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Chinese Food and Immigrant Experiences *in Pushing Hands* and *Take Out*

Jiankun Han

The Athenian School, 2100 Mt Diablo Scenic Blvd, Danville, CA 94506, USA

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Abstract

This paper compares Chinese food in Pushing Hands (1991) and Take Out (2004) and analyzes its relationship with immigrant life. In Pushing Hands, Mr. Chu keeps his past living habits through cooking Chinese food. Food also reflects the conflicts between him and his son's family and helps him build relationships with others in the Chinese community. In Take Out, Ming Ding, who has no legal status, makes a living through food delivery. Under the pressure of debt and violence, he must work hard to earn enough money to repay what he owes that day. This paper analyzes specific scenes of cooking, eating, and food delivery in both films and draws on research about food and Chinese immigrants to compare the two protagonists' experiences. It argues that Chinese food has different meanings for them: for Mr. Chu, it relates to memory and belonging; for Ming Ding, it is first a job that supports his livelihood. These differences relate to their family relationships and social situations. Both films also let viewers see that behind familiar Chinese food are immigrants' different lives.

Keywords

Chinese food, Chinese immigrants, Chinese American cinema, Cultural identity, Immigrant labor

Introduction

Many American customers encounter Chinese food through restaurants and take-out. Chinese food is often a dish on a menu or a meal that is delivered to their homes. But for immigrants who cook for their families or make a living from food delivery, Chinese food can mean something very different. The history of Chinese restaurants in the United States is also connected to the employment situations of Chinese immigrants. Haiming Liu, a scholar of Asian American history, points out that racial exclusion limited Chinese immigrants' opportunities to do other kinds of work, so many of them entered the restaurant industry; restaurant owners also adjusted their dishes to the tastes of local customers (Liu).

Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands* (1991) follows Mr. Chu, an older Chinese immigrant who, after leaving Beijing, moves to New York to live with his son Alex and Alex's family. In the kitchen, Mr. Chu cooks familiar Chinese dishes, which preserve the habits and memories of his former life. But at family meals, food reveals how differently he and his American daughter-in-law, Martha, see family life and what a home should be. In Sean Baker and Shih-Ching Tsou's *Take Out* (2004), Ming Ding faces threats of violence from debt collectors if he fails to repay them by that evening. The film reveals that Ming has been in the United States for about six months and has no legal status. Early in the film, debt collectors arrive at his apartment and threaten him. They demand $800 by that evening. Then he rides through the rain to make deliveries around the city. In *Pushing Hands* and *Take Out*, Chinese food has different meanings because the immigrants are in different social positions. In *Pushing Hands*, food connects Mr. Chu's family memories with cultural belonging, while in *Take Out*, it becomes exhausting labor that allows Ming Ding to survive even as customers barely notice him.

How Chinese food is represented in *Pushing Hands* and *Take Out*? How do the two films portray different Chinese immigrants' lives and experiences through their distinctive relationships to Chinese food? While *Pushing Hands* uses Chinese food to explore cultural nostalgia, family conflicts within a middle-class, Chinese American binational household, and the search for a Chinese community, *Take Out* centers on the hardship, struggle, and precarity of a Chinese restaurant's delivery worker's immigrant life.

In this paper, I will first provide a brief review of selected scholarship on Chinese immigrant history, food and immigrant experiences, and representation of meal scenes in Chinese American cinema. I will then draw on insights from the scholarship to offer a detailed analysis of the two films. I will study and compare the male protagonists, Mr. Chu and Ming Ding, examining how their relationships to Chinese food convey their different cultural identities, social experiences, and personal struggles within the broader history of Chinese immigrant communities.

Literature Review

Agyeman and Giacalone point out that the recipes and tastes immigrants bring to new places can let them continue their feelings of home and original traditions, and also help them maintain connections with family and community (7). They also discuss everyday food experiences and immigration policies together (8–9). Following this idea, the scenes of cooking, eating, and delivering food in Pushing Hands and Take Out can also let us see how food enters immigrants' everyday lives and is connected with the situations of the characters.

Turning the perspective to Chinese restaurants in the United States, Liu points out that during the Chinese Exclusion era, Chinese immigrants had limited job choices, so restaurant work became one of the few possible ways to make a living (2). He also discusses how restaurant owners adjusted the ingredients, flavors, and cooking methods of dishes to suit the tastes of local customers. After customers viewed these dishes as authentic Chinese food, the idea of this "authenticity" also gradually formed in American society (2–3). Overall, Liu's research provides a basis for understanding the background of Chinese

immigrants working in the food industry.

Existing research suggests that Chinese food embodies cultural ties and economic limitations of immigrants. In Kai Chen's analysis of Ang Lee's family trilogy, meal scenes serve as narrative elements, not mere decoration. Food preparation allows cooks to express love and establishes their identities (Chen 15), while cultural tension and miscommunication can deepen alienation within the family when family members sit together (43–49). This idea helps explain why Mr. Chu's dishes evoke memories of his former life, yet fail to bridge the gap with Martha. Murphy shows how *Take Out* presents this labor problem on screen. He notes that Baker and Tsou shot in a real restaurant during business hours. The undocumented cooks feared being on camera, so Baker framed them below the neck (Murphy). The film also switches between the restaurant and Ming's delivery routes. Some customers are nice to him, while others ignore or insult him. These details provide background for the later analysis of Ming's delivery labor and the limited attention he receives from customers. This discussion clarifies how food shapes relationships at the family table, while Liu explains the social history behind restaurant work. Murphy connects that history to Ming's daily deliveries. Overall, these studies provide a basis for this essay to compare Chinese food in the two films. They respectively discuss the relationship between immigrants and food, the history of Chinese restaurants in the United States, and the family and labor problems in the two films, but they have not put *Pushing Hands* and *Take Out* together to compare what Chinese food means to the two immigrants respectively. This essay will carry out a comparison from two aspects, the family table and delivery work, to explain how the social positions of immigrants affect the meaning of Chinese food in their lives.

Chinese Food: Cultural Identities, Social Experiences and Immigrant Struggles

In *Pushing Hands*, food connects Mr. Chu's original family memories and cultural belonging, while in *Take Out*, Ming Ding can only rely on delivering Chinese food as this kind of hard work to maintain his livelihood. Mr. Chu continues to cook according to his past habits, but he has never truly become part of his son's family's life. After Mr. Chu arrives in New York in Pushing Hands, he continues to cook as he did in Beijing. In one kitchen scene, Martha prepares macaroni and cheese while Mr. Chu cooks his own Chinese dishes on the other side of the room. The only sounds are running water and a knife striking the cutting board. They each focus on their own work without speaking or looking at each other (Pushing Hands 00:13:31–00:14:01). The kitchen belongs to his son's family, but the familiar cooking steps allow Mr. Chu to briefly return to the rhythm of his former life. Food preparation can show the characters' efforts to establish their identities (Chen 15). For Mr. Chu, cooking Chinese food is a way to continue his former way of life in an unfamiliar family environment. Chen's view can help us understand this scene. Mr. Chu cooks according to his past habits, and this lets him continue living his own life; but in his son's home, he still has not truly fit in.



Figure 1. Mr. Chu and Martha Prepare Food in the Same Kitchen in Pushing Hands

The community center gives Mr. Chu a different relationship with Chinese food. At the Chinese community center, he is a tai chi teacher, while Mrs. Chen teaches Chinese cooking. During one demonstration, he pushes a student into the food that Mrs. Chen's class has already prepared. Afterward, he stays to help her make it again. The two sit next to each other, make steamed buns, and talk in Chinese. Alex is not present, so they do not need him to translate. Mr. Chu often needs help at his son's home, but here people come specifically to learn tai chi from him, and Mrs. Chen understands the traditions he values. The scene of the two preparing Chinese food together shows how similar cultural experiences bring them closer (Chen 22–23). Later, during a picnic, they talk about how Beijing has changed. The homeland they remember can no longer be found as it once was, but Mrs. Chen understands Mr. Chu's attachment to the past, and he understands the disappointment she felt when she returned to Beijing. This shared experience gives the two older immigrants an understanding that they lack in their children's homes (Chen 74–78). At first, Chinese food is simply a way for Mr. Chu to continue his former life; after he meets Mrs. Chen, it also brings him into a Chinese community that understands him.

In Pushing Hands, although Mr. Chu moves into his son's house and sits at the same table with the family, he never truly becomes part of the household's established environment. In an early meal scene, Martha eats cold vegetable salad and crackers alone at the kitchen counter. Mr. Chu brings his Chinese food and chooses to sit across from her. He has a bowl and chopsticks in front of him, while Martha uses a plate and fork. They do not speak or look at one another, and the only sounds come from each person eating (Pushing Hands 00:16:24–00:19:36). Mr. Chu chooses to sit beside Martha, but they are not truly eating together (Chen 46).



Figure 2. Mr. Chu and Martha Eat across from One Another in Pushing Hands.

Later, when the whole family has dinner together, conflict breaks out. Mr. Chu eats the Chinese food he has prepared, while Martha and Jeremy have macaroni and cheese. Both Mr. Chu and Martha offer Alex the food they have made because each wants him to eat from their side. Caught between them, Alex switches from chopsticks to a fork and hardly has a chance to eat in peace. Mr. Chu expresses his opinions in Chinese, while Martha speaks in English. Alex has to translate repeatedly between his father and his wife (Pushing Hands 00:52:37–00:56:51; Chen 47–51). Their argument moves from food to Jeremy's television habits and how he should be raised, until Alex interrupts them and tells them to eat. This conflict also shows that Mr. Chu and Martha understand "home" differently. Mr. Chu sees giving advice about food and his grandson's education as part of his role as a father and elder. Martha already has her own routine and is accustomed to deciding how daily life in her home should operate. Mr. Chu's opinions instead interfere with her way of life and her control over the household. Their conflict is connected to their entry into each other's private lives. When they have to share the same space for long periods, each person's position in the family feels threatened (Chen 86–87). For this reason, each meal they share together seems to remind him that although the house belongs to his son, it is not a place where he truly belongs yet.



Figure 3. The Family Dinner in Pushing Hands

In *Take Out*, Chinese food represents a means of livelihood for Ming Ding, who delivers food in order to earn the money he desperately needs. At the beginning of the film, two debt collectors break into the crowded apartment that he shares with other immigrants and find Ming Ding still sleeping in the room. They find the money that Ming Ding hid in the refrigerator and then directly take it away. Because Ming Ding did not repay the money on time, he is required to hand over another $800 by that evening. If he cannot get the money by then, his original debt will double. To let him know the consequences, one of the debt collectors also uses a hammer to hit his back (Take Out 00:02:10–00:05:49; Murphy). Ming Ding later rushes to the Chinese restaurant where he works. The workers in the kitchen continuously prepare orders, and the finished food is packed and then handed to the delivery workers. After Ming Ding receives an order, he hurriedly rides away and travels through the rain to the customer's home (Take Out 00:14:00–00:19:40). Only after he delivers one order can he possibly receive a tip. Murphy points out that Ming Ding once borrowed money from loan sharks to repay the smuggling cost that his family paid for him. The debt he carries is about $40,000, and the interest rate is as high as 30 percent. Compared with this debt, the amount of money that Ming Ding can earn in one day is pitifully small. The highest amount of tips he has received during one shift is only about $90 (Murphy). After Young learns about Ming Ding's situation, he lends him $150. It rains heavily that day, and there are more delivery orders than usual, so Young also gives Ming Ding some of his own delivery work. Ming Ding therefore has more chances to make money, and he also has to travel farther through the rain. He has no other choice and can only try to deliver as many orders as possible. The film does not skip over this repetitive work; instead the camera follows Ming Ding at length as he makes one food delivery after another. He carries plastic bags filled with food out of the restaurant, rides through the wet streets, and gives the orders to the customers. After finishing a delivery, he still has to return to the restaurant and wait to receive the next order (Take Out 00:22:12–00:40:34). This process continues to repeat during the second half of the film (Take Out 00:52:21–01:07:10). Murphy also notices that the film continuously switches between the inside of the restaurant and Ming Ding's delivery routes. This allows the audience to see him leave

the restaurant and return, again and again, stressing the repetitive ad exhausting nature of the work. His work almost fills all the time that he can control (Murphy). Ming Ding has no legal status and also faces the threats of debt and violence, so it is difficult for him to refuse the work given to him by the restaurant. The takeout that customers receive represents the time and physical strength that Ming Ding exchanges for money. Chinese food becomes a series of orders in his life that must be delivered as quickly as possible. Only after he delivers this food can he possibly earn tips and deal with the survival crisis that is already pressing toward him that evening.



Figure 4. Ming Ding Rides His Bicycle to Deliver Food in Take Out

In Take Out, what customers notice first is always the food delivered to their house. As for who Ming Ding is outside the door and why he stands there completely soaked, most people do not want to know. During his deliveries, some customers speak to him politely, while others act coldly and show clear discrimination toward his accent and Chinese identity.



Figure 5. Ming Ding Receives Payment at a Customer's Door in Take Out

One customer immediately begins to mock and curse Ming Ding after discovering that the order is wrong. He rudely throws the takeout at Ming Ding and tells him to go back to the restaurant and get another one. When Ming Ding turns and walks downstairs, the customer still stands behind him and curses him in English, compares him to a dog, and says several discriminatory things about Chinese people (Take Out 00:22:12–00:40:34). Ming Ding does not stay to argue and can only take the returned food back. The worry on his face is not only because the customer is angry at him. For the customer, receiving the wrong food is not a big deal, because asking the restaurant to replace it can solve the problem. For Ming Ding, however, this wastes the time of one delivery, and the tip that he might have received is also gone. Murphy mentions that the film was shot in a Chinese restaurant that was open for normal business, and some of the real cooks there had no legal status. They worried that their faces would be caught by the camera, so Baker tried to keep the camera below their necks during filming (Murphy). The bodily movements of these cooks remain busy in the frame, and their hands continuously handle ingredients and prepare orders, but the audience can hardly see their faces or know their names. Murphy's discussion of the undocumented cooks can also explain this. The film lets the audience see Ming Ding delivering food all the time, but it does not let them truly understand who these workers are. Customers rarely notice the person who delivers the food. When the connection between the film and reality is placed together with Ming Ding's delivery experience, the position of the workers in the film becomes clearer. Customers only care about the food they ordered and how much they paid for the meal, but they do not realize what kind of debt Ming Ding carries. They also do not know that if Ming Ding cannot hand over $800 that evening, he will face his debt doubling and new violent treatment. Liu's research on the history of Chinese restaurants in the United States provides background for this difference. While Chinese food gradually became accepted by American customers, many Chinese immigrants were still restricted to service jobs with low social status (Liu). American customers can often order takeout from Chinese restaurants, but they will not connect Chinese food with the people who make and deliver it. Chinese food is just food.

When comparing Ming Ding and Mr. Chu, the differences stand out. The difficulties Mr. Chu faces in Pushing Hands mainly happen inside the family. He can still make choices according to his past habits, such as cooking, and he can also make steamed buns with Mrs. Chen. Chinese food preserves his life experiences and gives him opportunities to build relationships with other Chinese people. Although he cannot find a suitable position in his son's home, New York's Chinese community provides him with another kind of life. By the end of the film, Mr. Chu has become a tai chi teacher and has found his own social position in New York's Chinese community (Chen 87). But Ming Ding does not have this kind of social position. What he delivers and when he leaves both depend on the orders received by the restaurant. He has no legal status, and his debt of $40,000 prevents him from stopping to look forward to a new life. For him, one Chinese meal is one delivery that must be completed, and only after it is delivered can it possibly be exchanged for a tip. Both films bring the characters into Chinese restaurants, but the restaurants occupy different positions in their lives. In the second half of Pushing Hands, Mr. Chu enters the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant. After leaving the family space of his son's home, he gradually comes into contact

with the larger Chinese community and finally leaves his temporary job in the restaurant (Pushing Hands 01:20:11–01:22:54; 01:27:08–01:33:20). Every time Ming Ding returns to the restaurant in Take Out, what faces him is only another bag of Chinese food and another delivery trip. He leaves the restaurant for work, and after he returns, he is still working. Mr. Chu can later use tai chi to reorganize his life, while Ming Ding's day remains governed by the deadline imposed by his debt and the endless stream of delivery orders. Chinese food brings Mr. Chu's past into the present and also helps him find a Chinese community in which he feels understood. The Chinese food that Ming Ding encounters is tied to his survival and to a life that can never settles. The meaning of the food itself has not changed. What changes is its significance for the two immigrant men, shaped by their different identities and social positions in American society.

Conclusion

As represented in Pushing Hands and Take Out, Chinese food becomes a site through which Chinese immigrants' lives and identities are expressed. Yet, its relationship to each immigrant defies a single meaning rooted in cultural tradition. Immigration policy, social positions, and other historical factors play a significant role in shaping the meaning of food for each immigrant in American society. This conclusion holds beyond the films. Chinese food is now familiar and widely accepted in the United States, but the people who cook it, deliver it and build their lives around it often receive less attention than the food itself. Chinese immigrants continue to struggle for recognition, stability, and a sense belonging, though in different ways. Food, in this way, provides a critical lens through which we can reflect and examine a larger contradiction of American society as they are experienced by immigrants. Both films, then, invite the viewer to look beyond the meal itself and to consider whose labor, history, and lives make the meal possible.

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