

Chitalian Cuisine and Its Discontents

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June 27, 2010

When we think about Italy and food, Chinese food is definitely not the first kind of cuisine that comes up in people's minds, nor the second, nor the third...tourists, gastronomes, and epicures come to Italy expecting Lasagne and Chianti, not spring rolls and cheap Chinese Lager.

But please bear with us, for we, a Chinese-American born into a family of restaurateurs and a Mandarin-speaking Italian who has spent more than three years in the Middle Kingdom, think that the topic of Chinese restaurants in Italy deserves more attention and research.

The questions we used as starting points for our research were as follows:

- How has cuisine evolved in Chinese restaurants located in Italy?
- Do restaurants stick to traditional Chinese cooking, or does the cuisine reflect Italian influences?
- Is visiting a Chinese restaurant in Italy equivalent to "instant immigration" to China?

The methodology used for our research was participant observation: we took extensive photos of the food and the restaurants, noted down details and answers to our questions. All interviews with the restaurants' staff were conducted in Mandarin. The extensive use of photographic documentation was very helpful in documenting food behaviour and environment, as it can provide us with "snapshots of social life".¹

The two subjects of our study were the "Nin Hao" restaurant and the "Rosticceria Cinese La Cina," which encompass all the Chinese restaurants in the town of Bra. The location of the two restaurants is fairly different: the former is located on the outskirts of Bra, while the latter is downtown, on the town's main shopping corridor.

Although these are two different kinds of restaurants (sit-down restaurant vs take-away restaurant), they both share the same ambience: they look run-down, with kitschy Chinese décor; they both have red lanterns hanging on the outside and Buddhas, altars, fans, scrolls, etc decorating the inside; Nin Hao also features a massive Chinese-style arch.

The Nin Hao restaurant has definitely seen better days: the décor is faded, letters are peeling off the sign on the exterior, tablecloths and napkins are tattered. The Chinese motif



¹ Salazar, Melissa et al. 2008. "Salad Days: a Visual Study of Children's Food Culture." In *Food and Culture: a Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge, pp. 423-437.

carries onto the plates, decorated with a classic white and blue dragon. The cutlery and glasses are only western; there are no chopsticks in sight and we had to specifically request them.

Both restaurants were empty when we entered them: in a one-and-a-half-hour meal in Nin Hao only another customer came in, while in the Rosticceria we encountered only other two customers. Both places were extremely quiet, with the silence in Nin Hao broken only by “The Simpsons” playing on the television hanging at the back of the dining area.

The two restaurants also share the same ownership structure: they are run by families from the coastal province of Zhejiang, in southern China. We had the opportunity to talk with our server at Nin Hao, who has been in Italy for more than 9 years. Her family arrived later during our dinner, and we noticed that three generations were present in the restaurant. At La Cina, the cashier has been living in Italy for more than 15 years. She previously spent 8 years in Pisa, one in Florence, then bought this restaurant in Bra from a friend who now lives in Spain. Now, it is run together with her three younger brothers who all work at the restaurant. At the time of our interview, only one was present and was working as a chef for the restaurant. The cashier emphasized the fact that the restaurant sustains four families.

The restaurants’ menus share many features:

- They are both very big, presenting a massive array of dishes that actually hides little true diversity.
- There are picture menus of selected dishes hanging on the walls, so that customers will have an easier time ordering.
- Extensive use of Italian terms to describe Chinese dishes (Gnocchi for rice cake, Ragù for minced meat, Ravioli for steamed dumplings, Omelette).
- Italian-Chinese “Classics” that can be found in any Chinese restaurant in Italy: Cantonese fried rice, spring rolls, chicken with almonds, sweet and sour pork, fried gelato.
- Presence of Italian ingredients/dishes, such as stir-fried chicken with olives, mozzarella salad, Italian seafood salad
- Presence of unusual items for Italian Chinese restaurants: Niangao (sticky rice cake), Beijing Duck, lamb dishes



Although the restaurants share many menu items, the food could not have been more different. Nin Hao's dishes were very uninspired: bland flavours, with no dishes standing out as being "good"; extensive use of frozen ingredients, possibly because of a very low turnover due to a lack of customers; most dishes shared the same vegetables, probably because those were the only ones available in the kitchen. Of all the dishes we tried, the "spicy pork" was the worst, lacking flavour and character. We



were surprised by the presence of unusual dishes, such as the "gnocchi" that turned out to be boiled sticky rice cake (niangao), something that we had never seen in Chinese restaurants abroad. In particular, we were surprised by the presence of "Beijing Duck," a dish famous for its technical complexity that normally requires ordering in advance in other Chinese restaurants. Unusually, it was here offered as a normal dish. The duck turned out to be nowhere near as good as the real Beijing Duck, but the skin was surprisingly crispy and the pancakes offered with the dish were definitely handmade (although undercooked). All in all, the food showed a total lack of effort to offer authentic Chinese cuisine to the Italian public: the food was bad by any standard.

Rosticceria La Cina, on the other hand, gave us a few pleasant surprises: most of the dishes we tried had more character, mostly fresh ingredients were used and a couple of dishes actually tasted "Chinese." We were offered "Pane Cinese" (Chinese Bread) by the cashier, which turned out to be steamed buns with a delicious minced pork and peanut filling. The buns were handmade and were the best dish we had in our two days of observation. The salt and pepper shrimp were pleasantly spicy, and the stir fried



vegetables were all fresh (except for the Chinese mushrooms which were dried). The only letdown was the sweet and sour pork, which was cloyingly sweet. Interestingly, spaghetti was used in the stir-fried noodle dish we ordered. All in all, the meal we ordered at Rosticceria La Cina resulted in a much more agreeable experience, in spite of the prices, which were about 20% higher than Nin Hao's, even though at La Cina there is no table service involved.

In the end, we can say that the food in both restaurants was far from being authentic: most of the dishes we tried did not taste "Chinese" and showed no effort in trying to recreate a Chinese

dining experience. We will now analyze the reasons that brought about what we call “Chitalian Cuisine” and try to trace its roots.

Given the proper spatial context, restaurants can provide customers with a sense of “instant immigration” by putting them in a culturally decontextualized place, such that they lose their own cultural self.² For instance, in Beijing, McDonald’s is considered a symbol of modernity and the archetypical example of Western culture. When Chinese customers step into a McDonald’s, they undergo a temporary transportation into Western society. Their adherence to the social rules of American fast-food restaurants leads them to exhibit behaviors that differ sharply from their normal habits. Though it is generally considered taboo for women to dine alone in restaurants, they feel comfortable doing so at McDonald’s due to the gender-neutral ordering structure. Citing the desire to be more “civilized,” customers are also more likely to clean up after themselves and speak in lower voices at McDonald’s, compared to guests at Chinese restaurants. The restaurant space has become a surrogate passport to experiencing another culture.

Upon first glance, the décor and menu of Chinese restaurants in Italy suggest that an “instant immigration” experience is intended for Italian customers. There is heavy usage Chinese-style fans, lanterns and arches in the restaurants’ designs, and red is the most common color used for accents. However, these spaces are a reflection of stereotypical Chinese décor, rather than an accurate depiction of a true Chinese restaurant. For instance, a formal Chinese restaurant would likely use large round tables, sometimes topped with a rotating turntable, to facilitate family-style serving. Instead, Nin Hao used square tables, reflecting the Italian norm. Knives are never present on the table at Chinese restaurants. Here, Nin Hao used a European-style place setting with a knife and fork.

The menus for both restaurants include rice, stir-fry and dumpling dishes typical of Chinese cuisine. But closer scrutiny of the food offerings reveals that Chinese restaurants in Italy are strongly influenced by local cuisine. Traditional Chinese dishes are modified to cater to local tastes, with spices toned down to the point of becoming bland. Ingredients are replaced with new substitutes, reflecting the availability of local produce and unavailability of Chinese ingredients. Traditional Italian dishes are offered, such as mozzarella salad and seafood salad. Then there are entirely new dishes invented in the school of Chinese and Italian fusion. These hybrid dishes often contain local ingredients combined with Chinese-style seasoning, like the pollo con olive (chicken with olives) entrée seen at Rosticceria La Cina. There are also dishes that do not seem to have an apparent Chinese origin, but are now frequently seen on Chinese menus in Italy. Fried gelato and almond chicken are some examples of this. (Curiously, fried gelato is not usually seen on Chinese-American restaurant menus, but fried ice cream is a staple at Mexican-American restaurants. The origins of these cultural phenomena would be a ripe topic for further research.)

² Yan, Yunxiang. 2008. “Of Hamburger and Social Space: Consuming McDonald’s in Beijing.” In Food and Culture: a Reader, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge, pp. 500-522.

In fact, anecdotal evidence from the researchers' experiences suggests that there is a standard repertoire of dishes seen only in Italian-Chinese restaurants, dishes common to every restaurant that are sold in neither Chinese nor Italian restaurants. We posit that these dishes indicate the emergence of a new canon of "Chitalian" cuisine, inspired by both Chinese and Italian cookery, and that customers have come to know and expect these dishes at every Chinese restaurant in Italy.

Roland Barthes writes that food is a system, that is "sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies."³ In other words, food is a means of communication, with social and cultural meanings broader than the mere components on the plate. At Italian-Chinese restaurants, a plate of Cantonese fried rice signals a broad array of cultural constructs and inconsistencies. For Italians, eating at Chinese restaurants is a way to try something new and exotic, even if it isn't an accurate depiction of Chinese cuisine. Though the sample size of customers for this study was small, many of the items that customers ordered were Chitalian foods like almond chicken and Cantonese rice, items designed for Italian palates while still remaining "foreign." This occurred despite the presence of more authentically Chinese items on the menu.



One guest was even observed ordering a seafood salad, and his meal was completed with bread and grissini. In other words, he went to a Chinese restaurant only to have entirely Italian cuisine. Why did he not simply go to an Italian restaurant in that case? Perhaps he wanted to experience a sense of travel through his surroundings, while staying in his dining comfort zone. Chitalian restaurants provide a gray area between Chinese and Italian cultures that allows Italians to grasp a feel for the other, while knowing that an emergency exit is close at

hand. This comfortable intersection is expected by Italians, who generally order the standard Chitalian classics and do not branch out.

At the same time, it cannot be said that the Italians who are eating at Chinese restaurants are conservative. After all, they are some of the very few Italians to even step foot inside the Chinese restaurant. From that perspective, though most people are unconscious of it and just want dinner, choosing to eat Chinese take-out is replete with ideological meaning. As Dylan Clark notes, "Eating is a cauldron for the domination of states, races, genders, ideologies, and

³ Barthes, Roland. 2008. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." In Food and Culture: a Reader, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge, pp. 28-35.

the practice through which these discourses are resisted.”⁴ Eating in Chinese restaurants demonstrates open-mindedness and may be construed as a political statement of tolerance and acceptance of foreign cultures.

The tension between Italian cuisine, symbolic of traditional ways of life, and ethnic restaurants, emblematic of globalization and change, came to a head last year as legislatures in Lucca and other parts of northern Italy moved to ban the presence of “ethnic” restaurants, including kebab shops and Chinese restaurants.⁵ Critics called the moves a form of “gastronomical racism” and highly hypocritical, since Italian cuisine itself incorporates tomatoes and other ingredients not native to the country. In addition, the question of what was considered “ethnic” was unresolved. Massimo Di Grazia, city spokesman of Lucca, said that French restaurants were permissible, but that he was unsure of Sicilian restaurants, since that is influenced by Arab cuisine. Though Italy has the right to be proud of its strong heritage, at the extreme, this pride in tradition is simply a mask for xenophobia. Thus, in a world where non-Italian food is viewed as a threat, and measures like these are taken to safeguard traditional culture, eating a spring roll is an act of resistance to hegemonic ideals. Customers are not only supporting the presence of Chinese restaurants, they are promoting a more open, globalized society and the opportunity to choose a different set of cultural beliefs and behaviors.

For most Chinese restaurateurs, cooking Chitalian cuisine is simply a way to make a living, rather than a display of their heritage and food culture or a demonstration of political resistance. It is noteworthy that while we dined at Nin Hao, the restaurant’s family of owners brought their own food out for dinner, and the meal did not contain any dishes from the restaurant’s original menu. We were fortunate to be able to taste some of their dinner, and though the preparation style was very simple, the food that the family ate was significantly tastier than what we had eaten. Their dinner included large family-style platters of bone-in steamed fish and vegetables dressed in sesame oil and rice vinegar. This was more authentically Chinese than anything that we were served.

As we sampled the food, the grandmother hastened to tell us that these were very simple, home-style dishes, intended for private consumption. This dichotomy between the private face of home-style Chinese cooking and the public face of what is served to outsiders is a reflection of the separation between Chinese immigrants and



⁴ Clark, Dylan. 2008. “The Raw and the Rotten: Punk Cuisine.” In *Food and Culture: a Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge, pp. 411-422.

⁵ Owen, Richard. Jan 31, 2009. “Italy bans kebabs and foreign food from cities.” *The Times Online*. Retrieved from http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/food_and_drink/article5622156.ece, accessed Jun 27, 2010.

Italian society. The Chinese communities in Italy are young and not well-integrated into Italian society. Operating restaurants is one of the few ways the Chinese interact with mainstream society, but even there, the Chinese are not comfortable serving what is authentically Chinese cuisine, and instead prefer to reveal a more Europeanized face.

Still, there are other types of ethnic restaurants in Italy run by recent immigrants, such as kebab shops, and these do not make compromises in their cuisine in the way that Chinese restaurants do. Why else do Chinese restaurants uniquely modify their offerings to cater to local tastes, so as to produce dishes that are unrecognizable as being Chinese? One explanation may be the lack of Chinese ingredients and produce. Our server at Nin Hao told us that there was no source for Chinese produce in Bra, and that one would have to travel to Turin or Milan, cities with large Asian populations, to get Chinese goods. Indeed, the vegetables served at Nin Hao made heavy use of bell peppers, zucchini and celery, ingredients which are in season and widely available locally, but not commonly used in Chinese cooking.

More importantly though, there is low demand for authentic Chinese cuisine, particularly in small towns. Chinese restaurants offer Italian-influenced food because that is what people order most often; people order Italian-influenced food at Chinese restaurants because that is what is most commonly on the menu. Even if more authentic options are listed on the menu, if no one is ordering them, the quality of those dishes will suffer from low turnover. This is a bit of a Catch-22 situation, since there is no reason for restaurateurs to expand their menus and no motivation for Italians to try something new.

The key to breaking the cycle is a critical mass of Chinese immigrants in a population center, such that Chinese restaurants catering exclusively to Chinese people will open. This allows adventurous locals to try authentic Chinese food and become educated about it. As more and more Chinese arrive in Italy, there will likely be a gradual shift in Chinese restaurants to serving “real” Chinese food, prepared as it would be in China.

For now, Bra is home to only two Chinese restaurants and very few Chinese families. Our survey of these restaurants reveals that the décor, cuisine and serving styles employed are heavily influenced by Italian culture, and that the restaurants provide what is expected by Italians, rather than representing genuine Chinese culture. Therefore, visiting one of these restaurants does not provide an experience of “instant immigration,” but rather, allows guests to stay within their comfort zone. Despite these concessions, the Chinese restaurants are still far from being the most successful restaurants in Bra.