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IMMIGRATION TOLD THROUGH CUISINE

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The Fortune Cookie Chronicles by Jennifer 8. Lee is a wonderful, well researched book. Lee, the daughter immigrants from China and a speaker of fluent Mandarin, began this book as a research study into the lives of people who won lotteries based on numbers found in fortune cookies. What the project turned into was a discovery of herself and her culture. Lee, whose middle initial means prosperity in Chinese, combines historical facts and the stories of immigrants, along with her experiences as the daughter of immigrants, in order tell the story of Chinese food. In her travels all over the United States (and the globe), the author uncovers the truth behind such culinary items as the fortune cookie and chop suey. Ultimately, Lee accomplishes a literary and culinary feat —she tells the story of immigration through the story of Chinese food.

Long before Chinese food became a national crazy, it was feared—much like the Chinese themselves. The Chinese had many reasons to immigrate from their homeland, such as government oppression, mass slaughter, natural disaster and overpopulation. Yet, when the Chinese arrived on American soil, they were immediately treated equally as poor. According to Lee, the Chinese were seen as “vaguely human” or “extra terrestrials” (51) by the locals of the new lands they inhabited. On top of that, the food the Chinese ate made them stand out even more. Chinese food was rich, flavorful and far spicier compared to the bland food Americans were used to consuming. Chinese food also commonly contained meats and vegetables unfamiliar to Americans. There were even suspicions that the Chinese were eating rats (Lee 54), and due to this fear Chinese restaurants were not successful at first.

Then near the turn of the Century, something happened that created a sudden wave of Chinese food enthusiasm. A mysterious new dish, called chop suey, started to hit the tables of Chinese restaurants across the nation. In Mandarin, chop suey means “odds and ends” (Lee 49), yet there is no actual Chinese dish called “chop suey.” This new dish was made up of stir-fried vegetables in a savory brown sauce, yet the origin of the dish is a little unclear. Lee speculates that one possible origin of chop suey could have come from a group of drunken white men. The author recounts a story of a group of drunk white mine (or possibly railroad) workers who stumbled into a Chinese owned restaurant just before closing. The proprietor had nothing left to serve, so he threw together a mixture of leftovers immersed in flavorful brown gravy—a dish that he called chop suey. The dish was immensely successful and other restaurant owners began to make similar versions of this dish, thus setting in motion a Chinese food craze.

However, Lee deftly expresses that the troublesome thing about this culinary craze was the fact that the food being served in the newly popular Chinese restaurants was not authentically Chinese. Just like the fortune cookie, dishes like chow mien, beef and broccoli and chop suey were not dishes that the Chinese originally ate. However, because of the profitability of these culinary items, the Chinese took on this food as their own. Lee also suggests the reason the Chinese adopted such dishes could have been an attempt to fit in. In a time when the Chinese were suffering from severe racism, this rise in popularity—even if it was due in part to a cuisine that was not authentic to their culture—was an elevation in status the Chinese did not want to jeopardize.

According to Lee, a majority of Chinese immigrants come to American specifically to work in or open Chinese restaurants (110). However, immigration has a steep price. Literally, immigration from China can cost upwards of \$70,000. To put it another way, “there is a fairly good chance that the Chinese restaurant worker who cooked your roast pork fried rice...paid tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege of doing so” (Lee 111). Figuratively, the Chinese suffer from very poor working conditions in restaurants and must always be ready to uproot his or her life and family to move to a new restaurant. To actually own a successful Chinese restaurant can be a lucrative venture, however working as a server or a delivery person can make for a very difficult existence. In New York City alone there are numerous cases annually of Chinese food delivery people being murdered over orders. The wages of lower level Chinese restaurants personnel affords very little luxury—it is not uncommon for Chinese restaurant workers to live 5 or 6 people in a one bedroom house. Lee tells the story of a powerful government official in China who moved to America to find a new life and maybe a little more financial success. What moving to American really provided him was a series of low wage delivery jobs. This story rings true for many immigrants; the hope of success in a new country, yet having this dream diminished by poverty and racism.

It is ironic to think that food snobs everywhere turn their noses up at “unauthentic” ethnic food, yet salivate over a perfectly prepared plate of chow mien. Chow mien, however, is the perfect example of unauthentic Chinese food. It seems plausible that if Americans were to try the food of Chinese homeland, they would be shocked by what was served. Yet, Lee feels that the willingness of Americans to accept ethnic cuisine can be attributed to the Chinese (258). She thinks that because the new spices and flavors the Chinese provided readied America to become a melting pot of international cuisine.

In closing, Lee makes a profound claim. She states that food is the best way to preserve cultural heritage. In her case, she wonders if her grandchildren will even speak Chinese, yet she is fairly positive that her grandchildren will know how to make fried dumplings. As immigrants find themselves assimilating further into new cultures, it is generally food that helps to connect them to their homelands. In the case of the Chinese, the cuisine that was created here in America was not necessarily that of their home, but a new cuisine to carry on the legacy of the immigration experience. *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* is a truly wonderful read for food lovers and culture buffs alike. Lee finds a creative way to tell the story of her parents and other Chinese-Americans, and sets the record straight on culinary stereotypes. The truly delicious part of this book is the fact that Lee does not ask readers to turn away from what is currently viewed as “Chinese” food, but instead asks people to embrace this food as “Chinese-American” food.

Works Cited

Lee, Jennifer 8. *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles*. New York: Twelve, 2008.