that good service is critical to a restaurant's to be success and for the wait staff to earn sufficient tips. However, for some extremely poorly behaved customers the restaurant and the service personnel should reserve the right not to serve them. "This is nothing to do with the discrimination-we are not charity and our service personnel are not slaves, they need tip money to survive and to support their families."

According to our observations and interviews, customers are overall satisfied with the service provided and appreciate the Chinese food cultural values reflected at this particular foodservice site. However, as one of male respondents in his middle 40s says: "It depends on the server. Each person has his or her own personality." He believes that in general, the Chinese are polite and hospitable, and that the staff for the most part reflects this. When asked to list three things he did not like about the restaurant, he quickly responded "nothing" within a matter of seconds. However, upon later thought, he did state the one issue he had was with the servers bringing him and his family the bill before they were finished eating. He explained that often when he and his family were not finished eating yet, the servers present them the bill, and that this is like being told, "You're done, time to get out!"

The issues of the check arriving before the patrons finish eating ranks as among one of the most commonly registered dislikes and points of dissatisfaction, falling behind only the perceived lack of variety. The managerial implication of this finding is that perhaps the waitpersons and servers should be instructed *not* to present the bill when they deem fit, but when the customer *calls* for it, especially on days when the restaurant is not busy or crowded.

Mr. Zhang, the customer of Chinese background mentioned earlier, also expresses his concern over the issue of early arrival of the bill. He says that the “waiters and waitresses give us the bill and fortune cookies while we are still finishing our meals is like saying, 'Time to go!'” This is particularly an issue during peak times, because the servers want to expedite the dining process to serve more customers. However, as noted by one female customer who claimed to be a repeat visitor: “It seems that every time I am here, my friends always remark how sparsely populated the restaurant is. My friends and I have noticed that even during dinner and lunch, even on the busiest days, the restaurant is never crowded.” From this remark, maybe the restaurant managers can do something better to attract more customers to eat at this establishment. The authors have observed this phenomenon themselves.

Perspectives and Cultural Awareness

There is not only a great variety in people’s food consumption, but an infinite amount of variety. The reasons that consumers choose to eat at a particular restaurant are many, and determined by individual consumer’s preferences, tastes, and perspectives. The patrons of Cān Tīng are no exception; one of the most frequent attributes of this restaurant registered by our interviewees was the “good price.” This perhaps serves as the number one factor that attracts customers. A restaurant with affordable prices might be especially of interest to high school and college students who often do not have stable sources of income.

Based on our informal and formal interviews, we believe that the good price functions as an initial pull force, while good service, good food quality, and good environment of the restaurant help to build up customer’s positive experience, which function as enhanced pull forces to retain the customers. When respondents were asked the question, “What are the three things you like most about this restaurant, and why”, 86.8% of the respondents (46 out of 53) reported food quality, 79.2% (42 out of 53) reported friendly service staff, 45.3% (24 out of 53) reported pleasant atmosphere and environment, and 28.3% (15 out of 53) reported good price. (See Table 3 for detailed information of what customers like most).

During the study process, the authors noticed an interesting phenomenon while conducting the interviews. When asked to list three things they liked most and three things they did not like most about the restaurant, patrons were quick to offer points of satisfaction. Often within seconds, they offered a list of three attributes of the establishment they liked; some individuals even were able to give more than three things they like most. However, the reverse was not true; patrons sometimes struggled to offer more than one or two dislikes. In eight of the cases, the customers stated there was not one aspect of the restaurant they disliked. Furthermore, 44, or about 83%, of the respondents were not able to offer the full list of three things they did not like. As said by one elderly patron in her late 60’s, “If there was something we didn’t like, we wouldn’t be here.” Another guest, a man in his early 30’s of Hispanic origin, shares her sentiment by saying: “There isn’t really anything we don’t like, or we wouldn’t have eaten here.”

One male guest with his two young children for lunch was very happy with his meal and eager to share his responses to the survey questions. He declared that he chose to eat at Cān Tīng for the “good choices available,” and that he is a frequent customer. He also reported that at times he felt enlightened about Chinese culture and customs reflected at this restaurant. However, he, among a few others, complained about the wait staff giving him the bill before he finished eating.

TABLE 3
DISTRIBUTION OF THREE THINGS LIKED MOST, BY GENDER*

Items Liked by Male Respondents	Freq.	Items Liked by Female Respondents	Freq.
Friendly service staff	21	Good quality food	25
Good quality food	21	Friendly service staff	21
Pleasant atmosphere/environment	12	Pleasant atmosphere/environment	12
Price	5	Price	10
Background Music	3	Décor	5
Restaurant Cleanliness	2	Background Music	4
Convenient Location	2	Convenient Location	4
Décor	2	Restaurant Cleanliness	3
Interactions between staff and customers	1	Interactions between customer and staff	2
Other	3	Other	4
Total	72	Total	90

*A total of 53 customers were interviewed. They all pointed out at least three things they particularly liked, occasionally giving one or two more than was asked. However, not all of them gave three responses for what they disliked.

Another frequent dislike is the lack of food. Though to Chinese people the food might appear discrete, to Americans, one Chinese dish looks very similar to many others. A young Caucasian male in his late teens stated that he wishes “that, in terms of type/taste, Cān Tīng would offer more Chinese food.” The restaurant administration seems to be at least somewhat cognizant of the lack of variety; during a lunch visit in early September, the authors noticed there were about two or three dishes there that replaced some other dishes. However the dishes that replaced the previous ones were very similar, for example, General Tso’s chicken was replaced with sesame chicken. Only the more meticulous customers might notice such subtle differences.

One dislike reported by three young teenage girls on one occasion is their dissatisfaction with the quality of dessert. Though the issue arose only once, it is interesting to note that in the Chinese food culture, unlike in the US, desserts are generally not part of the meal. As indicated by one Chinese customer, “In China, there is typically no dessert after dinner.” The dessert offered by the restaurant may be an attempt to appeal more to the American taste (see Table 4 for detailed information about what customers dislike most about this restaurant).

TABLE 4
DISTRIBUTION OF THREE THINGS DISLIKED MOST, BY GENDER*

Male Dislikes	Freq.	Female Likes	Freq.
Lack of variety	15	Lack of variety	16
Boisterous customers	5	Boisterous customers	5
Restrooms not clean enough	5	Restrooms not clean enough	4
Food quality needs improvement	2	Food quality needs improvement	3
Too quiet	2	Location undesirable	3
Décor	1	Lack of interaction	2
Lack of interaction	1	Too quiet	2
		Staff sweep/clean while customers are eating	2
Total	31	Total	37

*A total of 53 customers were interviewed but none of them were able to give three dislikes, and quite a few even failed to give one dislike.

During a visit on September 10, 2010, there was a large family of Hispanics eating dinner. When asked the reason for their large gathering, one man said, “We're not here for any special occasion, just gathering the family together to eat.” The group informed the authors that they had a relative from out of town visiting them. Perhaps the restaurant offers a very informal and relaxing atmosphere, so customers feel comfortable gathering their families to enjoy a special time. According to one of the members in this group, they “eat here about three to four times every month.” The family said Cān Tīng offers a hospitable environment where they feel relaxed and enjoy the companionship of one another.

Also on this same day, about seven people refused an interview. This was an anomalously large number of rejections in a single day; in days and weeks prior, it was rare for more than one customer to refuse an interview. Weekends are generally a time when people want to sit down and enjoy their meal. Many came with friends and families, and several of the ones who came alone were reading. They did not want to be disturbed while eating with their friends or while reading, because this was their relaxation time.

The previous study suggests that ethnic restaurants may serve more than one role in society, providing not only a source of food, but also a social outlet and a source of experience in a different culture (DeJesus and Tian, 2004; Tian, 2001; Tian and Wang, 2006; Witte and Tian, 2003,). However, the predominant purpose of this restaurant seems to be to satisfy the biological need. Out of the 53 respondents in this study, the great majority (41 out 53 or 77.5%) responded that they came to Cān Tīng solely for the food, not for any cultural experience. As stated by one teenage girl, “We really just came for the food because it tastes good and we like eating here. We’ll go anywhere if the food tastes good, no matter what the culture.”

When asked what made the customers select this *particular* restaurant instead of some other ones nearby 67.9% of the respondents stated either that they wanted Chinese food, or were attracted by the high quality food and large quantities due to the buffet. Out of the 17 people who stated they wanted to eat Chinese food, 12 of them, a large majority, were female. On the other hand, the slight majority, 11 out of the 19 people, who stated they selected this restaurant for the high quality of food and the large quantity of food, were male. This suggests that males were somewhat more interested in satisfying hunger needs or “body food” needs than were females.

TABLE 5
CHINESE FOOD CULTURE AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE, BY GENDER

Issue	Gender	Str. Agr.	Agr.	Neut.	Disa.	Str. Disa.
Knowledge about Chinese food and Culture	Male	1	2	9	0	12
	Female	2	4	8	0	15
Food is authentic Chinese food	Male	1	4	17	1	1
	Female	2	9	11	4	3
Service reflects Chinese cultural values	Male	10	6	7	0	1
	Female	8	13	6	1	1
Came to this restaurant not just for food but also for cultural experience	Male	0	5	4	2	13
	Female	1	6	5	6	11
Consumption of food reflects differences among different cultures	Male	15	6	1	2	0
	Female	14	14	0	1	0

From our interviews, we assumed that customers’ Chinese food cultural knowledge and awareness are related to their ages, the older the more knowledgeable. However, the data collected from formal interviews do not clearly support our assumption, albeit 31.6% of those whose age was over 40 claimed

they were knowledgeable about Chinese food culture, while only 9.5% of those aged between 20-39 and 7.7% of those who were 19 or younger claimed so. There were 31.6% of those whose age was over 40 who agreed that they came to Cān Tīng not just for food but also for a cultural experience, while 23.8% of those aged between 20-39 and only 7.7% of those who were 19 or younger claimed so. (See Table 6 for more detailed information about age differences on cultural awareness and knowledge).

In terms of customer education and awareness of Chinese food culture, our informal interviews indicated that the more education one has the more knowledgeable. The formal interview data suggest that 44.4% of those whose age was over 40 claimed they were knowledgeable about Chinese food culture, while only 10.3% of those aged between 20-39 and 13.3% of those who were 19 or younger claimed so. Of those whose age was over 40, 22.2% agreed that they came to this restaurant not just for food but also for cultural experience, compared with 27.6% of those aged between 20-39 and only 13.3% of those who were 19 or younger claimed so. (See Table 7 for more detailed information about the differences in cultural awareness and knowledge due to education).

TABLE 6
CHINESE FOOD CULTURE AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE, BY AGE

Issue	Age	Str. Agr.	Agr.	Neut.	Disa.	Str.Disa.
Knowledge about Chinese food and Culture	≤19	0	1	5	0	7
	20-39	1	1	5	0	10
	≥40	2	4	7	0	6
Food is authentic Chinese food	≤19	0	4	4	3	2
	20-39	2	4	13	0	2
	≥40	1	5	11	2	0
Service reflects Chinese cultural values	≤19	3	5	3	0	2
	20-39	10	7	3	1	0
	≥40	5	7	7	0	0
Came to this restaurant not just for food but also for cultural experience	≤19	0	1	2	0	10
	20-39	0	5	4	5	7
	≥40	1	5	3	3	7
Consumption of food reflects differences among different cultures	≤19	4	9	0	0	0
	20-39	15	5	0	1	0
	≥40	10	6	1	2	0

Also from the informal interviews, we assumed that customers' ethnicity would play an important role in terms of cultural awareness and knowledge. The formal interview data suggest that 100% of Asians, 90.9% of African Americans, and 82.3% of Hispanics agreed that the service in this particular restaurant reflects Chinese cultural values, compared to 40% of Caucasians. In terms of Chinese food knowledge, 80% of Asians and 25% of Caucasians claimed they were knowledgeable, compared with 0% of African Americans and 0% of Hispanics claimed so. In terms of cultural experience, 60% of Asian respondents, 27.2% African American respondents, and 25% of Caucasian respondents agreed that they came to this restaurant not just for food but also for cultural experience, compared to only 5.9% of Hispanic respondents who agreed with this statement (see Table 8 for more detailed information on ethnicity and cultural awareness).

TABLE 7
CHINESE FOOD CULTURE AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE, BY EDUCATION

Issue	Education	Str. Agr.	Agr.	Neut.	Disa.	Str.Disa.
Knowledge about Chinese food and Culture	High Sch.	0	2	1	0	12
	College	1	2	12	0	14
	Post-grad.	2	2	4	0	1
Food is authentic Chinese food	High Sch.	1	4	9	1	0
	College	2	6	14	3	4
	Post-grad.	0	3	5	1	0
Service reflects Chinese cultural values	High Sch.	9	4	2	0	0
	College	9	11	6	1	2
	Post-grad.	0	4	5	0	0
Came to this restaurant not just for food but also for cultural experience	High Sch.	0	2	1	1	11
	College	0	8	5	6	10
	Post-grad.	1	1	3	1	3
Consumption of food reflects differences among different cultures	High Sch.	9	5	0	1	0
	College	16	11	0	2	0
	Post-grad.	4	4	1	0	0

Our findings suggest that overall, the great majority of patrons seemed to be satisfied overall with their experiences in the restaurant Cān Tīng. When they were asked the question: “If you were the manager of the restaurant, what you would like to do to better serve the customers?” Almost half said they would do “nothing.” One Caucasian man in his 40's replied, “No, I would not do anything. They are doing a good job.” On a separate visit, a Caucasian woman in her late 50's shared his sentiment, saying that there was “nothing flawed” about the service in the establishment.

On a note unrelated to food, but instead on the overall experience of the restaurants, a significant number of consumers also expressed their appreciation of the restaurant's décor. Though this particular restaurant seems primarily to function as a source of “body food” to satisfy hunger needs, the décor contributes to the overall experience of the consumers at this restaurant and perhaps makes their experience at this particular restaurant more authentic. Twelve interviewed customers indicated that they were interested in both the food *and* the experience overall provided by the restaurant. Among the points of dissatisfaction registered by costumers, there were 31 total instances of people suggesting that the establishment needs more variety in their dishes. Though the authors have noticed the establishment has attempted to vary its foods, the patrons seem to hardly notice. The managerial implications of this will be further discussed in the next section.

TABLE 8
CHINESE FOOD CULTURE AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE, BY ETHNICITY

Issue	Ethnicity	Str. Agr.	Agr.	Neut.	Disa.	Str.Disa.
Knowledge about Chinese food and Culture	Caucasian	0	5	8	0	7
	African-Am.	0	0	6	0	5
	Asian	3	1	1	0	0
	Hispanic	0	0	2	0	15
Food is authentic Chinese food	Caucasian	3	3	9	3	2
	African-Am.	0	5	6	0	0
	Asian	0	4	0	1	0
	Hispanic	0	1	13	1	2
Service reflects Chinese cultural values	Caucasian	3	5	11	0	1
	African-Am.	2	8	0	1	0
	Asian	0	5	0	0	0
	Hispanic	13	1	2	0	0
Came to this restaurant not just for food but also for cultural experience	Caucasian	0	5	6	3	6
	African-Am.	0	3	1	4	3
	Asian	1	2	0	0	2
	Hispanic	0	1	2	1	13
Consumption of food reflects differences among different cultures	Caucasian	6	11	1	2	0
	African-Am.	6	5	0	0	0
	Asian	3	2	0	0	0
	Hispanic	14	2	0	1	0

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

All people have to eat to satisfy a biological need. Though the basic function is the same across the world, to satisfy physical hunger and to survive, what people eat, the manner in which food is consumed, and the role of food varies based on culture. There is a growing demand for food away from home because of higher incomes, changes in consumption patterns, changes in household composition, and the time pressures created by dual-working families. The United States is one of the most diverse and pluralistic nations in the world, but despite such diversity, it is a very individualistic culture. At the individual level, Americans have many dining options, especially from the rise in ethnic restaurants in the United States.

Ethnic Chinese restaurants now outnumber the aggregate of many of America's fast-food chains and have become among one of the most dynamic factors for foodservice marketing in the US. This particular study deals with one such a Chinese ethnic restaurant herein called Cān Tīng in a region of the Northeast in the United States conducive to the acceptance of ethnic food culture and culturally diverse establishments. Because customers are the backbone of the restaurant industry, it is imperative that restaurant owners and managers heed their customers' opinions and desires.

Richard Pillsbury (1998) suggests that American restaurants are now serving double, mutually exclusive purposes. Some are more for "body food," while others are more for "soul food." Pillsbury's

assertion proves valid, however, the data collected by this study does not seem to support his belief that these two are mutually exclusive; serving both “soul food” and “body food” do not necessarily occur separately. The consumers at an ethnic restaurant may not necessarily need to be well educated to be aware of ethnic food and cultural differences. However, the data collected for this case study indicated that patrons selected an ethnic restaurant mainly for the food with a few respondents claiming that they also chose it for the ethnic cultural experience. Managers seem to pay more attention on educating consumers about the cultural meaning of ethnic food.

One employee role not examined in this study was that of the cook or chef. Though the people who make and prepare food do not directly interact with consumers, it is the quality of their work that ultimately determines whether consumers return. From the high number of frequent and repeat customers, as well as the high number of people who indicated that the quality of food was very good, the cooks and chefs at this particular restaurant seem to have done their jobs well.

Most of the consumers at this restaurant were satisfied with the service as well as the cultural experience. However, cases were observed where some customers noticed the wait staff serve the bills to customers while they were in the middle of eating. The wait staff could simply be required and trained to wait until the patrons call for the bill and fortune cookies.

Previous studies have demonstrated that the influence of cultural awareness on consumer behavior is difficult to verify without the use of several data collecting methods (Tian and Wang, 2006; DeJesus and Tian, 2004). In this case study, the data collected through observations, informal and formal interviews, provided the necessary information to understand these US consumers’ cultural awareness. Observing participants within the restaurant was particularly useful in studying consumer behaviors and in providing managerial recommendations. Even so, more observations and detailed interviews are necessary to conduct analyses that are more valid. In addition, more detailed interviews with the service staff as well as managerial staff will be significantly useful to better understand consumer behaviors at such an ethnic restaurant.

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