Tsu (2010) Fat, Spices, Culture, and More

Tsu, Timothy Yun Hui


‘Chinese food’ is a general term that has been applied to any Asian dish translated to American culture. Restaurant chefs and individuals who attempt to recreate traditional Chinese cuisines can modify their dish to suit their preference as well as those of their consumers. With endless room for modification, what defines authentic Chinese food? Can Chinese food also be a defining aspect of Japanese food culture?

Timothy Yun Hui Tsu’s article reviews Chinese cooking in Japan from the first time Chinese recipes appeared in Japanese literature (1600s) up to the present. Tsu (2010:64) uses the term “popular gastronomic writings” to refer to any type of compiled text relating to food recipes or cooking techniques in mass form. Chinese food first left traces of influence in Japan in the 1800s as ports such as Yokohama, Kobe, Nagasaki and Hakodate became settled by Chinese migrants (Tsu 2010: 65). First, Chinese food served strictly for Chinese migrants to consume. However, Chinese cooking began to provoke an interest in the Japanese culture in the 1920’s as the number of Chinese immigrants increased in Japan. Chinese food gained a reputation as a “low-budget” yet satisfying meal (Tsu 2010: 66).

While I predicted that Chinese food would remain in its original form when introduced to Japan, this was not the case. Tsu points out the main differences between Chinese versus Japanese food preferences. While the Chinese prefer spicy dishes, excessive oil, and flavor due to fat and spices, the Japanese are used to a “light[er] image for their food” (Tsu 2010: 69). This cultural difference caused the Japanese to modify Chinese dishes in order to better suit their people. In a way, the Japanese molded Chinese food into a separate identity. A constant struggle emerged as chefs searched for a balance between preserving traditional Chinese dishes and meeting the customer’s wishes. If a Chinese restaurant was owned by a Japanese native, you could usually expect lighter dishes cooked with vegetable or soybean oil and fewer spices as is characteristic of traditional Japanese foods. Chinese natives who served both Japanese customers both in and outside of Japan were faced with a dilemma. Should they stay true to spicy, flavorful and oily cuisines and ignore the dissatisfaction of Japanese customers or should they substitute sugar, fewer spices, and lighter oils? Chinese immigrants found many dishes too sweet or bland while Japanese consumers feared spicy dishes which were foreign to their palates (Tsu 2010: 71).

By compromising, many people might believe that the Chinese are losing their culture, allowing their dishes to be altered for the sake of the Japanese. Matsuno (1986: 151) sees more than the fusion of food; he believes that “Japanese and Chinese traditions can complement each other”. While each culture is distinct, the gastronomic writings of Chinese food have invaded Japan and have forever altered its identity.

References Cited

Matsuno, Shigeko