“Clean” Chinese Food’s Dirty Little Secret

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In the spring of 2019, health coach and wellness blogger Arielle Haspel caused a great deal of controversy when she opened her American Chinese restaurant Lucky Lee’s. Haspel, who is white, garnered criticism for her marketing of the restaurant as serving “clean” versions of American Chinese food which she was working to “healthify” for consumption. Most of the recipes Haspel formulated are iterations of classic American Chinese dishes that have been altered for people who are on health diets or have wellness-based dietary restrictions. Many people took issue with the language Haspel used to describe her restaurant’s menu, particularly the word “clean.” Several people, including author and celebrity chef Eddie Huang, accused of her of being racist and culturally appropriating (Singh-Kurtz). In an interview with *Eater NY*’s Stefanie Tuder, Haspel rebuffed accusations of racism by proclaiming her love for Chinese food and stating that her intention was to celebrate Chinese culture, which she partly hoped to achieve by “including ‘a lot of Chinese elements’ like ‘lucky bamboo’ and jade.” Surprisingly, this very generous inclusion of “Chinese elements” did little to placate Haspel’s critics (Tuder).

Now, some people may have difficulty seeing what exactly the problem is with what Haspel did. Why does the word “clean” matter so much in this context? Is it so wrong for a non-Chinese person to open a Chinese restaurant? And if she says she appreciates Chinese culture and food, how can she be appropriating? Though her marketing may seem benign to many at first glance, Haspel’s choice of words is indicative of a much wider issue: namely, the way that Chinese and Asian food are regarded in the West and the influence that historic antecedents of Orientalism have on its appropriation.

American stereotypes about Chinese cuisine, particularly with regards to it being seen as "dirty," have existed for as long as there have been Chinese people in America, if not longer. In the mid-1800s, shortly after Chinese immigrants began arriving in the US for the first time, negative (and often false) press surrounding Chinese cuisine was prevalent. One of the most common misconceptions perpetuated about Chinese food during this time was the supposedly widespread consumption of rats by the Chinese. Rats, which are irrevocably associated with disease and uncleanliness, "portrayed a pungent image," writes Professor Yong Chen, "painting the diet of the Chinese as being not only undesirable but also despicable" (16). While this specific stereotype may seem arcane and outdated, much of the anti-Chinese and anti-Asian rhetoric surrounding the events of the coronavirus pandemic mirror the sentiments of white Americans of the 19th century. In a Vice article titled "Coronavirus Fears are Reviving Racist Ideas About Chinese Food," several internet commenters attacking Chinese people and cuisine are quoted. One such commenter states, "That's why that damn virus going around they eat shit we should not not be nowhere close at [sic]" (qtd. in Makalintal). Despite the dubious grammar and syntax of this very tasteful tweet, it's not difficult to see the similarities in sentiment between it and many articles from the 19th century.

Later, in the mid to late 20th century, American Chinese restaurants and cuisine grew in popularity and became more mainstream. Of course, this popularization was partly due to the Americanization of Chinese dishes to make them more palatable to American consumers (Chen 135). However, in spite of its wider acceptance, Chinese food never quite lost its initial stigma. This was due, in part, to the hysteria surrounding the use of the flavor enhancer MSG (monosodium glutamate) in Chinese food and its apparent ties to various health issues that were dubbed "Chinese Restaurant syndrome." Claims of heart palpitations and headaches abounded after the publication

of a letter written to a medical journal by a doctor who claimed he experienced negative side effects whenever he ate Chinese food. MSG was one the ingredients he cited as possibly causing these symptoms. At first, the veracity of these initial claims was apparently confirmed by several medical experiments. However, these experiments were marred by the improper use of placebos and bad science. These incorrect conclusions have been disproven by several studies, and MSG has been deemed a safe and non-harmful foodstuff by various organizations like the FDA and the UN (Elmjouie).

One of these MSG-redeeming studies, conducted in 2017 by Dutch scientists, concluded that "Peking duck can be put on the Christmas menu without risking guests to be admitted to the emergency department with new episodes of [atrial fibrillation]" (van den Berg, et al). In spite of such evidence exonerating the seasoning, MSG is still highly stigmatized and many Asian chefs don't use it in their cooking for fear of driving away business, despite its status as a staple in many Asian pantries and recipes. It is worth noting that MSG is one of the many ingredients that Lucky Lee's menu explicitly eschews (Yakas). Though it doesn't have any actual negative effects, the fact that Haspel excludes MSG from her menu's dishes indicates that she is catering more to people's perception of Chinese food as unhealthy rather than any actual health detriment that traditional Chinese cuisine poses.

The creation, perpetuation, and continuing belief in these kinds of stereotypes surrounding Chinese food and foodstuffs is indicative of the power that false truths hold, even in the face of irrefutable evidence. In her article exploring the history of the malignment of MSG, Anna Maria Barry-Jester posits the "availability heuristic, where people make judgements using the easiest information available, rather than looking for alternative explanations," as a possible reason for the persistence in anti-MSG sentiment. While the availability heuristic may certainly be a part of

this phenomenon, it is not the only force at work. Part of what contributes to the virulence of the stereotypes that still surround Asian and Chinese food is the continuing influence of historic orientalism.

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said provides one definition of Orientalism as being "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident,'" and consequently "a very large mass of writers …, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories,… , social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on" (2-3). Said goes on to assert how deeply Orientalism pervades any attempt to think or study the Orient:

> Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (as is not) a free subject of thought or action. (3)

Though Said is referring primarily to the Orientalist style of thought as it informs the perspectives of professional intellectuals and academics, the Orientalist style of thought informs mainstream perceptions of the East as well. It should be said that Said primarily had the near Eastern part of the Oriental world in mind when writing his book; however, the ideas he outlines are just as applicable to the West's ideas about the far East.

A fundamental part of the Orientalist mindset is the belief that the Western observer has the right of authority when it comes to knowledge of Orientalist cultures and practices. Put another way, it is the idea that the West knows better than the East what is good for the East and, more fundamentally, what the East is. Evidence of this mindset is present in countless political and

military struggles in international history. Colonialism, imperialism, and tampering in the affairs of foreign states are all explicit examples of this philosophy of superiority put into practice. But those instances are obviously not the purview of this work.

When examining the vestiges of Orientalism in the culinary world, the most obvious instance is in the ongoing debate surrounding cultural appropriation. One of the misconceptions surrounding the concept of cultural appropriation is that as soon as someone participates in a cultural practice that is not theirs, it is cultural appropriation. This is not the case. As defined by Richard A. Rogers, cultural appropriation, or more specifically cultural exploitation, is "the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation" (477). While this definition is certainly adequate, it should also be noted that this exploitation often goes hand in hand with making a profit from said appropriation. Though its effects may not be as devastating as a war, cultural appropriation has an undeniably malignant and even sinister impact on how we think of other cultures.

In the case of Arielle Haspel, it was not merely the fact that she was a white person opening a restaurant that serves Chinese food which deserves criticism; it was the way in which she did it. By marketing her restaurant as an alternative that serves food that is superior the original dishes and recipes to which she owes her restaurant concept in the first place, Haspel demonstrated her lack of respect for Chinese culture and cuisine. Even worse, she contributed to the perpetuation of the stereotype that Chinese food (made by actual Chinese people) is unclean and exploited the common American availability heuristic of "unsafe Chinese food." In doing all of this, Haspel asserted authority over a culture which she clearly does not fully understand or appreciate. Her claims of trying to celebrate Chinese culture fall flat, most notably with her intention to incorporate "lucky bamboo" (which isn't even Chinese) into the restaurant's decor. As trivial as it may seem,

the terminology that Haspel used in the marketing of her restaurant matters a great deal. Especially with the added significance of coronavirus pandemic, the connotations of cleanliness in relation to Chinese food are inescapable.

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