

A Tale of Two Food Blogs: Culinary Tourism in Hong Kong from a Chinese-American Perspective

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Imagine you are about to go on a vacation. How will you build your itinerary? Depending on your time, money, and interest, you may choose anything from theme parks, national parks, museums, cruises, skiing, just to name a few. If you have an opportunity to travel abroad, chances are that you will treat your taste buds with international cuisines. In fact, when you travel across America or simply enjoy a night out in your neighborhood, you may dine at an ethnic restaurant. By consuming food from another culture, you participate in a booming industry known as culinary tourism. Folklorist Lucy Long coined the term “culinary tourism” in 1998 and defined it as “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of another culture – participation including the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system not one’s own” (Chrzan 40; Long 21). According to the International Culinary Tourism Association, among tourists of different ages, sexes, and ethnic groups, dining is one of their favorite activities wherever they travel because it is an interactive way to explore local food and understand local people (Kivela and Crotts 360). It can even enhance the authenticity of their visits (Okumus et al. 257).

Americans participate in culinary tourism all the time, especially Chinese food. When Chinese Americans consume Chinese food, you may assume that they are simply enjoying food from their own culture. However, it is not always true, especially for first generation Chinese Americans who immigrated to America later in their lives. My culinary tour began when I first tasted a Chinese

breakfast in Los Angeles eighteen years ago. Over the years, I have been relying on my memory to judge the authenticity of Chinese food from Kansas City to New York City. When I traveled to Hong Kong in the summer of 2013, I felt like a tourist of my own birthplace as I searched for nostalgic food. This paper will argue that Chinese Americans are culinary tourists in their homeland as they search for the taste of nostalgia, which may have been altered or even disappeared, in a dynamic foodscape.

This paper is not the first to discuss the cultural identity of Chinese Americans and the authenticity of Chinese cuisine. In 2014, historian Yong Chen, a first generation Chinese American, offered his interpretation in *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America*, a book that attempted to examine the rise of Chinese food in America since the nineteenth century and its continuous consumption nowadays. In that work, Chen argued that the limited job availability for Chinese Americans in the nineteenth century and the changing consumer culture contributed to the popularity of Chinese food in America. This paper provides an alternative analysis. Whereas Chen focuses on how the adaptation of Chinese food democratized the dining experience of the working class, African Americans, and racial minorities in the nineteenth century and eventually across America, I find that the cultural identity of first generation Chinese Americans is at stake when they compare Chinese food in America with those in their homeland in the twenty-first century.

Famed as the Food Paradise, Hong Kong offers exceptional local (Chinese) and international dining experiences. With more than 30,000 restaurants, Hong Kong boasts the world’s most restaurants per capita (Okumus 257). Within 425 square miles, or 6 times the area of Washington D.C., Hong Kong is home to more than 7 million people. How do locals and tourists find good places to eat? Before turning to the internet and mobile applications in this digital era, locals used to pick restaurants based on television, radio, and newspaper advertisements, restaurant guides, or

friends' recommendations while tourists relied on travel guidebooks they bought prior to their departure or brochures created by Hong Kong Tourism Board. Of course, they may choose restaurants at random.

Chinese cuisine is an umbrella term for eight regional cooking styles in China, including Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Anhui, Sichuan, Hunan, and Cantonese. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on Cantonese style Chinese food because it is the local style of Hong Kong, and it is popular in Chinatowns across America. Also, after reviewing food blogs and travel guidebooks on computers and mobile devices, I find that food blogs provide subjective opinions of locals and tourists who have various levels of exposure to the food or cuisines at restaurants, whereas travel guidebooks tend to offer objective comments written by veteran food critics and editors. For a given restaurant, there are usually more entries in a food blog than a guidebook. Since food blogs reflect the experiences of common people and their contents are more diverse, I prefer online food blogs to guidebooks.

Two food blogs will serve as my guide during my culinary tour in Hong Kong. The most popular food blogs consulted by locals (including non-Chinese) and tourists (including overseas Chinese) are openrice.com and tripadvisor.com, respectively. Although locals and tourists are bloggers on both blogs, more locals post in Chinese at openrice.com while more tourists post in English at tripadvisor.com. Instead of selecting a Chinese restaurant randomly, I make sure it appears in both food blogs because I am interested in analyzing their food from a Chinese American perspective. Moreover, with the notion of exploration in mind, I choose a restaurant I have never patronized. After a brief survey of both food blogs, I enter "Prince Edward" as my preferred location and "dim sum" as my favorite cuisine. One Dim Sum (see FIG.1.) shows up. Is it a good place for lunch?

Literally meaning "touch your heart," dim sum consists of steamed dishes in bamboo steamers and other baked, pan-fried, and deep-fried

delicacies (Dim Sum). Individuals, generations of family members, friends, and co-workers get together to enjoy dim sum for breakfast, brunch, or lunch. Serving dim sum all day long, One Dim Sum is a Michelin one-starred restaurant. Similar to Zagat Survey which rates restaurants across America, Michelin is the oldest European rating system for restaurants and hotels in Europe and around the world. While some bloggers at openrice.com say One Dim Sum is their best dim sum experience ever at a reasonable price, others say it does not deserve a star from Michelin because it is nothing more than a typical dim sum restaurant. Among 152 reviews at openrice.com, 87.5% of the bloggers have an average to positive experience at One Dim Sum. Bloggers at openrice.com report the average wait time for this 30-seat restaurant is about 30-45 minutes. Is their dim sum something to die for? Before making a decision, I consult tripadvisor.com which shows that One Dim Sum ranks 4th out of 3869 restaurants listed on its website. I head to One Dim Sum with my parents, my sister, and my three children by commuter rail, without a doubt.

Among the 13 dishes we have ordered, most of them look attractive and taste authentic. Four of them are worth discussing, namely, Steamed Cake in Mala Style (see FIG. 2.), Steamed Shrimp Dumpling (see FIG. 3.), Turnip Cake with Dry Salted Meat (FIG. 4.), and Boiled Chinese Vegetable (FIG. 5.). They are standard dim sum served in Hong Kong and America. Let us take a look at their quality, value, and services.

Local bloggers praise and criticize dim sum without hesitation. At openrice.com, the most highly recommended item is Steamed Cake in Mala Style. Almost every blogger who eats the steamed cake give it two thumbs up because it is "hot and fluffy," "soft but not too sweet," and "enough for four people." I have never seen such a generous portion of steamed cake in a bamboo steamer in my life! The taste is not exactly the same as what I had when I was young, but it is pretty close. What about Steamed Shrimp Dumpling, a classic dim sum item? Two bloggers note that the skin (translucent

wrapper) is not as thin as expected while one of them finds the shrimp not big enough but fresh. A non-Chinese blogger who works in Hong Kong thinks the skin of shrimp dumpling “beautiful” and the shrimp “tasty.” Indeed, the thinner the skin, the better the dumpling. Although the shrimp is not too big, at least it is not stuffed with fillers. Another popular item is Turnip Cake with Dry Salted Meat. Most bloggers who order this item are disappointed because it is either “too starchy,” or there is “not enough turnip,” or “not enough meat”. What the bloggers write is absolutely accurate! Not only are excessive flours added as fillers to substitute turnip and meat, it is also not crispy enough after pan-frying. A number of bloggers who try Boiled Chinese Vegetable think that it is “nothing special,” “too hard to bite onto,” or “not that exciting, but it’s vegetable, and you need them.” Frankly, its tenderness depends on patrons’ preferences. More importantly, bloggers fail to point out that oyster sauce is replaced by soy sauce, which is unusual. Soy sauce and boiled vegetable simply do not match.

Non-local bloggers record their experience with relatively less detail. Bloggers at tripadvisor.com, mostly consist of non-Chinese or overseas Chinese, tend to rate the food at One Dim Sum in a general sense, with adjectives like “excellent,” “good,” “great,” “not bad,” and “poor.” Their brief comments are insufficient for Chinese Americans to determine how good or bad the food is. Perhaps these dim sum novices have yet to season their taste buds with more dim sum before they are confident enough to develop vocabularies to describe them. While a Singaporean blogger who has prior dim sum experience is amazed at the size, softness and sponginess of Steamed Cake in Mala Style, another Australian blogger claims that it is not as fluffy as another restaurant he visited. Some bloggers who love Steamed Shrimp Dumpling usually suggest readers to try it without further description. Turnip Cake with Dry Salted Meat and Boiled Chinese Vegetable are not exotic dishes, but none of the bloggers mention them. Granted, dim sum novices may not have any exposure to turnip or

boiled vegetables before. They may not have any exposure to turnip or boiled vegetables before, and it all depends on their readiness to try.

Bloggers at openrice.com and tripadvisor.com focus on the value of food and the service rendered. Whereas the value is embedded within their posts at openrice.com, such as “The two of us ordered six dishes and we are full and satisfied. It costs less than [HK]\$100” and “We ordered a lot (too much), but it didn’t bother us because the total bill came to \$150 HKD for 3 people,” the posts at tripadvisor.com are flooded with titles like “Great value for money,” “Cheap and cheery dim sum place with a Michelin star,” and “Cheap Cheap Cheap.” Without the need to pay tax or tips while dining in Hong Kong, an average of HK\$50, or US\$6.25 per person, is a good deal at One Dim Sum. A blogger at tripadvisor.com notices that the price of the meal is cheaper than the taxi fare that costs her to travel to the restaurant. While bloggers are happy about the value of dim sum, some are worried about how to order. Undoubtedly, language can be a barrier wherever tourists travel; and there is no exception in Hong Kong. Some restaurants do offer picture menus, but it is not the case at One Dim Sum. Non-Chinese bloggers in both food blogs are especially impressed when the staff at One Dim Sum offer them menus in English, communicate with them in English, and show them how to eat dim sum in a correct sequence, that is, to start with salty dishes first and end with sweet dishes.

Rich in facts and opinions, food blogs provide recent reviews of restaurants. Each post combines together to give a composite image to readers about the atmosphere of the restaurants, hospitality of staff, and the value and quality of food before they decide where and what to eat. The image is enriched when some readers, who have dined at the restaurants, become bloggers. While most bloggers at both blogs claim that they have found “the best and cheapest dim sum” at One Dim Sum, a few ask “why Michelin??” In fact, food blogs help potential patrons to make informed decisions about which restaurants fit their budget,

schedules, and tastes. I cannot agree more with a post written by a blogger at openrice.com who states that she is so excited to eat dim sum at night. One Dim Sum is rather nontraditional in which it is a restaurant serving dim sum throughout the day, from 11:00 a.m. to 12:30 a.m. on weekdays and from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 a.m. on weekends. Traditional Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong, America, and around the world usually serve dim sum any time from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., with lunch menus added around 11:00 a.m. From 3:00 p.m. to closing, only dinner entrées are available. Dim sum is generally considered light and less fulfilling than lunch and dinner entrées. Apparently, One Dim Sum offers a brand new dining experience to patrons because they can enjoy dim sum beyond “normal” hours. It may spark a new trend for locals to have dim sum at night. Tourists may not be aware of this violation of tradition, but they can definitely take advantage of it. A dim sum dinner can still fit into their itineraries after a full day of sightseeing and shopping.

No matter how nice food and restaurants are presented in food blogs, they are not without limitations. First of all, food blogs cannot be analyzed independently. Bloggers at openrice.com inform me that One Dim Sum does not use monosodium glutamate, or M.S.G., an artificial flavor enhancer used in Chinese cooking. I would not have found this out if I visit tripadvisor.com only. Secondly, food blogs are not designed to include an exhaustive list of restaurants. Therefore, locals and tourists may turn to other sources like their mobile applications to locate restaurants or simply choose a restaurant at random. Finally, food blogs cannot convey the smell and taste of food to blog readers. Without any travel plan, some blog readers can only enjoy the food vicariously.

For Chinese Americans who visit Hong Kong, food blogs are an effective way to locate authentic Chinese food which they miss so much since they have immigrated to America. Their childhood favorite restaurants may be out of business. Their tastes may be altered by Americanized Chinese food over the years.

However, culinary tourism gives them an opportunity to revitalize their taste memory. Food blogs provide the latest reviews and culinary trends for virtual and real travelers while invoking collective memories of Chinese Americans around the world. Indeed, traveling from America to Hong Kong is very costly, especially when I bring my three children along over the summer. Yet, as a cultural bearer, I share a taste of Hong Kong with my children and reinforce their cultural heritage through culinary tourism.



FIG. 1. One Dim Sum, Prince Edward, Kowloon, Hong Kong



FIG. 2. Steamed Cake in Mala Style



FIG. 3. Steamed Shrimp Dumpling



FIG. 4. Turnip Cake with Dry Salted Meat



FIG. 5. Boiled Chinese Vegetable

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