

Changing Diets: From East to West

Examining Chinese Immigrant Acculturation through Food Choices

Introduction

As of 2010, The United States is home to about 1.8 million Chinese immigrants, and the numbers are continuously growing. This makes the Chinese the largest Asian population in the US and the fourth-largest immigrant population after Mexican, Filipino, and Indian immigrants.ⁱ

Chinese immigration to America is hardly a new phenomenon; it can be dated back to the 18th century and possibly even earlier. However, the first major wave of immigration began in the mid 1800's during the California Gold Rush and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Less than a few decades later, though, laws like the Naturalization Act of 1870 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 were enacted and restricted Chinese



immigration to the US.ⁱⁱ It was not until the Immigration Act of 1965 that these policies were eliminated and Chinese immigration could resume. Today, Chinese immigration is steadily growing—fueled by the business opportunities, education, free market, and democratic government of the United States. However, in recent years, changes in the Chinese population have been newly observed—many of these changes being in lifestyles and eating habits. As immigrants and children of immigrants have begun to acculturate—adopting behaviors of the surrounding American culture—there has been

increasing consumption of unhealthy convenience foods and decreasing taste values for healthier, traditional Chinese foods. In other words, acculturating Chinese are no longer receiving the same satisfaction from traditional foods; they like the taste of junk food and fast food better. Unfortunately, these changing patterns have potentially large consequences on immigrant health particularly regarding obesity and diabetes.

What is a traditional Chinese diet?

In America, Chinese food is generally associated with take-out restaurants or all-you-can-eat buffets—a hub of unlimited shrimp fried rice, lo mein, and orange chicken and a place of copious amounts of fats and oils. Surprising as it may be, these foods are not common at the majority of Chinese families' dinner tables. Instead, a traditional Chinese meal is high in fiber and low in saturated fats. It relies heavily on grains, particularly rice, vegetables like Chinese cabbage, gai lan, and bok choy, and protein sources like tofu.ⁱⁱⁱ All of these foods are generally steamed or lightly stir-fried and are void of heavy and fattening sauces. Light broth soups are also a typical part of the Chinese meal that helps satisfy the individual without the use of thick cream and butter. Lastly, Chinese tea is also a major component of the diet and is viewed as both a beverage and a medicine.^{iv}

Of course, the Chinese diet, like most other diets around the world, has its share of sweets and fried foods. However, cookies, cakes, ice cream, and other Western-styled desserts are

typically only served on special occasions. Examples of more commonly-eaten desserts are red bean soup, seasonal fruits, and steam papaya soup.^v

Potential Reasons for Diet Change

In the Chinese culture, there is no calorie counting. Food is viewed as nourishment and something to be enjoyed; it is not perceived as a source of weight gain.^{vi}



While this is generally a safe perspective to have because of the high nutritional value offered in Chinese food, as Chinese immigrants assimilate to American traditions, appreciation for these traditional foods and cooking styles is disintegrating. New, heavily Western-influenced diets are being adopted and are beginning to become a worrisome source of weight gain for Chinese immigrants.

Observed Dietary Changes

Among the Chinese immigrant adult population, there have been surprising and somewhat conflicting trends in dietary habits. In a 2011 cross-sectional analysis of 120 native Chinese individuals currently residing in Canada, Chinese immigrants reported having greater awareness and more knowledge of healthy food choices. They were even making better decisions like reducing the use of unhealthy cooking methods and eating more fruits and vegetables. The authors mention that this increase in fruit consumption could be attributed to the aesthetic appeal of Western displays of food compared to those in China.

Despite this glimpse of positive lifestyle change observed in acculturating Chinese immigrants, though, there are also a number of unfavorable changes being made: increased food portion size, greater frequency of dining out, and greater consumption of convenience foods.^{vii}

In a cross-sectional study conducted in Pennsylvania studying dietary pattern change and acculturation in Chinese Americans, individuals self-reported increased intake of fats, sweets, and soft drinks. They also reported decreased consumption of traditional Chinese foods. A potential contributing factor to this is shifted taste values for certain kinds of foods—switching preferences for the typically simple and lighter Chinese flavors with the more Western-styled foods.^{viii}

Changes in Perception of Food

Researchers of a Canadian study investigating changes in perceived flavor, health value, and prestige of food found that there were significant differences in food preferences between first generation Chinese boys and second generation boys. First, Hrboticky and Krondl found that the length of exposure in a new environment is a strong determinant in the extent of dietary change. The study also revealed that second generation individuals had higher appreciation of hedonic, or pleasure, flavor and gave high prestige ratings to desserts, snacks, and fast foods.^{ix}

Interestingly, a major contributing factor to changes in food preferences is whether the foods are typically consumed among friends or not. These foods include donuts, chips, French

fries, and other nutritionally-lacking or empty foods. This implies that compared to the first-generation, second-generation individuals are more heavily influenced by peer pressure. This trend has been observed in not only the Chinese population but in several other ethnic groups as well, in which the desire to fit in drives appetites for fattening and sugary foods.^x



Implications

In comparison to other ethnic populations in America, the Chinese have relatively low obesity rates, 15.3%.^{xi} However, there is still room for concern, as obesity rates across the nation are on the rise. Intervening steps must be taken now before the obesity epidemic grossly encroaches on the Chinese population. Furthermore, studies like the 2004 longitudinal study of Asian-American and Hispanic adolescents in Southern California has shown that greater acculturation is associated with lower frequency of physical activity.^{xii} Therefore, with trends of increasingly unhealthy diets and decreasing frequency of physical activity, the health of acculturating immigrants is a high-priority issue.

The Need for Intervention

It is necessary to develop culturally-specific and age-specific interventions to combat the increasingly unhealthy eating habits particularly in Chinese youth. As already discussed, kids are especially vulnerable to peer-pressure and are susceptible to media that encourages fast food and candy

consumption. Because of this, school-based education programs would likely be most effective at leading kids to live healthier lifestyles, since school is where they spend more than seven hours a day and where they are surrounded by peers.

Participants of studies who actually reported making improvements in health choices after immigration were clustered in groups of higher socioeconomic status, with higher education and better English proficiency.^{xiii} This shows the need for better dissemination of information that is able to reach out to all sectors of the Chinese population.

The cross-sectional study discussed earlier that found acculturated Chinese consuming more fruits also pointed out that appealing display of the fruit could have led to this trend. This is a relatively simple way that stores and markets can take part in encouraging healthy eating among its customers, and it clearly makes an impact.

“Dietary Pattern Change and Acculturation of Chinese Americans in Pennsylvania” suggests that acculturated first-generation individuals should be discouraged from consuming a lot of fats, sweets, and soft-drinks. Authors also suggest that less-acculturated Chinese Americans should be encouraged to continue their healthful cultural dietary pattern but increase vegetable and fruit consumption. A possible barrier to vegetable consumption in less acculturated Chinese individuals is the lack of familiarity with Western vegetables. Vegetables eaten in China are quite different from those available in the US, and perhaps the newness of particular vegetables and the scarcity of

Asian grocery stores in some areas of the nation contribute to lower rates of vegetable consumption. Thus, perhaps by providing Chinese communities with fliers of where individuals can buy cultural ingredients or how they can prepare Western vegetables with traditional Chinese flavor can help lessen this difficulty.

Helpful Links

Much of the information here is only the beginning of the story. There is still a lack of attention given to the nutritional health of Chinese immigrants, but hopefully change is forthcoming.

Links provided below give more information about this topic and contain several helpful resources.

Great Nutritional Resources:

- <http://www.eatright.org/Public/content.aspx?id=5691>
- <http://www.cchrchealth.org/healthful-eating/healthful-eating>
- <https://www.healthinfotranslations.org/>

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ⁱ Terrazas, A., & Batalova, J. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?ID=781>

ⁱⁱ Doolittle, J. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://cpr.org/Museum/Chinese.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Hoffmann, M. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.china-family-adventure.com/chinese-food-ingredients.html>

^{iv} Hoffmann, M. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.china-family-adventure.com/chinese-food-ingredients.html>

^v Lin, K. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://ethnomed.org/clinical/nutrition/chinese_food_cultural_profile

^{vi} Morris, S. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/healthy-living/use-your-noodle-the-real-chinese-diet-is-so-healthy-it-could-solve-the-wests-obesity-crisis-873651.html>

^{vii} Rosenmoller, D., Gasevic, D., Seidell, J., & Lear, S. (2011). Determinants of changes in dietary patterns among chinese immigrants: a cross-sectional analysis. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 8(42), Retrieved from <http://www.ijbnpa.org/content/pdf/1479-5868-8-42.pdf>

^{viii} Lv, N., & Casib, K. (2004). Dietary pattern change and acculturation of chinese americans in pennsylvania. *Journal of American Dietetic Association*, 104(5), Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S00028223040238X>

^{ix} Hrboticky, N., & Krondl, M. (1984). Acculturation to canadian foods by chinese immigrant boys: Changes in the perceived flavor, health value and prestige of foods. *Appetite*, 5(2), Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666384800318>

^x Hrboticky, N., & Krondl, M. (1984). Acculturation to canadian foods by chinese immigrant boys: Changes in the perceived flavor, health value and prestige of foods. *Appetite*, 5(2), Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666384800318>

^{xi} Popkin, B., & Udry, J. R. (1998). Adolescent obesity increases significantly in second and third generation u.s. immigrants: The national longitudinal study of adolescent health. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 128(4), Retrieved from <http://jn.nutrition.org/content/128/4/701.full>

^{xii} Unger, J., Reynolds, K., Shakib, S., Spruijt-Metz, D., Sun, P., & Johnson, A. (2004). Acculturation, physical activity, and fast-food consumption among asian-american and hispanic adolescents. *Journal of Community Health*, 29(6), Retrieved from <http://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10900-004-3395-3.pdf>

^{xiii} Lv, N., & Casib, K. (2004). Dietary pattern change and acculturation of chinese americans in pennsylvania. *Journal of American Dietetic Association*, 104(5), Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S00028223040238X>