

# Celestial Suppers: The Political Economy of America's Chop Suey Craze, 1900-1930\*

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*April 16, 2009*

\*Many thanks for the excellent advice and generous encouragement of participants in the Smith College Faculty Seminar; the University of California, Riverside Economics Colloquium; the Conference in Honor of Gavin Wright; the 2008 meetings of the Social Science History Association; the Cliometrics Society session at the 2009 ASSA meetings; the 2009 Asia-Pacific Economic and Business History Meeting, and the Von Grep Group in Economic History Seminar at UCLA, and Bob Barde who read an early draft. Richard Sutch was there at the beginning of this project and he has been a constant and inspiring source of support and suggestions throughout. Thank you Richard!

According to culinary scholars, American food retained a strongly British character through most of its history.<sup>1</sup> Despite the arrival of waves of immigrants from all around the world, ethnic cuisine did not gain a place at the American table until the food revolution in the 1970s (Root and de Rochemont 1976; Hess and Hess 1972; Pillsbury 1998; Kamp 2006; Kiple 2007).

At the same time, there is some suggestion, especially in the very recent literature, that Chinese food may have been an exception to this rule. Ivan Light (1974) documents the growing number of Chinese restaurants serving non-co-ethnics during the early twentieth century, though his emphasis is on Chinese restaurants in Chinatowns. Sylvia Lovegren (1995), Leslie Brenner (1999), Sherrie Innes (2006), Madeline Hsu (2008), and Jennifer 8. Lee (2008) describe a Chinese culinary influence in the post-World War II era. James Comer (2000), Samantha Barbas (2003) and Haiming Liu (2009) describe the growing popularity of Chinese food in the early twentieth century though none provide an analysis of why or how this came to be.

Donna Gabaccia (1998) develops an analysis of how and when ethnic food ultimately did impact American foodways. She subtitled her book, "Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans," emphasizing similarities in the ways in which the ethnic foods of many different groups came incorporated into the mainstream American diet. Since many of their foodways differed significantly from those of Americans, immigrants were compelled to import or raise their special ingredients in order to maintain their traditions. Demand for such foods provided an opportunity for ethnic entrepreneurs who eventually sought markets outside their enclaves as a way of expanding their businesses. In Gabaccia's telling, the process was similar for all ethnic groups, the Italians, the Jews, the Germans, and the Mexicans as well as the Chinese.

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<sup>1</sup> A large strand of the literature on American cuisine focuses on the impacts of technological and organizational changes in the production and marketing of food on its character. Its primary cultural interest is in governmental and professional efforts to "improve" the American diet that suffered as a result. See Cummings (1940), Levenstein (1988, 2003) and Pollen (2006). Culinary style is the focus of only a small proportion of this culinary literature.

My goal is to convince you that the Chinese story is unlike any other. The goals of my study are to demonstrate the success of the Chinese in bringing their cuisine to the larger American public during the early years of the twentieth century, to explain why they were uniquely able to do so, and to convince you that the story of the Chinese is unlike any other.

### Chinese Restaurants in City Directories: 1900 to 1930

The restaurant has become one of the most potent agents of change in altering the character of American dining. Virtually all of the new cuisines, cooking styles, and foods of the past several decades first entered the American diet in restaurant settings (Pillsbury 1998: 165).

If Pillsbury is right, we should be able to measure of the popularity of Chinese and other ethnic foods by observing the appearance and spread of their restaurants. Such quantification is possible using the city directories published for most of America's cities and towns beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing, for many, up through 1960. These directories provided four types of information: a complete listing of adults by residence, organized according to surname; a complete inventory of residents and establishments by address, organized according to street; a classified section listing businesses according to type and including street address, and later, telephone number; and a similar listing for governmental, religious, civic, and social organizations. The directories also included ads and a variety of annotations to the entries. In many communities these directories were published annually and included notations that described individuals' status. We know, for example, whether an individual was a home owner, renter, or boarder and his or her occupation and place of employment. In many cases notes indicate the whereabouts of persons who had appeared in the previous year's directory but who were no longer resident in the community. Some of these individuals were known to be deceased; others to have "removed" to some other community or even to another country.

City directories were compiled by commercial publishers who updated them annually or biennially and made their money selling them within the community. In the days before telephones were widely used, city directories provided the only listing of residents, businesses, and governmental, religious, and civic organizations. Publishers also sold advertising, though they made an effort to catalog every organization, whether or not it took out an ad. Here I use data from city directories to describe the spread of Chinese restaurants across the country in the early years of the twentieth century.

In most city directories for 1900, eating establishments were classified under a number of different headings. "Dining Rooms," "Eating Houses," "Oyster and Refreshment Saloons," and "Restaurants" were the most common headings. Root and de Rochemont and Levenstein argue that a considerable amount of food was also sold at establishments listed under the headings "Liquor, Retail" and "Saloons" (Root and de Rochemont 1976, Chapter 28 and Levenstein 2003, Chapter 15). The growing popularity of restaurants and the passage of the Volstead Act on October 28, 1919 meant that by 1920, all eating establishments were classified under the heading "Restaurants."

Except for those establishments that took out ads, there is little to indicate the type of cuisine that was served. In 1900 most restaurants took the name of their proprietor, only a few telegraphed their offerings in names such as *New York Quick Lunch Oyster House and Restaurant*, *Roma Restaurant*, *American-Chinese Restaurant*, and *Hof Brau Haus*. By 1920, some but by no means most, ethnic restaurants received a special identifier indicating ethnic cuisine. For example, in the Providence, Rhode Island city directory, *Chin Lee Co.* was designated as American and Chinese and *Chin & Co.* was designated Chinese. Inexplicably, *Far East Restaurant* received no ethnic designation even though its ad clearly states that it was a Chinese and American restaurant. Overall, explicit ethnic food designations were rare. The 1920 city directory for Rhode Island explicitly identifies only nine out of a total of 386 restaurants as ethnic.

I deal with these limitations by constructing two estimates of the prevalence of ethnic food. Both use restaurant names to classify the cuisine served. My lower-bound estimate classifies as ethnic those where the restaurant name itself is an explicit ethnic reference as in *Far East*, *Canton*, *Napoli* and *Venezia*. I also include those with a specific ethnic designation. My upper-bound estimate adds restaurants named with surnames of people outside of northwest Europe and French Canada. Many of these names -- *Bun Far Low*, *Allegretti Gaetano*, *Paul Pappas* -- are easy to classify. Where I was unsure I searched for the name on Ancestry.com using the federal census closest to the date of my survey. In only a few cases was I unable to classify a name using this tool.

My lower-bound estimate surely understates the number of ethnic restaurants and the amount of ethnic food served. Patrons didn't need a specific ethnic designation to know the type of food they would be served at *Bun Fong Low* or at *Cambopiano Francesco*. Another reason my measure understates the amount of ethnic food is that many Chinese restaurants carried out business under the names *Royal* and *Palace*. Because these names are ambiguous, I count them as Chinese only where I find some explicit indication that they served Chinese food. Yet another problem is that some popular ethnic dishes were also served at non-ethnic restaurants. Chicago druggists were reported to serve chop suey and chili at their lunch counters ("Health Hurts Drug Trade:" 1908). Imogene Lim found chow mein sandwiches on lunch counter, drugstore, five-and-dime, and amusement park menus (Lin 2004: 137). A number of restaurants with clearly Western names also responded to the popularity of Chinese food by making it a speciality:

Dearings' fame for its superb Chinese food served in a colorful Oriental Garden has spread afar. Gauffney's Auburn Palace, under the management of Mrs. Richard Gauffney, comely wife of our good friend Richard Gauffney, extends a special welcome to Frog patrons. They, too, specialize in Chinese food ("Local Merchants To Welcome Frog Visitors:" 1931).

This evidence suggests that even my upper-bound estimate understates the prevalence of Chinese food in American restaurants.

The Greeks were also heavily employed in the restaurant industry, but, unlike the Chinese or the Italians, they seem to have rarely served their national dishes. As a lengthy article in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1909 pointed out:

Of the foreigners who are invading the restaurant field in the city, Greeks are coming to the front as leaders. The Italian may run a sort of an artistic café, the Chinese may cater to the fancy trade of chop suey eaters. The Greek caters to the American workman. His meals are not fancy. They are plain and wholesome and in general strive to give one "his money's worth.".... Today every Greek who wants to make money in the restaurant business goes out of his own colony and establishes a restaurant in an American neighborhood ....According to the opinion of some of these Greek proprietors of restaurants, American cooking is the easiest thing on earth. By keeping an American cook for about two month at the time they open up the restaurant they can easily learn the "art." Then they do the cooking themselves. The reason for this is that there are no elaborate dishes to be prepared and because the American likes to have his meat cooked while he is waiting for it (Miller 1909).

Theodore Saloutos argued that, "The general idea was to develop a profitable business that did not call for heavy overhead costs or place too great a reliance on trained skills" (Saloutos 1964: 264). Greeks pioneered the development of the American diner, which offered such American staples as sliced roast turkey, mash potatoes with gravy, and corn (Witzel 1999). Gabaccia reports that in Charleston, SC, where Greeks operated about a third of all restaurants, cafes, and lunchrooms, "They offered standard southern fare" (Gabaccia 1998: 115). These observations suggest that the number of Greek-run restaurants greatly overstates the availability of Greek food. As we will see in a moment, though, even using this generous measure of Greek fare, the Chinese food appears to have been much more readily available.

### **Ethnic Restaurants in Rhode Island: 1900-1930**

I begin by examining listings from Rhode Island, a state whose city directory conveniently displayed entries for all cities and towns for a given year in a single volume. By 1900, when this investigation begins, Rhode Island had already had a long urban and industrial history. The state was home to America's first textile factory, founded by Samuel Slater in Pawtucket in 1790. Over the nineteenth century, Slater's mill was joined by other cotton and woolen manufacturers and later by manufacturers of machine tools, silver, and jewelry. By 1900, Rhode Island became the most urban, industrialized state in the nation. This growth continued during the early part of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1930, the state's population grew from 428,556 to 687,497 with much of the increase due to immigrants drawn to its manufacturing employment opportunities. About a third of the population was foreign-born and another third first generation. The largest of these ethnic groups was Italian. With a population of 92,036 in 1930, they accounted for almost 20 percent of the state's foreign white stock.<sup>2</sup> There were only 197 Chinese. The median age for the Rhode Island population was 25-29 years. Despite the high proportion of immigrants, the sex ratio in the 20 to 29 year age group was only 90.2. Among native-born whites, 42.3 percent of women 15 years of age and older were single. In other words, the employed, single, young adults who predominated among the restaurants' clientele also comprised a large share of the Rhode Island population in these years.

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<sup>2</sup> Foreign white stock includes foreign-born whites and native white of foreign or mixed parentage (U.S. Census 1932).

I present the results of my classification of Rhode Island restaurants by ethnicity in Table 1. It offers snapshots of the restaurant population taken ten years apart, beginning in 1900 and continuing through 1930. Numbers are displayed for the state as a whole and for each of the 12 cities and towns with a population of 20,000 or more by 1930. Ethnic restaurants by type, calculated according to my lower- and upper-bound estimating procedures, are shown for the three ethnic groups with the largest number of restaurants – the Chinese, the Italians, and the Greeks. The Portuguese and Armenians also operated a number of restaurants in the state.

In 1900, Providence, home to about one-third of the state's residents, accounted for two-thirds of its restaurants and seven out of 10 of its ethnic restaurants. Consistent with Gabaccia's model, the ethnic restaurants appear to have been serving primarily co-ethnics. The Italian restaurants of Providence were located in the Federal Hills neighborhood, part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward in which 59 percent of Providence's Italian-born population resided. The Chinese restaurants were located in the downtown, part of the 4<sup>th</sup> ward that was home to 42 percent of Providence's Chinese.<sup>3</sup> Over time the number of Chinese restaurants increased and more of them located outside of their ethnic enclave. By 1910, there were 12 Chinese restaurants in the state, six new ones in Providence and one each in Pawtucket and Woonsocket. A decade later in 1920 the number of Chinese restaurants more than doubled for a total of 26, with new locations in Newport, Westerly, and three small towns. Within Providence, ethnic restaurants began to appear outside of the downtown. By 1930, although the total declined from 26 to 24, half of the 12 larger cities and towns had at least one Chinese restaurant.

Restaurants operated by the Chinese, Italians, and Greeks grew as a share of the total, rising from six percent in 1900 to 23 percent in 1930.<sup>4</sup> Consistent with Garbaccia's argument, the Italians and the Greeks increased the number of their restaurants and began locating them outside of their ethnic neighborhoods. But no group, not even the Greeks, specialized in catering to non-co-ethnics like the Chinese. Table 2, which displays what I call "ethnic restaurant density," shows that while Italian restaurants per Italian doubled between 1900 and 1930; Chinese restaurants per Chinese increased more than 11-fold. At 121.8 restaurants per thousand Chinese in 1930, the Chinese ethnic restaurant density rate was 305 times the level for Italians and 6.5 times the level for Greeks. The increasing number of Italian restaurants largely reflected the growth in the Italian population. The increasing number of Chinese restaurants reflected a growing popularity of Chinese food across a broad spectrum of the American population.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I calculated the residential distribution of the Italians and Chinese from information made available on Ancestry.com. In 1900, 3,507 of the 5,929 Providence residents born in Italy lived in the 9<sup>th</sup> ward and 105 of the 246 Chinese lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> ward. As these numbers suggest, the Chinese were considerably more geographically dispersed than were the Italians.

<sup>4</sup> In 1920 their share was 33 percent.

<sup>5</sup> In a longer version of this paper I report findings for all the New England states for the census years 1900 through 1930 and for every community of 30,000 or more in 1929, the year of the first census of retail. The pattern for the other New England states is similar to what I report above for Rhode Island. The national sample for 1929 indicates a greater predominance of Chinese

I model the behavior of Chinese Americans (potential restaurateurs) in a demand and supply framework. By demand, I mean the demand for restaurant meals generally. Growth in overall demand should expand the market for all restaurants, Chinese included. I model the Chinese supply response in terms of three factors: extreme racist attitudes and practices directed toward them; the strength and operation of their transnational mutual aid societies known as huiguans; and economies of scale and scope in the operation and provisioning of ethnic restaurants.

### The Demand for Restaurant Meals

The growth in the number of Chinese restaurants occurred at a time of growth in demand for restaurant services more generally. Part of this increased demand resulted from the declining popularity of restaurant substitutes.

In 1900, restaurants were not the only – or indeed even the most important – venue for procuring meals outside the home. Hotels, boarding houses, and even saloons and taverns outnumbered restaurants and may have sold more food (Pillsbury 1990). Before the widespread availability of electricity, single men and women working away from their parents' homes lived in boarding houses and hotels without personal cooking facilities. These establishments typically offered the "American Plan" in which meals were included in the price of lodging. Saloons competed for the lucrative alcohol trade by offering free or heavily subsidized meals to accompany the drinks.

Growth in per capita income, urbanization, and the advent of trolley service (most restaurants were located in the city center) further expanded the market for restaurant services. Employment for women, especially white collar employment, created a new clientele. The Volstead Act ("Prohibition") outlawed a major competitor. Electricity and the residential building boom of the 1920s generated alternatives to the boarding house. The automobile stimulated travel, leading to a boom in restaurants at vacation spots such as Newport, Niagara Falls, Atlantic City, and Miami.

One measure of the rapidity of restaurant growth is shown in Table 1 which lists the number of Rhode Island restaurants at the decennial years 1900 through 1930. Decadal growth rates are 76, 37, and 58 percent, respectively, for the successive ten year periods. Another measure that indicates change over time in the demand for restaurant meals at the national level is the share of the labor force employed in the industry. This share rose 85 percent between 1900 and 1930 from 0.84 percent to 1.55 percent.<sup>6</sup>

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restaurants in New England and the Upper Midwest and the smallest representation in the Western states where, paradoxically, the majority of the Chinese population resided.

<sup>6</sup> Calculated using IPUMS Employment in Eating and Drinking Establishments identified by variable IND1950, code 679.

## The Supply of Chinese Restaurants

Why did the Chinese devote so much effort to running restaurants compared with the Italians? How were the Chinese able to promote their own cuisine while the Greeks -- heavily involved in the restaurant industry and heirs to a sophisticated, glorious culinary tradition -- served American, but not Greek, food? Their behavior, I suggest, derives from three factors: extreme racist attitudes and practices directed toward the Chinese, the strength and operation of Chinese mutual aid societies known as *huiquans*; and economies of scale and scope in the operation of ethnic restaurants.

### *Racism*

The Chinese first began arriving in the United States in the early 1850s and from the beginning they faced a level of discrimination that had few parallels. While they were valued by employers for their industry and their willingness to work for low wages in remote locations such as mines and on railroad construction projects, these same qualities engendered the wrath of other workers. Responding to public uprisings, laws passed as early as the 1850s limited the ability of the Chinese to make mining claims and own land (Brown and Phillips 1986 and Boswell 1986). Jean Pfaelzer (2007) describes episodes of mob action that resulted in murder, the seizure of Chinese property, and the forced abandonment of their businesses and homes. These hostile actions culminated (but did not end) in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which severely limited Chinese entry into the United States.

After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Chinese faced restricted prospects. They couldn't naturalize. In many states they could not marry outside their race, conduct businesses, or educate their children. Racism limited their employment and housing options. Shih-Shan Henry Tsai cites a study of Americans conducted in 1927 that found "only 27.0 percent who said they would accept Chinese as fellow workers, 15.9 percent as neighbors, and 11.8 percent as friends" (Tsai 1988: xi).

Mining and construction had been major employers of the Chinese in the nineteenth century, so when the railroad-building era came to an end and the mining claims ran out, the Chinese moved into general labor, domestic service, laundries, and restaurants. In Ivan Light's view, these occupational choices were the direct result of discrimination that the Chinese faced in other sectors. He writes:

The Chinese did not "by nature" gravitate into laundry and restaurant businesses. These operations required very long hours of work at low rates of remuneration. When higher paying wage or salary jobs became available, they took them. The Chinese preference for high wages was indicated by the alacrity with which they abandoned Chinatown occupations when the labor shortages of World War II opened new employment opportunities for them. Since World War II, salaried white collar jobs have become increasingly available to college-educated Chinese-Americans who prefer these jobs to self-employment in restaurants, curio stores, or laundries. But prior to 1940, discrimination in employment virtually eliminated opportunities for Chinese in the general labor market. The classic small businesses of prewar Chinese were, in this sense, monuments to the discrimination that had created them (Light 1972: 7-8).

Roger Daniels, in a case study of the Chinese in Butte, Montana, elaborated on these themes:

[H]ow to explain the exceptional growth in "outpost" Chinatowns like Butte of businesses that catered largely to non-Chinese customers? Here a number of factors obviously interacted: Chinese men were driven from some of their earliest occupations, such as placer mining; the relative scarcity of women in the American West pushed these men into "women's work"; they came from a culture in which business and business dealings were highly developed; the law itself both barred them from many professions and gave special preference to what were called "treaty merchants." The Chinese American could exploit the labor of other Chinese, sometimes his kinsmen and usually his fellow clansmen, who had fewer employment options than other American workers. Furthermore, the Chinese employer often had a special hold on his workers – many of them were "illegals" whom he could turn in (Daniels 1988:77).

Daniels also mentions the possible importance of "rotating credit associations" but ultimately decides that they cannot in and of themselves explain Chinese business success since other ethnic groups developed similar institutions (Daniels 1988: 77).

Changes over time and by region in the industrial distribution of Chinese males 14 years of age and older by region are consistent with the outlines of the story as told by Light and Daniels. The laundries and later restaurants employ large and increasing fractions of the Chinese workforce, but only in those regions of the country where alternate employment was not available. Thus less than 0.1 percent of Chinese workers in the Northeast were employed in the restaurant industry in 1900; by 1930 the share is 41.7 percent. In the west, the Chinese restaurant employment share rose from 0.8 to 12.8 percent over the same period. Particularly noteworthy are the employment patterns of the Chinese in Hawai'i (a region not studied by either Light or Daniels). There the Chinese were generally well integrated into the larger society and could select from a wide range of industries (Glick 1980 and McKeown 2004). It is therefore notable that laundry and restaurant work occupy only a tiny fraction of the Hawaiian Chinese labor force.

Chinese occupational change was accompanied by geographic change. Daniels called attention to these "great and continual changes" in the Chinese community during the Exclusion Era, "with geographic changes being only the most easily noticeable" (Daniels 1988: 68). He focuses on the movement of the Chinese out of the rural areas and small towns where they were initially employed in mining and construction activities and emphasizes the emergence of "Chinatowns" in big cities. He notes that:

In 1880, for example, only 21.7 percent of Chinese lived in cities of over 100,000. This percentage increased with every census. By 1910 almost half (48.5 percent ) of Chinese Americans lived in such cities. By 1940 the figure had risen to 71 percent (Rogers 1988: 69).

Perhaps even more remarkable, however, was the Chinese movement into smaller-sized communities without Chinatowns. Even as the total number of Chinese in the country fell, small towns across America witnessed the arrival of an often solitary Chinese laundryman or restaurateur.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A highly regarded study of the social isolation experienced by Chinese laundrymen of this period is Siu (1987), originally published as the author's Ph.D. dissertation in 1953.

The Duncan index measuring change in the proportionate distribution of the Chinese and non-Chinese populations across states and over time plummets from 97.3 in 1870 to only 55.6 by 1920. To provide some perspective, the same index for the black versus the non-black population over the same period and reflecting the impact of the fabled “Great Migration” falls from 67.7 to 49.1 between 1910 and 1920, after which it rose to 54.5 in 1920. Altogether, this is a considerably smaller reduction in geographic concentration than that achieved by the Chinese.

For such a tiny population to achieve such a high degree of geographic dispersion, individuals had to move into communities where there were very few persons like themselves. If the 61,639 Chinese resident in the 48 states of the United States in 1920 were distributed equally across the 3,063 counties at the time, each county would be home to approximately 20 Chinese (average county *total* population was almost 34,363). In fact, 61.2 percent of all counties had no Chinese residents at all, but that percentage falls by half, to 30.7 percent when we restrict the sample to counties with a population of 25,000 or more. An amazing 10.4 percent of all counties and 14.4 percent of counties with populations of 25,000 or more had exactly one Chinese resident. Another 20.3 percent of counties had from two to 20 Chinese persons, 36.9 percent if we limit the sample to the more populous counties. Every county with a population of 250,000 or more – and such counties were home to approximately a third of the total population – had at least one Chinese resident.

One of the implications of these indices for the chop suey craze is that they show that many Chinese had already moved out of California, out of Chinatowns, and into small cities and towns across America before Americans fell in love with Chinese food. These migrants weren’t restaurateurs at the time; they were laundrymen.

Neither Light nor Daniels comments on the shift over time of the Chinese out of laundries and into the restaurant business. The shift is evident in the census data and it was noted by the press at the time. The popular analysis was that the Chinese could afford to leave the laundry business because their growing experience with American language and culture and also because of their thrift. The combination allowed them to accumulate the necessary capital for establishing restaurants; they were motivated to do so because restaurants were more profitable. Thus, the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1924:

Laundries run by Chinese in this country are not nearly so conspicuous as they were a few years ago. Their number is decreasing. Chinese who first came to America were poor and ignorant, and could not go into any business that required capital or a knowledge of the language and customs of the country.

In order to be independent they resorted to the laundry business which required little of either, and they began to save money and acquire the necessary knowledge for a more pleasant and a more profitable occupation. There are fewer Chinese laundrymen today, but in New York alone Chinese own and operate more than three hundred restaurants (“Chop Suey vs. Shirts:” 1924: 2).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A similar article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* during the same month. See “Chinese Laundries Gone; Restaurants Are Many” (1924).

The *Wall Street Journal* analysis implies that the Chinese came to the United States with few assets and through hard work and abstemious living, gradually amassed the capital that allowed them to move into a more profitable industry. That is the standard immigrant story, and it surely was part of the Chinese story as well. But there is another, possibly more important, factor that contributed to their success. It involved the huiguans.

### *Huiguans*

Huiguans are transnational Chinese mutual aid societies built around similarity of dialect and surname. The first American huiguan was organized in San Francisco in 1851. By 1862, when there were six, they joined together in a federal association with the English name Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. As the Chinese moved into new cities they brought their huiguans with them, establishing local branches that operated with some autonomy while retaining strong ties to similar organizations in other cities. San Francisco's Chinese Benevolent Association remained the most prominent branch and was known to Americans as the Chinese Six Companies (Hoy 1942; Lai 1987; Tsai 1988: 46; Brown 1995; McGlinn 1995; Hsu 2000; and Yee 2003).

The huiguans provided a wide variety of services to Chinese Americans. Tsai notes that they were the first contacts in-coming Chinese made upon their arrival in America and the last before their departure.

As soon as an immigrant ship arrived from China, the company sent an interpreter to the wharf to welcome the arrivals. In the company headquarters, the new immigrants were furnished water, fuel for cooking, and a room in which to spread their mats. Chinese laborers from inland towns and mining camps, embarking for return to China, often stayed in the company houses instead of in the more expensive boarding houses. The sick and indigent were also welcomed; the idle and irresponsible, however, were quickly weeded out...For all except transients and invalids, the membership fee was \$10, in the 1850s. Finally, members intending to return to China were required to make that fact know, so their accounts could be examined and measures taken to prevent their departure if debts remained unpaid (Tsai 1988: 48).

The huiguans also helped their members find employment and obtain credit and insurance. They provided public goods such as fire safety, garbage collection, and even police protection that were often denied the Chinese by hostile white communities. They made provisions for their members' observance of religious rituals, adjudicated disputes, and provided legal services. They also organized trade between China and the United States, including the importation of Chinese specialty foods such as rice, soy products, sauces, dried seafood, and ethnic fruits and vegetables that were otherwise unavailable in the United States at the time. Robert Spier (1958) uses evidence from the railroads for which the Chinese furnished much of the manual labor to show that these workers had access to their ethnic foods even in remote locations. Critics of the Chinese argued that the huiguans also engaged in illegal activities including the importation of "coolies" and prostitutes, the operation of brothels and gambling and opium dens, and the extortion of money from their own members (Tsai 1988: 48).

Passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act greatly increased the power of the huiguans. Under the law, only "treaty merchants" and their families, religious figures, scholars, and the foreign-born children of American-born Chinese *men* were allowed to enter the country. Enforcement was tough and even persons with the proper

credentials were challenged upon their arrival (Barde 2008). Just prior to passage of the Act, in 1880, the Chinese population numbered 105,465. After its implementation the Chinese population fell precipitously so that at its trough in 1920 it was only about half its 1880 level. Population figures disaggregated by sex and nativity show that the declines were concentrated among the foreign-born males who constituted the majority of the Chinese population in 1880.

Despite the stringent entry restrictions, recent scholarship shows that a surprisingly large number of Chinese were able to enter the United States. Because the number of Chinese at successive censuses is consistent with a “no migration” model and also because of the paucity of detail on age and country of birth in the published censuses, scholars for many years assumed that the Chinese Exclusion Act effectively prohibited new entrants and that Chinese Americans during the Exclusion Era constituted an “aging bachelor population” of survivors from the earlier era of open borders.

Recent work by Kenneth S. Y. Chew and John M. Liu (2004) and by Erika Lee (2003, 2006) demonstrate that this characterization cannot be sustained. Using the IPUMS samples from the manuscript censuses, Chew and Liu show that although the number of Chinese at each census is consistent with a “no migration” model, there was in fact quite a bit of in- and out-migration of Chinese. Their conclusions derive from their discovery of many more individuals in the young-adult age groups than would be predicted by the number of those ten years younger in the previous census. They write, “...no plausible combination of vital rates accounts for the observed population structures” (Chew and Liu 2004: 65). Through a process of elimination they conclude that:

Notwithstanding immigration policy intended to preclude two-way migration, our projections indicate that many (if not most) Chinese who left the United States were replaced, one-for-one, by others (Chew and Liu 2004: 66-67).

Because of the small size of the IPUMS samples, however, Chew and Liu were not able to analyze the characteristics of the post-Exclusion Act migrants. Lee’s investigations of the reports of the Commissioner-General of Immigration for the period 1910 through 1924 suggest that these later migrants were quite different from the laborers who predominated prior to Exclusion. She finds that a large proportion of the men were new or returning merchants and their sons and that the women were merchants’ wives and daughters (Lee 2006: 8, 11). She is also impressed by the volume of the flow, concluding:

...considering the immense barriers that the Chinese exclusion laws posed to new immigrants, returning residents, and citizens alike, the fact that over 300,000 Chinese successfully defied exclusion is testament to their persistence and motivation (Lee 2006: 21).

Since the total Chinese American population in the United States in 1920 was less than 62,000, many of those 300,000 entries had to have been made by repeat migrants.

Some insight into how the character of the Chinese community was affected by migration is provided by Table 3, which compares various attributes of the Chinese who had migrated into the United States during the ten years prior to the census with the rest of the Chinese American population. Surprising, given the stringency of the

restrictions and of border enforcement, recent migrants comprised a substantial share of the Chinese American population during the Exclusion Era. In the year with the lowest value, 1910, their share is 11.3 percent. In 1900 it is almost a third. Between 1910 and 1930, even as immigration law was becoming more restrictive and the native-born Chinese population was growing through natural increase, the proportionate representation of recent arrivals grew. Constituting only 11.3 percent of the Chinese American population in 1910, the recent arrival share grew to 20.4 percent by 1930. The large share of recent arrivals and the large number of arrivals (which must have been matched by departures) is consistent with the emphasis in the institutional histories of Chinese Americans on the transnational character of their community. See for example, Hoy (1942) and Hsu (2000).

The growing share of recent arrivals is important, in part, because their personal characteristics differed substantially from those of the native-born Chinese Americans and from those who arrived at an earlier time. The recent arrivals were younger, less likely to settle in the Western states, and more likely to be engaged in whatever industry happened to be the growing industry for the Chinese at the time of their arrival. Surprisingly, they were similar to American-born Chinese and earlier arrivals in their English language fluency, that is, they were amazingly fluent in English! In 1910, 42 percent of Chinese recent arrivals could speak English; in 1920 the share was 76 percent. The other important distinction of recent migrants is that they were much more likely than the others to be living in households as a non-relative. Some of the "households" were boarding houses, but many were headed by co-ethnics and included only one or two non-relatives. Overall these measures suggest that for the Chinese – and perhaps more so than for other ethnic groups -- migration to America was a business venture. The characteristics and apparent motivations of recent migrants from China would appear to have played an especially important role in enabling the Chinese to capitalize on the new American fondness for exotic restaurant meals.

To understand the mechanisms that strengthened the power of the *huiguans*, it is useful to focus on the avenues through which Chinese could enter the United States during the Exclusion Era. Under the new law there were only two potentially large classes of persons born in China could legally enter – merchants and their immediate families and China-born children of Chinese men born in the United States.<sup>9</sup> To qualify as a merchant one had to show proof of ownership of a trading company or similar business organization. This requirement could be satisfied by having one's name listed as a partner in an American business organization. It appears that there developed, in response to the new law, a transatlantic market for such listings. Chinese Americans, operating through their *huiguans*, could sell "partnerships" to Chinese wishing to enter the United States. Emma Woo Louie describes some evidence supportive of this conjecture:

During the Chinese exclusion period, a Chinese store may have had many more owners than was expected of a small business because being a merchant was a viable way of making a living in this country and to being able to bring a wife from China. For example, in 1906, the Man Jan Company in San Francisco listed 29 partners and the Peking Bazaar listed 18 partners in 1916. No doubt some were laborers who were

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<sup>9</sup> Altogether there were ten classes of Chinese exempt from exclusion but only the merchants and China-born children of American-born Chinese men were numerically important. See Tsai (1988).

partners in name only because this was the only way they could bring their families to this country. (After the role of a Chinese merchant was defined in 1893 (28 Stat. 8), immigration authorities required Chinese stores to submit partnership lists so that they could keep track of those claiming this exempt classification.) (Louie 1998: 101).

To enter as the China-born child of an American-born Chinese male required that a male American citizen of Chinese descent had previously established his American citizenship with immigration authorities, usually by showing an American birth certificate. He would then have had to have left for China and spent some time there. Upon his return he could either bring his China-born child with him, or, as was more common, bring evidence of a child or children born to him while he was abroad. These claims of children born in China created "slots" that could later be used to facilitate the immigration the child or children but also of persons who would otherwise be denied entry. There was strong demand for these "slots." Evidence suggests that transnational Chinese organizations bought and sold such slots and that they provided coaching to potential immigrants on strategies for getting through U.S. border control. Unrelated persons making use of these slots are referred to as "paper sons" (since almost all of those making use of the slots were males) or more generally, "paper families" (Lau 1997).

The Chinese had developed strong family, business, and fraternal organizations even prior to the Exclusion Act, but, as Estelle Lau argues, that U.S. immigration law and the Chinese response to it greatly strengthened those ties:

Adoption of these techniques was not without long-term consequences for the Chinese – they were forced to change their names, adopt fictitious family histories, and maintain these deceptions over time until these fictions themselves became inescapable elements of the stories the Chinese told about themselves. These manipulations not only changed the ways Chinese spoke and understood themselves, but it changed the ways in which they interacted as a community and with the greater population. The need for the paper slot to roughly match the individual seeking to enter created a market that extended beyond immediate kinship. And the need to learn and create a plausible family in the eyes of immigration inspectors required a substantial level of coordination within the Chinese community in the United States and China. As the network of paper kin developed and was maintained over time, the Chinese became mutually interdependent, liable, and obligated to each other (Lau 2007: 7).

Scholars offer conflicting estimates of the quantitative impact of these practices. We will probably never know the precise extent of illegal entry, but the IPUMS data allow us to construct an indirect measure, the proportion of the Chinese population known by the most popular Chinese surnames. If entry restrictions strengthened the cohesiveness of the Chinese community and strengthened the position of those whose assets allowed them to buy and sell slots, then we should see wealthy clans growing at the expense of the others. The manuscripts from the federal censuses up through 1930 provide surnames of the enumerated population and the IPUMS makes these available in an electronic format. Consistent with the argument that U.S. immigration law strengthened the power of the best established clans, the figures show a strong increase in the share of the Chinese American population using the ten most popular surnames along with an even stronger concentration of the recently-arrived population with those names. In 1900, 26.8 percent of Chinese and 32.2 percent of those who arrived within the previous decade

belonged to one of the largest surname groups; by 1930, over a third of all Chinese Americans belonged to one of the ten most predominant Chinese surname groups.<sup>10</sup>

### *Economies of Scale and Scope*

Most early-twentieth century American restaurants were small-scale operations. They involved little capital, advertising, special equipment, ingredients, or special training for their chefs and wait staffs. Indeed, the modest requirements and ease of entry into restaurant work is what made the industry so attractive to the impoverished Greeks. But a Chinese restaurant –or, for that matter, any other ethnic restaurant operating outside of its own ethnic neighborhood – was different. Precisely because it was selling an exotic experience, its costs were potentially high. To make good on its claim to the exotic, such restaurants had to offer hard-to-find ingredients, special plates and other service items, unique menus, and secret recipes. Non-ethnics had to be encouraged to give this new experience a try.

Imagine for a moment the logistical difficulties facing an independent restaurateur wishing to establish a Chinese restaurant in, say, a small town in Western Massachusetts in 1920 that had never before been exposed to this type of ethnic cuisine. Where would he procure the soy sauce, tofu, oyster sauce, bean sprouts, bok choy, and other necessary inputs? How could he be assured of continued supplies for the long term? How would he finance the provisioning of the necessary supply chains? One could imagine long-term contracts accomplishing these supply requirements, but where would the finance for such contracts come from? Imagine the advertising campaign required to persuade Western Massachusetts residents accustomed to meat and potatoes to try something different.

Contrast the problem facing an independent restaurateur with the opportunities available to an organized entity that supplied and managed a large number of Chinese restaurants. Such an entity could buy exotic ingredients in bulk – contracting for the production of ingredients such as bean sprouts that could be grown in the United States, arranging for the importation of ingredients such as shark fin that were available only in China. It could standardize the format of Chinese restaurant menus and centralize their printing. It could set up a system for the training of chefs and the selection of new restaurant sites. It could regulate competition to prevent too many Chinese restaurants from selecting any particular location. Under such an organization the cost of provisioning *each individual restaurant* could be lower. Such reductions in the cost per restaurant as the number of restaurants increase are called economies of scale.

Other scale effects also derived from reputation. Given the white community's hostility toward the Chinese and their suspicion of their ingredients and hygiene, it is difficult to imagine how such restaurants could attract their first patron, let alone develop a loyal clientele in the absence of positive publicity surrounding Chinese restaurants in

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<sup>10</sup> Emma Woo Louie argues that by the late nineteenth century American census takers were systematically and accurately recording Chinese names. In the early years of Chinese immigration to the United States, however, generic names such as "Chinaman, John Chinaman, and Chinese" were frequently recorded in the census. Louie also notes that the vocative "Ah" was recorded as a surname during the nineteenth century and continues to be listed as such in the *Soundex* (Louie 1998: 97-101).

other cities. Because of these reputation effects, the success of any individual restaurant was dependent upon the quality of all of others. Each had an interest in promoting the success of his colleague. Each was engaged, either consciously or unconsciously, in marketing the services of other present and future Chinese restaurants. Efficiencies associated with marketing the Chinese restaurant are called economies of scope.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Chinese organized to take advantage of these economies of scale and scope soon after Chinese food became popular with Americans. A 1903 article in the Chicago Daily Tribune describes a "Chop Suey Trust: Has Tentacles in Chicago." It is worth reproducing the article in full because it describes the wide range of Chinese foods admired by non ethnics, the movement toward single ownership and control over Chicago's Chinese restaurants very soon after the chop suey fad took off, and also the possible consequence for consumers of unified ownership– higher prices.

And now it is a chop suey trust.

Chicago epicures who have extended their gastronomic adventures to the mysteries of chop suey, bird's nest soup, gamgott, chow mein, and a score of other Chinese delicacies are appalled to learn that prices are going up.

Twenty-five of the thirty-five Chinese restaurants in the city have been absorbed by a Chinese company. The others are holding out for better offers, but the trust has threatened to cut rates and drive out competitors who refuse its terms.

Time was when Chicago could boast of but two chop suey cafes, one in State street, the other in South Clark street. Now Clark street has a dozen, and scarcely a principal street but has its Chinese cafes. Most of them are presided over by chefs and waiters from the Chinese colony in South Clark street,

At first the resorts were owned by individual companies, many of which were engaged in mercantile business in Clark street. Gradually the Hip Lung company and representatives of the Six companies in Chicago bought one restaurant after another, until now Hip Lung is the chop suey king of Chicago.

How soon the rumored raise in the prices of Chinese dishes will come no one in Clark street would divulge yesterday. It seems that the plans of the trust have leaked out prematurely, the negotiations for the restaurants outside the combination still being under advisement.

"Yes, I suppose you call it a trust," said Lung Chen, one of the prime movers in the consolidation. "Americans have trusts, why not Chinamen? Chop suey business good business – better when all in together. Prices go up? Mebbe, can't tell. Americans put up prices, sometimes, eh?" ("Chop Suey Trust Octopus Has Tentacles in Chicago:" 1903).

Another article describes a Philadelphia-based chop suey trust soliciting participants from the Washington DC area in 1907 ("Chop Suey Will Not Go Up:" 1907). Also suggestive of the prevalence of organized restaurant businesses is evidence that restaurant space owned by a popular New York nightclub, put out of business by Prohibition, was purchased by "a syndicate of American and Chinese food dealers who converted it into a chop suey restaurant" ("James Churchill, Restaurateur, Dies." 1930). I plan to do further explorations into the number and character of such organizations.

For now, in a longer version of this paper, I provide a glimpse into how these organizations may have operated by looking at the establishment and management of Chinese restaurants in Northampton, Massachusetts in the early twentieth century. Northampton was a college and mill town with a population of about 20,000, located along the Connecticut River in western Massachusetts. The first Chinese restaurant appeared in 1917. Its owner was a Tom Lee and it was the only explicitly ethnic restaurant in the community at that time. In 1920 a second Chinese restaurant was established by four individuals with the surname Wong. A year after the establishment of the second Chinese restaurant, the first closed its doors. Though the restaurant owned by the Wong's changed its name a number of times, it remained in continuous operation at the same location, under the direction of overlapping generations of Wongs until 1953. I document a pattern of shifting, overlapping control, in which new recruits (almost always with the surname Wong) appear in subsidiary roles and then eventually replace the previous owner. In some years the city directory notes the departure of the former owner, often to China, sometimes to other New England cities or towns. The closing of the establishment followed the appearance of a widow Wong and her children in the late 1930s. At first all the children worked in the restaurant. The commencement of the Second World War (and the American alliance with the Chinese) drew some of widow Wong's children into the military. Another left his restaurant employment to become a student. Over the course of the war, one son moved out of restaurant employment into manufacturing. Within eight years following the conclusion of the war, all of widow Wong's children have found employment in other sectors and the family closed the restaurant although they remained in residence in Northampton. As of 1960 when the city directories for this community cease publication, no new Chinese restaurant had appeared. Over the entire period, the only other explicitly ethnic restaurants in this community were Italian ones that appeared in the years following World War II.

## Conclusion

This is a preliminary effort to both document and explain the popularity of Chinese food in early twentieth century America. The popularity is the easy part. As Shirley Cheng (2004) points out, the Chinese have been developing and improving their cuisine for thousands of years. It shows. The biggest hurdle for Americans was in overcoming their aversions and gaining access to it. The Chinese Exclusion Act produced a small and shrinking population of Chinese Americans, but one that was unusually well organized and which maintained close ties to financial and supply centers in Asia. Their organization, capital, entrepreneurship enabled the Chinese to develop and meet the demands of the American market.

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**Table 1**  
**Restaurants by Ethnicity, Rhode Island Cities, 1900 through 1930**

	All Restaurants				Non-Ethnic Restaurants				Chinese A				Chinese B			
	1900	1910	1920	1930	1900	1910	1920	1930	1900	1910	1920	1930	1900	1910	1920	1930
State	160	282	386	608	150	219	259	470	0	8	17	16	4	12	26	24
Bristol	5	3	3	4	5	3	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Central Falls	1	5	8	27	1	5	4	21	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Cranston	2	3	2	1	2	3	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Cumberland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
E. Providence	2	3	2	4	2	3	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newport	14	33	49	57	14	31	34	42	0	0	1	2	0	0	4	3
N. Providence	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pawtucket	4	25	31	53	4	18	19	42	0	1	3	3	0	1	4	3
Providence	106	163	199	255	96	110	114	174	0	6	9	7	4	10	12	10
Warwick	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Westerly	7	4	10	17	7	4	9	15	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
Woonsocket	3	12	21	45	3	11	16	39	0	1	2	2	0	1	2	2
Rest of State	12	31	61	145	12	31	56	130	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	4
	Italian A				Italian B				Greek A				Greek B			
	1900	1910	1920	1930	1900	1910	1920	1930	1900	1910	1920	1930	1900	1910	1920	1930
State	1	1	6	9	3	8	22	34	0	0	1	3	0	29	53	41
Bristol	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Central Falls	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Cranston	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cumberland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
E. Providence	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newport	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	8	8
N. Providence	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pawtucket	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	5
Providence	1	1	3	7	3	8	15	22	0	0	1	3	0	23	39	26
Warwick	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Westerly	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Woonsocket	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Rest of State	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

*Notes:* Restaurants by city were computed as the total of the entries under the various headings used for eating establishments in the business classified sections of city directories for the State of Rhode Island for each of the four years shown. In the small number of cases where a single restaurant name indicated more than one location, I counted each location as a separate restaurant. I show values for two definitions of ethnic restaurants for each of the three ethnicities presented. The narrower definition, "A," counts only restaurants whose ethnicity would be unambiguously apparent to an outsider based on the city directory entry alone. This unambiguous ethnic indicator can be the restaurant name itself, for example, *American-Chinese Restaurant*, *Hong Kong*, *Oriental*, *Roma*, or *Venezia*. It could also be an indicator added by the city directory. Some examples are: *Low Bon Hong* (Chinese), *Nikko Restaurant* (Chinese), and *Kakarian Madros* (Armenian). The broader definition, "B," includes those in category "A" but also counts restaurants with names that can be linked to people with a clear ethnic heritage. Most restaurants in this period were named for their proprietor. I can determine the ethnicity of a very high fraction of restaurant owners by going to the census manuscripts for the census year closest to the survey date of the city directory, as shown in Ancestry.com.

*Source:* City directories for the State of Rhode Island. Analysis based on the City Directory collection at the Library of Congress.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Italians</i>	<i>Greeks</i>
1900	10.9	0.2	0.0
1910	44.1	0.2	15.1
1920	115.6	0.4	21.8
1930	121.8	0.4	18.7

*Notes:* Ethnic restaurant density calculated as the number of ethnic restaurants per thousand of the ethnic population. Ethnic restaurants represent the expanded definition, "B" shown in Table 1. Ethnic population defined for the Chinese as those of the Chinese "race." For the Italians and Greeks, it is the number of foreign born plus the number of native whites whose foreign parents were born in Italy and Greece, respectively.

*Sources:* Ethnic restaurants from Table 1. Chinese ethnic population from the published census volumes. For 1910 and 1930 Italian and Greek ethnic populations are also from the published census volumes. In 1900 and 1920 the published censuses did not include state tables on the number of native whites of foreign parentage by country of origin. For these years I took the foreign born population by country of origin from the census but estimated the number of native white of foreign parentage by country of origin using the IPUMS.

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Recent Arrivals</b>				<b>All Other Chinese</b>			
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1910</b>	<b>1920</b>	<b>1930</b>	<b>1900</b>	<b>1910</b>	<b>1920</b>	<b>1930</b>
Percent of total	31.3	11.3	15.2	20.4	68.7	88.7	84.8	79.6
Percent Male	98.7	92.4	90.8	83.0	97.7	93.5	86.7	77.1
Average Age	29.9	29.4	28.1	27.5	41.9	42.8	41.4	32.4
Percent Who Speak English	11.3	42.3	76.1	71.6	50.7	53.1	78.2	75.2
Percent Living in the West	9.9	62.6	55.1	41.5	66.2	56.3	63.8	60.1
Percent Restaurant Workers	0.2	3.3	15.6	28.5	0.2	7.7	17.5	23.9
Percent Laundry Workers	6.4	19.0	30.5	21.2	20.5	20.7	24.1	22.4
Percent Head of Household (if male)	4.8	14.4	12.2	23.4	22.0	24.7	34.3	41.3
Percent Non-Relative (if male)	92.7	81.7	78.1	68.6	75.6	69.2	57.7	47.5
Percent Spouse of Household Head (if female)	66.7	30.0	87.5	84.0	45.5	46.2	47.5	42.1
Percent Non-Relative (if female)	33.3	50.0	12.5	8.0	40.9	26.9	15.0	6.6

*Notes:* "Recent arrivals" are defined here as foreign-born Chinese who immigrated to the United States during the ten years prior to the census date. Percent restaurant and laundry workers refer to the male population 14 years of age and older. The percent who speak English and the relationship to household head measures refer to the population 14 years of age and older. *Source:* IPUMS.