

## **Consumer Culture and Chinese Food in Britain**

**Mike Featherstone and Tomoko Tamari**

Chinese Dietary Association Proceedings, Taiwan, 2006. A Chinese version appeared in *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, no. 8, 2007 pp234-244.

## Introduction

Over the last twenty years in the West there has been an expansion of interest in the food of other cultures. Foreign food, often confined to the outside and deprecated, is now increasingly taken in. There is a greater variety of cuisines and types of food available in restaurants, cafés, supermarkets and specialist shops. In part this can be seen as an effect of the process of globalization with increasing numbers of migrants taking their food with them as they move around the world. Yet it is also the result of the activity of the expanding global food industry, with large corporations transporting raw and cooked food, along with the promotion of food brands and restaurant chains. Food has also become part of the global media, not only with specialist magazines on all forms of cookery in the home, but the expanding range of television channels and the Internet, providing further outlets for learning about food and the ways to integrate food into consumer culture lifestyle activities. There are programmes on ‘authentic’ regional and national cuisines: how to rediscover and recover lost culinary arts. There is also a greater interest, certainly in Anglo-Saxon countries, in the merits of innovation and experimentation, the interest in the creative chef’s capacity to produce global fusion food for the new middle class and upper class audiences seeking taste education and new culinary sensations. These processes, then, can hardly be seen as uniform products of globalization. Different societies possess different food histories, levels of food commercialization, along with customs and attitudes towards eating out and preparation of food at home. Indeed, if consumer culture is about the formation of taste cultures and the operation of distinctions which mark the boundaries between groups, the capacity to distinguish, appreciate and search for fine distinctions in the smell and taste of food, along with the aesthetics of food presentation and framing of the eating experience, can be assumed not only to be important, but to follow diverse paths.

It is a commonplace that the English do not possess a national cuisine of note. Global ethnic food may well be in fashion, but while there are now Ethiopian and Mongolian restaurants in metropolitan centres, there are hardly any English or British restaurants participating in the boom. Indeed, for many this has become something of a topic for jokes, especially from those writing from within nations which assume that they take their food more seriously and can point to the formation of a national cuisine as part of their historical cultural heritage, such as France. The reasons why this happened in

England and not France, are complex and have been subjected to a good deal of debate (see Mennell, 1996). On the positive side, it can be argued this lack of a strong sense of culinary superiority and fixing of tradition, has made English food more open to other influences, most notably in the post Second World War era. What passes as English food today is contested: curry is now apparently more popular than fish and chips or roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, with steak and kidney pudding hard to find on the menu.<sup>1</sup> In the history of the opening up of English food to other cuisines, Chinese food has played a central role. This paper seeks to investigate the place of Chinese food within English culture and discuss its relationship to taste cultures within the development of consumer culture. It can be argued that the shift towards a greater interest in lifestyle construction on the part of the new middle class has encouraged a greater experimentation with cultural goods and experiences, particularly since the 1960s. The success of Chinese food should be understood within this expanding context of consumer culture.

### **Food and Consumer Culture Lifestyle**

Discussions of consumer culture seldom seem to directly discuss food, which is unexpected given the centrality of food in household consumption and the way in which a good part of non-work life is organised around the purchase, preparation and eating of food.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, within consumer culture advertising and publicity, we are not only surrounded by images of the body, we constantly encounter images of food in the urban landscape and of the media. Food outlets in the form of supermarkets, shops, fast food joints and restaurants are evident throughout consumer culture sites such as malls, resorts and urban shopping centres. Food, not only plays an important role in the production of space but also time: in punctuating the daily rhythms which maintain the social fabric. Not only do we organize the regular purchase of food to take home and prepare in the household, food also is consumed outside the home at standardized meal-times or snacks, by increasingly mobile populations. Additionally, food within consumer culture is seen as a pleasurable leisure time activity: to go out for a meal, to meet people, to share and discuss tastes in ambient settings, is frequently presented as a pleasurable experience in its own right. Within the UK over the last decade there has been a noted expansion in the number of restaurants and the range of cuisine offered.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mentioned in the *Time Out London Eating & Drinking Guide 2005*.

<sup>2</sup> A glance at influential texts such as Daniel Bell's *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), Colin Campbell's *Romantic Ethic and Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987) shows no reference to food in the contents or index.

One of the more recent tendencies noted in theories of consumer culture is the emphasis on lifestyle. That is, lifestyle is assumed in the consumer culture popular literature (magazines, advertising, television, self-help books etc) to be something people should actively construct in their leisure time. Lifestyle construction suggests that one's body, appearance, consumer goods, leisure activities can be actively integrated into an assemblage, which has a particular distinctive style (Featherstone, 1991). Consumer culture along with a wide range of media advertising and programming publicity emphasises this achievement view of the life as entailing the duty to explore new possibilities and experiences, to have a life of one's own (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Consumer culture publicity emphasises a learning mode: the need to research, learn and investigate if one is to develop not necessarily 'good taste', in the sense of a socially legitimated upper-class set of dispositions and tastes, but rather a more individualized and exploratory set of tastes. Within contemporary consumer culture the emphasis is on the process of sampling and 'tasting' cultural products, objects and experiences, involves a constant struggle to keep abreast with the new supply of goods and experiences. These tendencies in consumer culture which are associated with lifestyle construction, suggest some of the symbolic hierarchies of cultural taste have become loosened and there is more latitude for variety and invention.

According to Bourdieu (1984) this 'inventiveness' or at least the capacity to play with culture and interest in alternative tastes and sensations culled from different parts of the world, is not to be seen as a general phenomenon throughout the social strata. Rather, it can be found most clearly as a characteristic of a fraction of the new middle class, in particular the new cultural intermediaries: those working in media, design, advertising, journalism, fashion and 'para intellectual' occupations, education and the helping professions, who are attuned to the skills of self presentation and image and learn to handle and play with a variety of cultures, ideas, and experiences (Featherstone, 1991:35). In one sense the habitus, the embodied dispositions and classificatory frames, with which this strata approach the world can be seen as more flexible and experimental with an openness to new possibilities, coupled with an interest in exploring the cultural and historical archive to engage in cultural declassification, or pull out and/or combine attractive and unusual fragments, hence their role as 'merchants of astonishment' (see Featherstone, 1991: 139).

In his ground-breaking study *Distinction* it is noticeable that Bourdieu saw the new middle class's particular set of tastes and dispositions as part of a broader 'universe of class tastes.' He suggests that all consumption and leisure activities: choices in entertainment, vacations, fashions, art, cars, food and drink, etc., work through a logic of oppositions which can be mapped onto a field of whose axes are constructed in terms of volumes of economic and cultural capital which coalesces around class fractions and occupational groups (Bourdieu, 1984:178-9). For our purposes the key aspect is the emphasis upon the way in which different groups possess different tastes which are manifest in their overall habitus, the set of embodied dispositions and classificatory schemes with which they approach the world. A person's habitus directs them to making a series of naturalised judgements about the objects, experiences and people encountered in the social world. As Bourdieu (1984) remarks 'taste, classifies and classifies the classifier.' Alongside one's seemingly inherited or individualised taste ('my taste,' 'I like steak and hate pizza,' 'we can't eat foreign food and prefer a proper meal,' etc.) there is a whole selection apparatus which simplifies and naturalises the cultural choices, which becomes visibly incorporated. Others can see the effects of my taste manifest in the shape, set and stance of my face and body, and vice-versa. Preferences for certain types of foods such as burgers and fried potatoes consumed with sweet fizzy drinks (colas etc) clearly build certain type of bodies.

The new middle class vegetarian eater tends towards a slim ascetic body, especially when combined with body maintenance techniques such as jogging and aerobics. They are more likely to possess a wok and have cooked Asian food. This group includes the new cultural intermediaries, those in media, information and service sectors who learn to produce, handle and play with symbolic goods and cultural codes. In effect, they learn to adopt an open proto-cosmopolitan attitude towards other groups and cultures, which is not only manifest in their work practices, but in a more experimental attitude towards lifestyle and taste. This group are attracted to foreign holidays, sampling new health regimes and body practices, different types of food and drink. Their lives are bound up with a quest for new experiences, new fashions, new places, new tastes and sensations. In effect life can be seen as an adventure, or better as a series of adventures (see Simmel, 1997; Featherstone, 1995). The anthropological approach to cultural difference not only involves the experimentation of going there and being there, fuelling travel and various forms of tourism, it also involves a good deal of preparation work, reading guides and handbooks prior to the embodied experience. In

this sense food is also seen as an essential opening into a culture through the body.<sup>3</sup> Restaurants, then, are often inadvertently and overtly linked to travel, tourism and voyaging. They can prompt memories of a previous visit to a different place or culture, through the way food gives rise to emotional associations in the manner so graphically explored by Marcel Proust. Or alternatively, sampling an exotic cuisine, can provide an imaginative anticipation of what is assumed to be in store for the traveller. As Rebecca Spang (1999:80) reminds us ‘numerous writers have treated the restaurant table as a mode of transportation slightly less marvellous than a flying carpet.’ Additionally buying a foreign cookery book or browsing through the Lonely Planet type of travel guide can stimulate various forms of romantic dreaming and anticipatory pleasures.

The various forms of imaginative work with which food can be overloaded, is to be contrasted to the picture of food Bourdieu (1984) presents with respect to the working class, whose taste set he presents as constrained and confined, using the telling phrase ‘the tastes of necessity.’ This is contrasted to middle and upper class groups who value taste cultivation and have the investment time and money to embark on the learning process which introduces them to more nuanced and elaborate repertoires of taste, not only in music, art, literature, but teaches them how to appreciate good food and wine too. The capacity to discriminate between different tastes, to have an ‘educated palate,’ involves a distancing and reflective judgement, which allegedly contrasts to the direct immediacy of taste experienced by the working class. The working class are presented as preferring strong food and drink: ‘salty, substantial, clearly masculine foods’ such as soup, meat, cheese, which relates to the ideal of making a strong and virile as opposed to a lithe and fit, male body (Bourdieu, 1984:382).

Bourdieu has been criticized for his one-dimensional view of working class, whose culture he presents as defensive and passive, lacking a positive self-image, conceding too much legitimacy to the upper and middle classes. In addition, he does not address the dynamics between class fractions within working class culture. Here we think of Bernice Martin’s (1982) account of the changes within British culture since the 1960s. She provides a fine-grained description of respectable northern working class culture in which she emphasises the high degree of order in the working class house. Everything

---

<sup>3</sup> As Jonathan Parry remarks: ‘A man *is* what he eats. Not only is his body substance created out of food, but so is his moral disposition too’ (cited in Ohnuki-Tierney, 199?: 245).

has its place, meals must be on time, dishes washed and tidied away straight after the meal, furniture and fireplace shiny and polished, etc., suggesting the operation of a rigid code with strong classifications. A world in which housewives and mothers prided themselves in producing nourishing wholesome 'traditional' English home cooked food, based around copious quantities of fresh meat for their men. One thinks also of the typical confidence in the superiority of this food and the strong boundary erected against 'foreign food' and the disgust expressed at the use of garlic and other 'strange' ingredients. Her picture is of the respectable working class who gained considerable pride in achieving and preserving an ordered life to distinguish them from the lower and lumpen elements, the 'rough' working class who are slovenly, untidy and dirty, who possess weak classifications and frames.<sup>4</sup>

Martin argues that in the 1960s a new dynamic became evident: the development of a transgressive counter culture. The respectable working class gradually lost in income and prestige through changes in the division of labour which propelled forward new service occupations and part-time female labour to replace the traditional manual and skilled labour. This new group enjoyed few of the job rights and trade union protected income levels of the former working class with its skilled 'aristocracy of labour.' Also interesting is the dynamic within the middle class which saw the emergence of the new middle class (Bourdieu's new petite bourgeoisie) who unlike the traditional middle class, were not locally based small shopkeepers, businessmen, or white collar workers, but a new educated strata who had gained cultural capital through higher education and worked in service, information and media occupations – they produced immaterial labour and culturally saturated or informational goods. This class fraction was of course not new and can be seen as becoming increasingly prominent with each of the various waves in development of consumer culture and the expansion of services in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (1860s, 1890s, 1920s etc.). What is interesting about this group is that the flirtation with cultural expressivity brought them into conflict with the bourgeois values of hard work, respectability and the ordered life and opened up other more bohemian identifications. Here we find the long-term attraction for the middle classes of the otherness cast out from the mainstream, the appeal of expressivity and emotional de-control, the allure of sites of ordered disorder such as the

---

<sup>4</sup> Today's lower class (those who often work in low-paid service jobs, the 'Mac-jobs,' which have variously been characterised as 'the underclass,' and 'the excluded' (see discussion in Wacquant, 1998;; Sennett, 1999), are more likely to eat fast-food and ready made meals and snacks which are high in fats and sugars. They typically take little exercise after youth, or increasingly in childhood and youth. It is not surprising that this produces bulky overweight bodies which fuel the current concern for obesity in Western countries.

carnival, the fair, the music-hall, the seaside resort, the circus, the slum, the exotic, the desert island (Stallybrass and White, 1986; Featherstone, 1991:81).

Some of these themes were taken up within artistic modernism and found their way into consumer culture.<sup>5</sup> If then, it can be argued that in the late twentieth century in particular we have seen some democratization of bohemian themes which spread into mainstream culture via the '60s counter culture, advertising, rock music etc. (see Wilson, 1998, on bohemia), then it would be expected that some of the taste hierarchies which operated in Britain and other Western countries, have become de-stabilized. We also might expect not only less emotional investment in rigid classifications and strong distinctions. This informalization meant a greater capacity to tolerate emotional de-control and explore situations which would previously have been perceived as threatening and have resulted in angry outbursts or hysterical responses (Wouters, 1987).

In terms of British food and its place within consumer culture since the 1960s, we have seen a greater curiosity in the variety of tastes from around the world, coupled with a greater experimentation and innovation in producing new hybrid fusions between cuisines which were previously kept separate. It has been argued that food should not be treated in the same manner as other consumer goods, as it is not subjected to the same dictates of stylistic innovation and fashion (Warde, 1997). At the same time an analysis of magazines suggests there was an upsurge of interest in foreign food in the 1960s and that in the period from the 1960s to 1990s this interest extended from British and European food, to food from other parts of the world from places like China, the Caribbean, Africa and Mexico (Warde, 1997:57ff).<sup>6</sup>

There has also been a notable increase in the media coverage given to eating out since the 1960s. This has been evident in the proliferation of recipe books, food guides, newspaper columns and television coverage. In terms of the latter, the emergence of super or celebrity chefs with their own programmes, elaborate recipes and accompanying high colour books and glossy magazine features, has been evident. Indeed since the 1980s an ironic new term has emerged to refer to those, largely from

---

<sup>5</sup> In the United States in the 1920s, for example, it was argued that the burgeoning consumer culture drew heavily on the transgressive and hedonistic themes derived from the bohemian lifestyle of artists and intellectuals in Greenwich Village. This is, of course, central to the argument about the development of consumer culture made by Daniel Bell (1976) who detects a shift from the hard work Puritan values to hedonistic self-expression and the development of a 'fun' ethic at this time.

<sup>6</sup> Citing a survey of magazines, Warde mentions that between 1968 and 1992 the percentage of recipes dealing with ethnic food from outside Europe increased from 10 percent to 39 percent.

the middle class, who have become enthusiasts: ‘foodies’ (see Warde, 1997:106). In particular, it is certain fractions of the middle class, especially professionals, who have been spending large proportions of their food expenditure on eating out in restaurants (Warde, 1997:117).<sup>7</sup> The general trend has been one of increasing diversity of types of food on offer in restaurants and other outlets such as fast-food and take-aways.<sup>8</sup> This has been coupled with a relaxation of the rules governing the eating of food, with etiquette and table manners becoming more informal in many sectors of the social structure (although class, age and generational differences are still notable). Fewer people eat the traditional English ‘meat and two veg,’ or the Sunday roast dinner and ‘curry’ has apparently become the most popular English meal.

When we look more closely at the relationship between food, taste and consumer culture in Britain, we can identify a number of questions which could be useful to frame our discussion of the reception and development of Chinese food here. How has Chinese food in Britain made the transition from being an ethnic food – the food that Chinese people in Britain eat – to an acceptable and normal part of British cuisine? In the same way that many people may identify pizza as normal British food, how are we to understand the dynamic of exoticization and de-exoticization at work here? With the normalization of Chinese food has there been a tendency to re-exoticize it for the new middle class, with restaurants expanding their menu to take in more regional variations and even produce Chinese ‘fusion’ food – e.g. nouvelle cuisine ‘crossover’ dim sum. Have menus of Chinese take-aways remained pretty stable over the years, or have the tastes of their largely youthful clientele shifted? How is Chinese food presented in the media – is it a part of the celebrity chef repertoire and the glossy food magazine and cook book circuit and is this in terms of whole dishes or particular ingredients, sauces etc.?

### **Chinese immigrants and the expansion of Chinese catering**

The history of Chinese food in Britain should be understood in relation to the history of Chinese immigrants. The size of the Chinese population in Britain was pretty negligible until the nineteenth century and it was only with the turn of twentieth century that the so-called ‘Chinatowns’ began to take shape in London and Liverpool’ (Ng, 1968:5). The early Chinese settlers in England were seamen and this is evident in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Cheung (2002:171) also detects a similar impact of the new middle class on the popularity of Chinese food in Japan in his case study of Yokohama Chinatown.

<sup>8</sup> Of the ethnic restaurants visited in the last year in a survey carried out in 1995, Indian (33%), Italian (31%) and Chinese (29%) were the most frequent – yet pubs bar meals (49%) and pub restaurants (41%) along with fast food joints/burgers (49%) bars were the most popular (Warde, 2000:76).

*1901 Census* when 61 percent were classified as seaman (although the actual number was a paltry 237 - the only other significant category being 27 people employed in laundries). By 1911, when so-called 'Chinatowns' had been founded in London and Liverpool, the percentage of Chinese employed in seafaring had dropped to 36% (480 persons) and the number of laundry men, on the other hand, rose to 26% (351 persons) (Ng, 1968: 10). By 1921 there were 547 (22%) laundry man and 455 (19%) seamen; with only a small handful of restaurant keepers (26 persons) (Ng, 1986:10). In 1951, with the increased introduction of domestic washing machines and laundrettes, the Chinese hand-iron laundry had all but disappeared, with only 20 persons recorded as still engaged in this occupation; on the other hand, the number of restaurant proprietors and managers had more than doubled to 36 (Ng, 1968:10).

the decline of Chinese laundries and concomitant increase in the number of Chinese restaurants is interesting (Ng, 1968:10).<sup>9</sup> Although it was natural to expect Chinese immigrants with limited command of English, to seek to convert from the laundry business to catering, given the latter being basically domestic work which seemingly did not require special skill, but this begs the question of the demand for Chinese food. In this process, one might posit an over-supply of restaurants and cheap labour, given that the catering business was often the first point of call for migrants (Driver, 1983:75). In the early phase up until the 1940s, the majority of customers in the restaurants were not the English, but Chinese immigrants. The proportion of Chinese engaged in the catering business increased and Chinese immigrants also become a relatively noticeable category of British immigrants.<sup>10</sup>

Before the Second World War the number of Chinese restaurants in Britain, particularly in London, was less than ten. The first Chinese restaurant in London was established in 1908 (Ng, 1968:27). Most of the early Chinese restaurants in Britain were small noodle shops and cheap diners catering for Chinese seamen in the dock areas of Liverpool and London (Cheung, 1970, cited in Watson, 1975:104). In the inter-war years, their main customers were Chinese students, with none too many of them. The negative attitude of the English was clear: 'No Englishmen ever came near a Chinese

---

<sup>9</sup> According to Ng, 'it is worth noting that almost fivefold increase of Hong Kong-born residents in London from 1951-1961, a feature compatible with the great influx of Chinese from the New Territories into England, especially London, to work in the catering business' (1968: 11).

<sup>10</sup> 'In earlier centuries, when the Han and Tang dynasties were expanding their empires westwards along the arid trail of the Silk Road, if an innkeeper could produce a large bowl of steaming noodles after a day's journey through biting wind and sand, he could bring untold joy. So it was and is when any Chinese, student, businessman or refugee, travels anywhere. The eating houses provide a beacon to guide the weary and alienated traveller to safety. Just as I had found board and lodging at 'The Nanking' restaurant in Berlin after leaving the Olympic village, so, decade later, I could still find refuge and identity in a Chinese eating house' (Kenneth Lo, 1988:173).

restaurant, and in those days no Englishmen would even look at a Chinese' (Chong Mong Young, 1961 cited in Ng, 1968:28). This strong coding of inside/outside, English/foreign could be seen as part of the continuing nation-state formation process, which since the mid-nineteenth century developed narratives and images which furthered myths of national greatness and purity of origins. Various waves occurred: opening up to cheap labour when the economy was in the boom part of the cycle, or wartime as in World War One, and then closing down in times of recession. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, there were racially motivated disturbances in London, Liverpool and Birkenhead and thirty Chinese laundries were destroyed in Cardiff in response to what was seen as the unfair use of Chinese strikebreakers in the 1911 seamen's strike (Parker, 1998:71). Over one hundred thousand Chinese were shipped from Shandong province by France and Britain to the western front in World War One to work as cooks, trenchdiggers etc. After the war in 1919 there were disturbances between Irish and Chinese in East London with Chinese homes stoned and fears of race riots, resulting in deportations under the 1919 Aliens Act (Parker, 1998:73). Further racist tropes and Orientalism were evident in the moral panics about the threat of drug abuse and exotic debauchery in Chinatown in the interwar years (Kohn, 1992) as economic growth faltered and nationalism flourished in Europe. A xenophobic world of strong racial distinctions in which 'the wogs started at Calais' became reinforced in the interwar years (Cary, 1992).<sup>11</sup>

It was not until after the Second World War that Chinese food and Chinese restaurants began to be discovered by the British public at a time of economic expansion and labour shortage.<sup>12</sup> Chinese restaurants grew gradually in numbers with a restaurant boom taking off by the mid-1950s (Watson, 1975:104). As Kenneth Lo remarks

---

<sup>11</sup> Our earlier discussion of the new middle class and their fascination with the carnivalesque, bohemia, the south sea island and exotica, suggests that this was not the whole story. Such tendencies have a long genealogy as a counter culture within English culture, and there were many who were able to identify with what was cast out and put on the boundary through the application of strong categories. Here we think of the attraction of intellectuals and artists to an exoticized orientalized India, in which the other's body, food and way of life became fascinating. This is sometimes bound up with a critique of the racist categories in operation in the mainstream culture of English colonial administrators as we find in George Orwell's essay 'Shooting an Elephant.' The reasons for the shift in attitude towards ethnic food could well be seen as part of a general shift in global power away from the West, along the lines identified by Norbert Elias (1982) in the final chapter of *The Civilizing Process*.

<sup>12</sup>By the 1930s, several Chinese restaurants were operating in Central London. Perhaps the most popular among Westerners was the *Ley On* in Wardour Street, where in the 1930s one could order a single dish, with rice for one shilling and three pence. There were two or three Chinese restaurants in the West End, their clientele consisting mainly of Chinese students. *Choy's Chinese Restaurant* opened in the late 1930s and later moved to its present location on the King's Road. *The Shanghai* Restaurant in Greek Street was also operating by 1939 (Robert, 2002:157). Ken Lo also referred to the three major predecessors of Chinese restaurants of the day: *Yang* of Hong Kong, *Shang* of Fava and *Ley-On* of Ley Ons were the three Chinese culinary 'musketeers' who laid claim to the heart of London (Lo, 1988:174). *Ley On* and *Shanghai*, in particular, were still going strong in the late 1950s. (Roberts, 2002:170).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Chinese food rapidly gained popularity in the West. Westerners had gone East in unprecedented numbers and brought back a taste for the Orient. The troops may only have had time to gulp back their food, but even that experience left them in no doubt that the Chinese chefs had more to offer than their counterparts back home. With large scale migrations of ethnic Chinese, prospecting for a better life overseas, following the Gold Rush, fleeing from Communism, the decades after the war saw hundreds of thousands moving westwards and bringing with them all their culinary expertise. Whenever they had passed you could always find a bottle of soya sauce or root of ginger to track the migration. And, where the settlement had put down deeper roots, Chinese restaurants sprang up as tangible staging posts for the progress of that tide. (Lo, 1993:173)

We can identify a number of factors in the Chinese restaurant boom. Firstly, in line with Lo's remarks above, British soldiers returning from various parts of the Empire and Far East had many opportunities to become familiar with and enjoy Chinese food.<sup>13</sup> Some of these become frequent customers to Chinese restaurants, especially after the end of rationing in 1949. Secondly, there was an increase in Chinese immigrants,<sup>14</sup> in particular after the 1949 Communist Revolution, with 'Northern' Chinese former staff of the Nationalist Chinese embassy which was closed down. These were Mandarin speakers who went on to operate some of the most expensive 'Peking-style' restaurants in the greater London area (Watson, 1975:104).

Yet, the largest group of Chinese restaurant's owners and workers originated from Hong Kong's New Territories (Watson, 1975:104).<sup>15</sup> In the 1940s and '50s when labour shortages encouraged governments to open up immigration, the number of Hong Kong

---

<sup>13</sup> In particular: 'American soldiers stationed in London, returned colonial officials, and others who had acquired a liking for Chinese food while serving in the Far East (Ng, 1968:28).

<sup>14</sup> After 1945, the substantial increase in the post-war Chinese population of Britain can be attributed to the post-war demand for labour. The colonial status of Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia and Britain's permissive immigration laws facilitated emigration. Under the 1948 British Nationality Act, Commonwealth citizens had the right to settle in Britain (Parker, 1998:75).

<sup>15</sup> Why did Chinese people come to Britain from Hong Kong? The major impetus was the disruption of life in rural Hong Kong. Several factors combined to undermine the livelihood of subsistence rice-growers in the New Territories. The vast numbers of refugees fleeing China in 1949 began to put pressure on the land. Many of the new comers from southern China were skilled agriculturalists and competed with Hong Kong peasants. At about this time, cheap rice was beginning to be imported from Thailand. The urbanization of Hong Kong and the development of supply lines and a transport infrastructure were drawing new generations into the city. A settled way of life was disturbed; emigration seemed a viable solution. Britain, the colonial 'motherland', was an obvious destination, not because it welcomed them but because it needed their labour (Parker, 1998:75).

Chinese immigrants increased. The impending 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act was a further factor accelerating Chinese immigration. The regulation removed from Commonwealth citizens the automatic right to British citizenship. Under its terms, prospective entrants from the Commonwealth (other than the highly skilled) could enter Britain only with an employment voucher for a specific job obtained for them by their prospective employer. Hence, there was a spurt of migration from Hong Kong in 1961 and 1962 to beat the ban. The requirement of needing to have a job in advance furthered the concentration of Chinese settlers in catering through family, kin and village connections (Watson, 1975 cited in Parker, 1998:77). The dominance of Hong Kong and Guang Dong Chinese meant that what most British thought of as Chinese food was in fact a version of Cantonese food. Other regional foods – Peking or Szechwan, became filtered through this culinary grid, as the vast majority of chefs were Cantonese trained and such was the hold of the Hong Kong/Guang Dong group, that they owned the majority of other regional restaurants too (for a discussion of the dynamics at work in the reception of Chinese food in other parts of the world see Wu and Cheung, 2002).

Thirdly, as Ng (1986:28) reminds us, food rationing was in force during and soon after the war; after rationing ended, restaurant of all sorts proliferated.<sup>16</sup> Fourthly, for the same amount of money, one can buy a more substantial meal in a Chinese restaurant than in other types. What has been referred to as ‘the rice-bowl revolution’ (Driver, 1983:80) began to occur in Britain when the wartime canteen culture was disappearing. They offered an element of consumer choice to those who had become bored by the uniformity and egalitarianism fostered by rationing (Roberts, 2002:171).

Fifthly, reinforcing the shift in eating habits after the Second World War, with ‘eating out’ becoming more popular, Parker (1998:75) remarks that ‘The rebuilding of the country, the development of suburban lifestyles, and the rise in the number of women workers combined to boost the practice of ‘eating out’ once post-war rationing had ended.’

---

<sup>16</sup> Later, around 1975, ‘the economic setbacks that Britain has suffered in recent years have had a serious impact on the business of the ordinary Chinese restaurants. People are now less inclined to pay high prices when they dine out. In response, many of the New Shops emerged, which are cheaper than restaurants. The carry-out business has become very popular in the London area and reached a peak’ (Man, 1968 cited in Watson, 1975:105).

This combination of good value for money, unthreatening unpretentious ambience, yet adventurous food, contrasted with the perception of English restaurants in the 1950s where food was often dull and atmosphere stuffy and over formal. As Roberts remarks

In British cities and towns in the 1950s the choice of places to eat out was restricted to hotels which served uninspired food, restaurants which tended to be expensive and pubs which might not be considered appropriate eating places for couples or young women on their own. A Chinese restaurant offered a cheap meal and table service in an acceptable environment. It also offered a kind of adventure. This combination was attracted to young people and in particular to students and so it is not surprising that some of the earliest Chinese restaurants in provincial Britain opened in university towns (Roberts, 2002:178).

In this sense, Chinese restaurant provided not only food, but also new safe spaces in the city for woman and young people.

### **The negative image of Chinese food**

In the middle of 1960s, however, the British attitudes to Chinese people and Chinese food were still ambivalent. According to the *Good Food Guide*,<sup>17</sup> one of the leading food magazines of the day: ‘The ambivalence of British attitudes to Chinese culture is no more evident than in the case of food, a most basic form of intercultural contact’ (Parker, 1998: 76).

In *The Good Food Guide 1963-64* (the book was then biennial) eight Chinese and six Indian or Malaysian restaurants were listed in London out of total of 164 that satisfied the examiners (Driver, 1983:81). A *Daily Mail* article published on 15 October 1965, had the headline: ‘It’s boom time for Tim Suin Yuk’ (sweet and sour pork) and presents many themes that still recur in food commentary (see Driver, 1983; Pile, 1985 cited in Parker, 1998:76). On the one hand, the Chinese are commended for having ‘revolutionized British catering with their readiness to keep open late.’ On the other hand, they are put in their place: ‘whether, or not one likes their cooking, they have served us well’ (Parker, 1998:76).

---

<sup>17</sup> Raymond (William) Postgate (1896-1971) was the founder of this journal. He was an English social historian and mystery writer, whose best-known crime novel is *Verdict of Twelve* (1940). He had always been interested in food and wine, and he decided to make an effort to raise standards by editing the reports of a band of volunteers on their visits to British hotels and restaurants. The highly influential *Good Food Club* was born as a result of the idea. Postgate wrote books about choosing and serving wine, and edited *The Good Food Guide to Britain*, which was published biennially. In 1962, the publication was taken over by the Consumers' Association. (<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/postgate.htm>).

Many of those who came to eat Chinese food in Chinese restaurants did not have ‘a negative image’ of Chinese food. ‘What constituted an appropriate diet’ was a major topic of the day, and Chinese food was considered as a potential risk food, due to putative negative of opinions. Roberts mentions a series of attitudes recalled forty years later by *Saga Magazine* correspondents:

One wrote that his mother firmly believed that chicken served in Chinese restaurants came from dead cats. She would not, under any circumstances, accept an invitation to eat in such a place. Another rumours that ‘Kitty Kat’ cat food was served in Chinese restaurants, but was determined not to be influenced by them. A third remembered that in 1960, while still in bed after the birth of her third child, her husband had volunteered to get a Chinese takeaway, even though at that time tales were rife of people who ate Chinese food getting bones stuck in their throat which were later identified not as chicken bones, but cats’ or even rats’ bones (Roberts, 2002:178).

#### **From restaurant to take-away: the 1970s**

After the great influx of Chinese male immigrants from Hong Kong with the approach of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act which came into effect on 1 July 1962, the Chinese population kept growing with the addition of their family members. Moreover, in the period 1962-1973, 10,000 mainland Chinese were also admitted to Britain. Many of them were in their early twenties and became cheap labour exploited by some of the larger Chinese restaurants (Roberts, 2002: 174). 16,000 Vietnamese refugees, 70 per cent of whom were ethnic Chinese, arrived in Britain in the 1970s. As a result, the Chinese population of Britain had risen to 154,763 by 1981 (Roberts: 174). A consequence was that ‘It is now almost impossible to find a town in England (and increasingly Scotland) with a population of 5000 or more that does not have at least one Chinese or take-away shop’ (Watson, 1977 cited in Roberts, 2002: 174). Watson estimated that the number of restaurants and takeaways was then about 4,000, and suggested that saturation point had been reached. The number of restaurants and takeaways continued to increase and by 1984, the total was estimated at 7,000 (Roberts, 2002: 174).

According to data made available by the Hong Kong government Office in London, there were 1,406 Chinese restaurants in the United Kingdom in 1970 (Watson,

1975:104). These restaurants were influenced by the economic setback of Britain in the 1970s, with people unwilling to pay high prices when they ate out. 'In response, many of the New Territories immigrants have opened take-out Chinese food shop, which are cheaper than restaurants' (Watson, 1975: 105). Another reason could be the introduction of Value Added Tax (VAT). VAT was resented by most Chinese restaurants and can be seen as further encouraging customers to switch from restaurants to more economical take-aways and fish and chip shops, which require fewer staff and were not subject to VAT (Driver, 1983: 80). These take aways could be operated by a family unit and 'require only 'hole-in-the wall' premises' (Watson, 1975:106). They were able to make good profit as a result of their low cost conditions. Family labour also was an important means of allowing Chinese caterers to react to new competition from American fast-food chains (Parker, 1998:77). The number of Chinese restaurants and takeaways were larger than Pakistani and Indian counterparts in the 1970s. To succeed against their competitors, Chinese families had to work long hours, and in addition 'their anti-social hours enabled them compete successfully with British proprietors of fish and chip shop.'(Roberts, 2002: 175).

### **Social networks and Chinese restaurants and takeaways**

Although the majority of workers in Chinese restaurants had been procured by relatives, often from the same village, this does not mean that Chinese restaurants and takeaways became places of communication and sociability amongst Chinese immigrants.

Watson stated that 'they (Chinese restaurants and takeaway shops) are certainly not spaces where Chinese people can interact with the outside world on their own terms' (cited in Parker, 1998:79). This is because as family businesses they seldom had a chance to work with non-Chinese people, or even Chinese from different provinces. Family businesses proved good ways to cut investment costs and minimise potential conflict between employees and employers,<sup>18</sup> increase productivity, solidarity and loyalty. Employees from outside the family could always have the ambition to have their own business and potentially be future competitors. In addition, most Chinese did not have good command of the English language<sup>19</sup> which increased their isolation and made it practically impossible to gain other forms of employment. It was also

---

<sup>18</sup> Fathers and elder brothers managed to run a business with female labour, which was seen as 'the foundation-stone of the British Chinese family economy' (Parker, 1998: 79).

<sup>19</sup> By the late 1960s, the Chinese population in Britain consisted of three main groups. First there were a recently migrated group of catering employees, originating largely in the New Territories, many speaking Hakka. (These were employed by established Chinese restaurants). Second, there were students and professionals from Hong Kong, and especially from Singapore and Malaysia. Those who settled were able to work outside the catering economy, because of their better knowledge of English. Third, there were the earlier seafarers and laundry owners in London, Liverpool and Cardiff and their dependent children. From the late 1960s onwards these become an important source of new labour (Parker, 1998:77).

difficult to have a good network amongst Chinese people who came from different provinces/villages who normally spoke their own dialect.<sup>20</sup>

### **From take-aways to ethnic food as consumer culture lifestyle**

Roberts suggests that the growth of Chinese restaurants and takeaways across the Britain went through three distinct phases. The first phase was a period from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s when a boom occurred in Chinese catering,<sup>21</sup> a period in the 1970s and 1980s when the consumption of Chinese food in various forms became entrenched in British eating habits, and from the late 1990s a period when substantial amounts of capital were invested into more sophisticated restaurants (Roberts, 2002:170). By 1970, the number of UK Chinese catering businesses of all kinds had levelled out at about 4,000. By the early 1965, 31 per cent of those who ate out regularly or occasionally had visited Chinese restaurants (*Smethurst's National Catering Enquiry* cited in Driver, 1983:80).

This suggests that British eating habits were changing thorough an increase in the standard of living, with eating out regularly and eating foreign food becoming a part of lifestyle. Additionally, holidays abroad and tourism became since the 1960s, with a wider spectrum of people having the opportunity to encounter exotic food in different countries. The general expansion of consumer culture through renewed transport infrastructure enabled supermarkets and department stores to provide a greater variety of food and cooking ingredients and materials from various parts of the world. For new middle class people, 'rich ethnic food culture' became linked to lifestyle (Diver, 1983:79), for reasons we have discussed above in terms of the expansion of the tastes of this group within consumer culture.

In 1965, five Chinese restaurants opened in rapid succession in an obscure street in London's West End theatre district (L. Wong 1967:8 cited in Watson, 1975:116).

---

<sup>20</sup> The increase in the number of Chinese restaurants led to the establishment of merchandise shop to supply the ingredients of Chinese food to these restaurants. In comparing the merchandise shops in London with those in the old Chinatowns of the United States, Ng quotes R.H. Lee who suggests that in the US Chinese merchandise shops functioned as public spaces to form Chinese communities, with informal post office, banking facilities etc. (Ng, 1958:32) London Chinese merchandise store were essentially economic institutions with hardly any such secondary social functions.

<sup>21</sup> *The Good Food Guide* 1963-64 edition mentioned that eight Chinese and six Indian/Malaysian restaurants in London out of a total 164 had satisfied the examiners (Driver, 1983:81).

They provided authentic Chinese food, which had seldom been seen in Britain before. One restaurant was opened by a Beijing chef on Willesden High Road in 1966 to provide North Chinese food – to later be celebrated by *The Good Food Guide* as ‘the most important cultural defection since Nureyev’ (Robert, 2002:181).

Chinese *haute cuisine* was provided by a number of highly paid, expert chefs, but these men work in the more elegant London restaurants or in establishments catering exclusively for the Chinese community (Watson, 1975:110). Kenneth Lo, was one of the best of them and is generally recognised as the most successful Chinese chef in Britain; as he puts it in his own words: ‘I became the hub around which most matters concerning Chinese food and cookery revolved. At different times I was the inspector for both the *Egon Ronay Guide* and the *Good Food Guide*’ (Lo, 1993:178). In the 1970s Kenneth Lo and his wife organized a Chinese Gourmet Club as part of his mission to encourage the spread of Chinese food culture.<sup>22</sup> He travelled to many parts of Britain to introduce Chinese food to middle class people; he tells us:

At its height the Club had a membership of 1,000 and I must have personally taken 20,000 people out to dinner in London. But we could not find it in ourselves to exploit our market. We were charging next to nothing for the annual subscription and collected it erratically. The net result was that there was not enough in the till to pay for the cost of postage, packing, secretarial and printing costs. The bank manager never failed to remind us of our overdraft. (Lo, 1993:181)

He concluded that the activities of the Chinese Gourmet Club was very important in helping to diffuse Chinese food throughout British eating culture, as well as providing British people with a new type of eating experience. Ken Lo came from an upper-class Chinese family, was well-educated and spoke perfect English and could move freely in society and became very well-connected at a time which it was rare to do so. Lo amassed considerable social and cultural capital and was commissioned to write food articles for Penguin Books. As he puts it ‘From writing, reviewing and eating, by the 1970s more and more people were drawn to enquire of me as to what to eat, what Chinese dishes to choose and where to go for good food’ (Lo, 1993:178). Chinese

---

<sup>22</sup> Ken Lo mentions the centrality of his wife: ‘Ann’s role at the periphery of my activities, arranging meals and menus, these activities eventually grew the Chinese Gourmet Club. Between 1975 and 1980 Ann and I organized as many as ninety Chinese Gourmet Dinners a year in all parts of London. Sometimes we even made excursions as far a field as Birmingham, Manchester or even Alderney Edge (Lo, 1993:179).

food was becoming par of the affluent new middle class lifestyle by the 1980s. A good example was *The Yang Sing*<sup>23</sup> in Manchester, which in 1981 became the first ethnic restaurant to win the coveted *Good Food Guide* restaurant of the year award (Roberts, 2002:181).

In the 1990s the increasing popularity of Chinese food led to the expansion of more sophisticated and more expensive Chinese restaurants in big cities such as London and Manchester. These new type of Chinese restaurants tended to have more elaborate interior design and cultivated ambience, along with better facilities, and in some cases car parking for customers. In effect, Chinese restaurants had gone up market; as Roberts remarks ‘these restaurants did not offer any specific Chinese cuisine, but in other ways claimed a degree of authenticity by expecting clients to use chopstick and by not offering Western dishes alongside the Chinese menu’ (Roberts,2002:182).<sup>24</sup>

Customers who lived in the suburbs and arrived by car, adopted more of a learning approach to Chinese food and sought to cultivate their taste and show off their technical mastery of both chopsticks and a sophisticated Chinese menu. This was very different from ordinary cheap Chinese restaurants and takeaways. Knowledge of Chinese culture was also ‘on the up’ in the symbolic hierarchy with the economic and cultural expansion of Chinese economies around the world. Yet this was a process which could move in a number of different directions. People might invest in knowledge of Chinese culture and food, and become more of an expert in the harmonious spiritual and health benefits.<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, they might become bored of narrowly conceived

---

<sup>23</sup> Kwan Yeung arrived in England from Hong Kong in 1968. He was a renowned Dim Sum chef in Honk Kong, and found himself in demand in many Chinese restaurants in the UK. In 1977, he took over a failing French restaurant, renaming it *Yang Sing* (Canton City). He soon became celebrated amongst the Chinese community as the best Dim Sum Chef in Manchester. The obvious popularity of the venue attracted the local Manchester gastronomes and the success of the Yang Sing was soon secured. Refreshingly, the *Yang Sing* staff took the initiative when serving their exquisite food, adopting a specialised approach to each customer, dispensing with the menu in most cases and advising what each should try. This approach, and the spectacular quality of their dishes, secured the *Yang Sing*’s popularity.

<sup>24</sup> I recall one working class friend in Yorkshire in the early 1960s who would invariably order rump steak and chips and never touch Chinese food, while I experimented with Egg Foo Yung, special Chow Mein and Sweet and Sour Pork which were truly exotic to English palates at the time. Apart from the usual banter and his ‘how can you eat that?’ jokes, he never elaborated on his culinary caution. At that time menus also had a sizable English section with steaks, omelettes and other staples. I guess he found the Chinese restaurant good value for money, and to sit in one was one of the few adventures available in a smallish northern town (MF author note).

<sup>25</sup> Chinese food also fitted in with the new middle class focus on body maintenance and the healthy lifestyle, increasingly popular over the last two decades. The vegetarian boom give a boost to Chinese cuisine, which henceforth became identified as healthy food (stir fries and steaming in particular were ‘in’). For some sectors of the population such as the new middle class the cooking of Chinese and Asian food became part of a reaction to ‘junk food,’ burgers, sausages, pies, hydrogenated fats etc. Indeed vegetarianism was given a big boost by the public reaction to BSE and other food scares such as GMOs, as well as the recent obesity epidemic, which were all in various ways linked to the excesses of the Western diet and profit-lead agribusiness and food industries. But whether health conscious vegetarian, meat or fish eater, Chinese cuisine offered a new food universe for the middle classes to explore and culture industries and the media were quick to stimulate this appetite with cookery books, magazines, television programmes, along with the ingredients and kitchenware now routinely supplied through

national food cultures and follow the trend in restaurants towards fusion foods, sampling Chinese-Japanese or Chinese–South American fusions created by the new breed of young chefs brought up on the celebrity chef boom of the last decade, keen to make their mark with innovative dishes and menus, designed to stimulate the jaded pallets of those suffering from restaurant neurasthenia and food anomie. The shift was evident in the introduction to the Chinese restaurant section of the *Timeout London Eating and Drinking Guide* for 2004, which immediately sought to distance itself from the old Chinese restaurant past. Readers were cautioned to avoid at all costs set menus which ‘pander to outdated western stereotypes of Chinese food with clichéd dishes such as sweet and sour pork, chicken in black bean sauce, egg-fried rice.’ Instead people were encouraged to be adventurous and learn to master the art of ordering a variety of dishes and to balance a variety of ingredients. The *Guide* also remarked that ‘dingy décor and claustrophobic dining rooms are out... in comes clean lines and trendy lighting,’ with a number of restaurants seeking to recreate the atmosphere of a traditional Chinese house, inn or restaurant.

Alan Yau is an interesting case study of the new type of Chinese entrepreneur with his upmarket *Hakkasan*, which opened in 2001, being the prototype of a new form of Chinese restaurant which seeks to blend the atmosphere of a recreated traditional Chinese inn with a nightclub ambience and lighting, with loud heavy beat house music, serving expensive innovate global fusion food and cocktails. *Hakkasan* was cleverly designed by *Christian Liagre*, who aimed to recreate the feel of ‘a decadent brothel in Shanghai.’ If the setting for the food was an example of ‘soft engineering,’ equal care was taken in devising the menu. Its nouveau-gourmet Chinese menu featured dishes such as: Peking duck with royal beluga caviar, roast silver cod with champagne and Chinese honey, steamed crab in Shao Hsing wine, stir-fried jellyfish, squid and Chinese chives, pan-fried rib-eye beef with sweet soya and almond, roast duck with mango and lemon sauce, plum, wine jelly and lychee sorbet. Yau comments ‘I like to get into the deeper semantics of these things. I’m interested in using traditional ingredients – jasmine flower, chocolate fondant – in a modern way. But without the superficiality of just being shocking or contrary. Keeping it Chinese, not fusion, and still being modern – that’s difficult.’ *Hakkasan* cost in the region of £4.5 million (approximately \$8

---

supermarkets and department stores. Woks, root ginger, soy sauce, oyster sauce, dried mushrooms, bean curd and a host of varieties of noodles were now less than exotic. How many teenagers and students snacked on instant ‘pot noodles’ without really considering whether these were Chinese?

million), but the investment would seem to have paid off as it won a Michelin star and it is constantly booked out.<sup>26</sup>

A further point of interest in terms of the place of Chinese restaurants within English food relates to the general rise of interest in restaurant cuisine in Britain and the perceived rise in quality of the range and variety of food served. One indicator, of the global standing of English food in relation to French food which we referred to at the beginning of the paper, is the rating of the top restaurants in the world. We have of course to be highly sceptical of global ratings and the over use of terms such as ‘world class;’ we need to ask who constructs the lists, on what criteria and what is the location of the judges. But it is interesting to note that in the English-based *Restaurant Magazine's* ‘50 Best Restaurants in the World 2005’ 14 of the top 50 restaurants were English. The overall winner was an English restaurant, *The Fat Duck* at Bray, near Oxford. Its innovative menu from Chef Heston Blumenthal includes: sardine on toast sorbet, snail porridge, bacon and egg ice cream. It is also of interest to note that David Yau’s restaurants *Hakkasan* and *Yauatcha*, were respectively 30<sup>th</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> on the list. So British based Chinese fusion food, in this particular indicator of global esteem can be seen to have been held in high regard.

## **Chinese Food and Global Food Culture**

How far, then, is Chinese food now considered to be a part of English cuisine? The answer to the above question is usually conceived in historical terms: over time different countries take in other food and forget its cultural origins. Tea becomes the drink of the English and potatoes the staple food with their origins in China and the Americas forgotten; rice too has been seen as typically Japanese with its Asian and Chinese roots erased (cf. Ohnuki-Tierney, 1999). An interesting angle on this process has been provided by the writings of Norbert Elias and Jonathan Friedman in their analysis of global processes.<sup>27</sup> Elias (1994) argued that it is possible to detect two major phases in the process of global integration. The first, is a phase of *colonization*

---

<sup>26</sup> Alan Yau had also invented Wagamama’s an influential chain of quick service East/South East Asian fusion food restaurants (Chinese, Japanese, Thai being the main influences) which has proliferated over the last decade and is particularly popular with young people. After *Hakkasan* he opened *Yauatcha*, an innovative designed Chinese teahouse, Berwick St., Soho, London, serving Dim Sum seven days a week from 10.00 a.m. to midnight. Tim Yip Oscar winning costume designer for *Hidden Tiger*, *Crouching Dragon* designed the waiters’ outfits.

<sup>27</sup> The global history of food is a fascinating topic and throws interesting light on the flows of knowledge and goods and interconnections which occurred prior to the emergence of nation-states. This also could be very productive in generating theoretical categories which are not bound to the generic nation-state society model as we find in much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of sociology (see Grew, 1999).

*and assimilation* in which outsider groups have their pattern of conduct permeated by those of the dominant established group. The second is a phase of *differentiation and emancipation* with the rising groups gaining in power and confidence (Elias, 1982:311). If we seek to apply it to global history over the last century or so, we can see that in the first phase, the Western established group maintain a strong sense of superiority and confidence in their own 'group charisma,' with outsider groups seeking to assimilate to the standards of the powerful.

In the second phase, the phase of equalization, outsider groups gain in relative power and oppose their own codes and manners more confidently to those of the established. Patterns of conduct migrate from those below to those above and there is a more general interpenetration of standards of conducts of different groups and classes (Elias, 1982:325; see discussion in Featherstone, 1995, 2004). If we introduce food into the equation, then we can see that in the nineteenth century the powerful Western colonial nations had strong confidence in their classifications and categories: their own food was seen as superior and the food of colonial or outsider inferiors unhealthy and distasteful. It can be argued that the attitude of the British to Chinese food was initially seen via this framework: Chinese food was associated with a low other.

But the second phase, of greater equalization in the balance of power as the twentieth century unfolded with the retreat of colonial powers which gathered pace in the post World War Two era, resulted in a greater interpenetration of standards and openness to the cultures and lifestyles of others, including food. We might add that the longstanding interest in elements of the middle class in the carnivalesque, bohemia and exotica and fascination with the outsiders and their culture, chimed with this switch and the take up of these cultural themes into the mainstream of Western societies since the 1960s. Friedman (1994) detects similar phases in the dynamic of the global system. In the first phase, distinctions are strong and one would expect foreign food to be identified negatively and in the second, the food becomes incorporated and normalized.

If the People's Republic of China and the wider Chinese diaspora continues to accumulate in power potential in the way it has over the last decade, then it is likely there will be a rise in the cultural capital value of Chinese things and with it a continued interest in Chinese food globally. Chinese food has, of course, undergone previous phases of globalization and given the dominance of China in the world economy up to the end of the eighteenth century, and the long phases of affluence, strong court society

and cultivated elites and merchant cultures, it is only to be expected that the development of a refined *haute cuisine* occurred.<sup>28</sup> This Chinese food archive itself can provide a fascinating world to explore, sample and re-invent tradition from. One might be happy with such a world. Yet the dynamic of consumer culture is to quest for new, not only in the sense of recovery and replaying in the glass bead game of cultures, but also in terms of creation and invention.<sup>29</sup> The consumer culture intermediaries will push on to discover and market new cuisines and replay, re-fragment and repackage old ones. How Chinese food will fare when it ceases to be exotic, when it becomes an increasingly elaborated code hybridized and re-hybridized with other cuisines, as super-chefs deconstruct recipes and pull out sauces and ingredients to rework them into new fusion food, is an interesting question.

All this points to the inbuilt excess in consumer culture, which then struggles to generate additional narratives on healthy eating and body maintenance, so one can returned suitably cleansed to join the hedonistic fray. Ashis Nandy has captured this tension well in his discussion of the global ethnic food market, when he remarks:

..most discourse on food centred on health and nutrition in China and on social and religious rituals in India. The new forces of global commercial integration, which have reportedly expanded the estimated global market of ethnic dining to more than 800 billion dollars, have, paradoxically, picked up exactly these two themes – food as health and food as a social ritual – to reorder and formalize the cuisines of all countries according to its own needs. The ideas of health and ritual under globalization are, of course, not the older ideas of health and ritual in these countries. They have more to do with the growing awareness of the excesses of consumerism and waste, the emergence of food, particularly some kinds of ethnic food, as a marker of social success and cultivation, and the decline of the ‘natural’ capacity that ordinary citizens once had to instinctively discriminate between the healthy and the unhealthy, or to check unqualified hedonism or intemperance in food. (Nandy, 2004:9).

---

<sup>28</sup> Compare here, the arguments about the relationship between haute cuisine and court society by Elias (1983; see also discussion in Mennell, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> An interesting indication of this process is the judgements of the critics who write restaurant guides. *Kenneth Lo's Memories of China*, clearly one of the most prestigious Chinese restaurants in Britain, given Lo's long and pivotal role in promoting Chinese food, was reviewed in the 2004 edition of the *Time Out London Eating and Drinking*, in carping negative terms and the food described as having an ‘unadventurous bias towards western tastes,’ and criticised the lack of vegetarian dishes. How ironic he should suffer under the slings and arrows of apparatchik critics and be accused of Western bias given Lo's long term efforts in widening the scope of Chinese food eaten in Britain. Happily to say normality and harmony was restored in true Chinese manner, with the 2005 edition of the *Time Out London Eating and Drinking* providing a report from the critics returning to the expected superlatives.

## References

- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002) *Individualization*. London: Sage.
- Bell, D. (1976) *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. London: Heinemann.
- Campbell, D. (1987) *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Carey, J. (1992) *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. London: Faber.
- Driver, C. (1983) *The British At Table 1940-1980*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Elias, N. (1978) *The Civilizing Process Volume 1*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, N. (1982) *The Civilizing Process Volume 2*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Featherstone, M. (1991) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage. (New enlarged edition in press, due out September 2007).
- Featherstone, M. (1995) *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*. London: Sage.
- Friedman, J. (1994) *Cultural Identity and Global Process*. London: Sage.
- Grew, A. (1999) 'Introduction' in R. Grew (ed) *Food in Global History*. Boulder, Co.: Westview Press.
- Kohn, M. (1992) *Dope Girls: the Birth of the British Drug Underground*. London: Granta.
- Lo, Kenneth (1993) *The Feast of My Life*. London: Transworld.
- Mackerras, C. (1987) *Western Images of China, Revised Edition*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, B. (1982) *A Sociology of Contemporary British Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nandy, A. (2004) 'The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: Preliminary notes.' *South Asia Research* 24(1):9-19.
- Ng, Kwee Choo (1958) *The Chinese in London*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, E. (1999) 'We eat each other's food to nourish our body,' in R. Grew (ed) *Food in Global History*. Boulder, Co.: Westview Press.
- Parker, D. (1998) Chinese People in Britain: Histories, Futures and Identities in *The Chinese in Europe* (ed) Benton, G. and Pieke, F. London: Macmillan.
- Roberts, J.A.G. (2002) *China to Chinatown, Chinese Food in the West*. London: Beakton Book.

- Sennett, R. (1999) 'Growth and Failure: the New Political Economy and its Culture,' in M. Featherstone and S. Lash (eds) *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*. London: Sage.
- Simmel, G. (1997) 'The Adventure,' in D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (ed) *Simmel on Culture*. London: Sage.
- Stallybrass P. and White, A. (1986) *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Routledge.
- Wacquant, Loïc (1998) 'Inside the Zone: the Social Art of the Hustler in the Black American Ghetto,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 15(2):1-36.
- Wilson, E. (1998) 'Bohemian Love,' Special issue on Love and Eroticism. *Theory, Culture & Society* 15(3-4).
- Wouters, C. (1986) 'Formalization and Informalization: Changing Tension Balances in Civilizing Processes,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 3(2): 1-18.
- Wu, David Y.H. and Cheung, Sydney, C.H. (eds) (2002) *The Globalization of Chinese Food*. London: Routledge.