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Writing Sample

Excerpt from a Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibit Service show entitled “*Sweet and Sour: Chinese American Food from Chinatown to Main Street*,” dated December 17, 2013.

Title: Sweet and Sour: Chinese American Food from Chinatown to Main Street

Main Text: Sweet and Sour

Chinese Food from Chinatown to Main Street

Chinese food is so thoroughly woven into America’s culinary tapestry that you can find a Chinese restaurant in the most remote U.S. town. But, the success of Chinese food culture was hard earned. Early Chinese immigrants faced many obstacles due to fear and prejudice. Their history has been reflected in the evolution of Chinese restaurants, which served as avenues of economic opportunity, means of integration, and sites of cultural exchange. From immigrant-only destinations, they have become everyday fixtures of American life.

Exotic atmosphere, adventurous flavors and reasonable prices have always been a hallmark of these restaurants. As non-Chinese embraced the food, it made its way into American cookbooks and kitchens. Today, Chinese food American style might rival apple pie as uniquely American.

[Word count 121]

Statement: Did you know, there are more Chinese restaurants in America than McDonald’s, Burger King, and Pizza Huts combined?

Subtext 1: From big cities to the small towns that dot America’s heartland, Chinese restaurants are everywhere that hungry customers are. They run the gamut from chic, high-end eateries, to barebones take out counters, and bustling all-you-can-eat buffets. While there may be slight variations, the menu is usually comfortably familiar, with standard bearers like egg rolls, fried rice, and wonton soup always available.

[Word count 61]

Gang Label: A medley of colors and textures, Chinese food is often beautiful to look at as well as delicious to eat. (extra photos of dishes)

[Word count 20]

Designer’s Object:

Frederick Weeks Wilcox patented this “paper pail” design in 1884. Constructed from a single piece of paper, the folded container was sturdy and leak-proof. In the 1970s, a red pagoda and the words “thank you” were added. Today this box is synonymous with Chinese food.

[Word count 45]

Subtext 2: Cultural Exchange – Integration

The exchanges that take place in Chinese restaurants go beyond the simple business transactions of buying and selling food. For owners, the restaurant is their livelihood. They may have left professions and education behind, because this is the avenue that is open to them in America. For workers, many of whom face language and immigration barriers, the restaurant represents safety and home. For customers, the restaurant offers appetizing food and a slice of exotica. And for each group, the restaurant offers a window into another world.

[word count 86]

Gang Label: Pop Culture

Chinese food is a familiar backdrop in American pop culture. Take out boxes, chopsticks, beaded curtains, and ornate, red restaurant interiors appear constantly in print, online and broadcast media.

[word count 29]

Gang Label: Art Design: Chop Suey font

Chop Suey font was created in 1883 at the Cleveland Type Foundry. By the 1930s, these letters appeared in signs promoting Chinese restaurants across the country.

[word count 26]

Object Label: Over time, owners realized how to use the established imagery, including neon signs, chop suey font, and popular menu items to advertise their Chinese restaurants.

[word count 25]

Section 2: Social History

Main Text: Becoming American

The Chinese encountered daunting barriers in the United States despite its reputation as the land of opportunity. Resentment and racial fears led to a series of exclusionary laws that prohibited most Chinese from immigrating or attaining American citizenship for

nearly 70 years. Those already here turned inward for support and resided together in neighborhoods, known as “Chinatowns.” With the passage of a new immigration law in 1965, immigrants from all over the globe were welcomed to the U.S. including those from China.

[word count 82]

Subtext 1: Early Arrivals

Seamen and adventurers were the earliest Chinese arrivals in the U.S. The first large-scale migration was triggered by the 1849 California Gold Rush. The Chinese worked as miners and later railroad builders, farmers, fishermen, launderers, and restaurant owners. Early Chinese restaurateurs initially fed their own communities, but eventually introduced Americans to Chinese dishes, often altering recipes to use available ingredients and suit Western tastes.

The restaurant business continued to grow through the 1800s despite discriminatory laws that prohibited Chinese from immigrating to America.

(word count 82)

Gang label: California and the Gold Rush

Many immigrants were hoping to strike it rich in California and return home. The Chinese were not necessarily welcomed by those already in California. As the gold ran out and jobs faded away, their perceived “foreignness” created widespread ill will among the locals.

(word count 43)

Gang label: Early eateries

The first Chinese eating establishments, known as chow chows, served Chinese laborers. More formal restaurants followed that featured exotic furniture, screens, and lanterns imported from China.

[word count 26]

Gang label: Norman Assing

Chinese immigrant Norman Assing is credited with opening the first recorded Chinese restaurant in San Francisco in 1849. It was called Macao and Woosung. A leader in the Chinese community, Assing published an open letter in 1852 challenging California Governor John Bigler’s call for Chinese exclusion.

[word count 46]