

NO MSG: CHINESE RESTAURANT MENUS, MONOSODIUM GLUTAMATE AND THE  
TROPE OF RISK IN SHAPING CHINESE CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS

By

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### Abstract

This paper examines how Chinese restaurants use the message of “No MSG” as a response to the *perceived* risk of the flavouring agent monosodium glutamate in Chinese cuisine. Using risk communication theory, and treating MSG as material, this paper will investigate how MSG becomes a synecdoche for Chinese food and perpetuates a fear of Chinese culture in Canada. As MSG is scientized as a “risk factor” instead of a flavouring agent, Chinese restaurants respond by messaging “No MSG” as a response to this perceived risk. Using rhetorical analysis of Chinese food menus, this paper identifies how businesses respond to the discursive framework of a “risk” of MSG through messaging found in their take-out food menus. This paper posits that the scientization of MSG as a harmful chemical, specifically in Chinese food, has created a space for biases not only against Chinese food but also Chinese culture in Canada.

*Keywords:* Chinese food, Chinese restaurant, health communication, monosodium glutamate, orientalism, race, risk perception

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## Dedication

To all the people who braved hardship and the unknown, who eventually came to call  
Canada their new home.

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**No MSG: Chinese restaurant menus, monosodium glutamate and the trope of risk in  
shaping Chinese cultural perceptions**

**Introduction**

In 1968, a letter was published in the New England Journal of Medicine, written by Dr. Robert Ho Man Kwok, claiming to experience a “strange syndrome” whenever he had eaten out at Chinese restaurants in America serving Chinese food—these syndromes, he claimed, included headaches and palpitations (Sand, 2005). The letter was titled “Chinese Restaurant Syndrome” and the phrase resonated with other readers who also claimed they were experiencing the same syndromes after consuming Chinese food (Sand, 2005). People speculated that monosodium glutamate (MSG) was the culprit for these symptoms, yet no hard scientific evidence could prove it so. Even after years of various studies and tests debunking the harms of consuming MSG, there is still a strong stigma against the use of MSG in cooking, specifically when associated with Chinese food. Consequently, Chinese restaurants in North America has moved towards “clean” MSG-free foods (Tuder, 2019).

This paper examines how “No MSG” messaging has been adopted and used by Chinese restaurants as a response to the *perceived* risks of monosodium glutamate, the flavouring agent, in Chinese cuisine. Using risk communication theory, and treating MSG as a material artifact, this paper will investigate how MSG becomes a synecdoche for Chinese food and perpetuates a fear of Chinese culture in Canada. As MSG is scientized as a “risk factor” instead of a flavouring agent, many Chinese restaurants have responded by adopting “No MSG” messaging as a response to this perceived risk. This paper identifies how Chinese restaurants have responded to the “risks” of consuming MSG by investigating the messaging found in take-out food menus using rhetorical analysis. Specific key words, phrases and symbols in the restaurant

menus' messaging are analysed. This paper posits that the scientization of MSG as a harmful chemical, specifically in Chinese food, has created a space for biases not only against Chinese food but also Chinese culture in Canada. Using the theoretical frameworks of health and risk communication, I evaluated these justifications and investigated how Chinese restaurants responded to the biases of MSG in their advertising and messaging. Other themes examined in this paper includes the history of MSG; the history of Canadian treatment of Chinese people; othering of the Chinese; as well as westernization and adaptation of Chinese food. Including the history of the treatment of Chinese people in Canada is important in contextualizing the discussions and debates of how MSG is associated with Chinese food and culture. For this research, I analysed a collection of Toronto Chinese food menus spanning over 50 years. Food menus used for this research is sourced from the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) Archive's Harley J. Spiller collection. Menus from the archive will be examined in person and documented via photographs.

### **Research Questions**

I argue that the misrepresentation of MSG as a harmful flavouring agent, specifically in Chinese food, has created a space for biases against Chinese food, people and culture in Canada. I accomplished this by examining how Chinese restaurants responded to the perceived representation of MSG as a "risk" by advertising and messaging "No MSG" in their food; the history of the treatment of Chinese people in Canada; and by evaluating justifications of these biases using the theoretical framework of health and risk communication.

My research was guided by the following three questions:

RQ1: By treating MSG as a "risk", how can risk communication theory help tell the story of Chinese restaurant menu messaging?



RQ2: How do Chinese restaurants respond to these biases in advertising, signage, and messaging?

RQ3: How, through this treatment of MSG as a “risk”, create a space for biases against Chinese food in Canadian culture?

The research questions focus on MSG from the perspective of a health risk and the communication to the public by restaurants serving Chinese food. Due to the history of communication of MSG as a risk in Chinese food, Chinese restaurants response of “No MSG” demonstrates business and marketing implications where the success of the entrepreneurship depends on catering to the values of the Canadian public. Seemingly, this can only be achieved if the Chinese restaurants market themselves as serving MSG free food

## **Literature Review**

### **Chinese Canadian History**

Chinese people first immigrated to Canada in the late 1800’s in order to find wealth during the Gold Rush in Canada. They were primarily poor Chinese men from the Guangdong province who were looking for a better a life and were hoping to gain employment and wealth for their families during a time where work was hard to come by in China (A. Chan, 2013). They came to Canada via the United States after gold had dried up in California (Li, 1998). And after the gold had dried up in British Columbia, British Columbians were calling for the Chinese to be sent back to China. However, with the Canadian Pacific Railway underway, labourers were needed to work the undesirable jobs that the whites did not want. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald had stated that the British Columbians required the Chinese labourers or else the railway would not be built (A. Chan, 2013). Under these conditions, the Chinese men were recruited from China, mainly from the poor province of Guangdong, in order to come to Canada

to complete the railway. With the prospect of jobs, the Chinese immigrated in hopes of employment and money. Those who survived the perilous journey and harsh winter conditions worked to build and complete the railway. After the completion of the railway in 1885, thousands of Chinese workers were laid off and British Columbia's economy took a turn for the worse. There were few jobs available to the British Columbians, let alone the Chinese immigrants (A. Chan, 2013). Instead, the Chinese became scapegoats for British Columbia's economic problems ultimately leading to British Columbia's petition for a 'White Canada' (A. Chan, 2013).

To prevent Chinese immigration after the completion of the railroad, the implementation of the Chinese Head Tax was mandated by the Canadian government for any Chinese looking to enter Canada. The first iteration of this tax was implemented in 1885 at \$50 (the head tax would later rise to \$100 in 1901 and then again to \$500 in 1904) (K. B. Chan, 2005). Finally in 1923, the Canadian parliament passed the *Chinese Immigration Act* which excluded the Chinese people from entry into Canada unless they were students, merchants or Chinese children born in Canada to parents of Chinese descent (Li, 1998). This form of legislation was one form of institutionalized racism, whereby race was justification to disqualify certain members from full participation in society (Li, 1998). Because of this, the marginalized Chinese remaining in Canada were subjected to racial policies encouraged by the country and enacted not only by employers but by society as a whole. People used this as a way to other the Chinese and it justified undervaluing their labour and denying them equal status (Li, 1998). Because of institutionalized racism in Canada, the Chinese were consistently excluded and segregated from Canadian society, which acted to confirm, justify and maintain their inferiority (Li, 1999). In the

minds of many white Canadians, excluding of the Chinese ensured their “undesirable habits and corrupt culture” did not contaminate the image of a white Canada (Li, 1998).

Othering is used to understand how a dominant group in society holds sway over the perceptions and actions of the othered. Othering creates separation between different cultural groups whereby something in their action, culture or values marks them as different from the rest of society. Othering in this context closely links to Orientalism where the Occident (or Western society) holds dominance and authority over the Orient (or Eastern society) (Said, 1979). Power is in the hand of the Occident implying that the Orient must be dominated because they are “inveterate liars and lethargic and suspicious” (Said, 1979). Because their values are lesser than European’s rational, virtuous, mature and normal ways, the Orient must be dealt a firm hand so their values can be shaped to be aligned with European values (Said, 1979). Orientalism also expresses the perceived weakness of the Orient by the West, further justifying actions of the Occident to dominate over the Orient in ways of shaping hegemonic culture by stating what separates “us” from “them.” For example, even though some Chinese were born in Canada, because of their black hair and yellow skin, they are not like rest of Canadian society, and because of this distinction, they cannot fully “be” Canadian.

The relationship between immigrants and their host nations has implications on how immigrants adapt to their new environment and are able to build a life in. There are multiple ways of adapting and integrating into the host society; however, the opposite can be said as well—immigrants may be unwanted by the host nation and made alienated to the point of being victims of hostile sentiments. Multiple factors play into why groups of people migrate, for example, the motivations of the Chinese first immigrating to Canada were economic. The North

American gold rush offered the possibility of financial success in a time of poverty and very limited economic opportunities at home (A. Chan, 2013).

Martin and Nakayama cover an entire spectrum of migrant-host relationships including assimilation, integration, hybridity, marginalization and separation (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). The migrant-host relationship between the Chinese and white Canadians were negative, and still affecting how people view the Chinese in Canada. Separation best describes how the Chinese adapted to their circumstance in Canada. There are two types of separation, either by choice of the migrant group or enforced by the dominant host society (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Separation enforced by the host society is known as segregation (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). In the case of the Chinese, Canada created legislations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century against the Chinese immigrants. Legislation started with various head taxes from 1885 until 1875 which escalated to the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, 1923, where Chinese immigrants who were not students, children of naturalized citizens or merchants were outright banned from entering Canada (K. B. Chan, 2005). These laws led to institutional othering of Chinese people, barring them from the same rights or respects as other immigrants (usually of European decent). The Chinese were given no opportunity to integrate with Canadian society (Li, 1998). In response, the Chinese built separate communities for themselves in order for survival in Canada.

Rules and customs of the host nation are learned through the process of cultural adaptation (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Adjusting and becoming comfortable in the new environment can depend heavily on how welcoming or hostile the host environment can be (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Cultural adaptation was virtually impossible for the Chinese because of Canadian perceptions and legislations that constantly painted them as the other to be feared and who threatened national identity and economic stability. When the Chinese first came to

Canada for the gold rush and later to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway, they were useful to the development of Western Canada but were undesirable as citizens (Li, 1999). In addition, because of many alleged cultural and social peculiarities, they were deemed unassimilable immigrants, whereas European immigrants did not garner the same wariness or distrust (Li, 1998). Furthermore, the Chinese were segregated into a separate labour market, one where they received lower wages, were rejected by unions, and were given undesirable jobs that did not threaten the white male labour force such as in laundries and restaurants, which at the time was typically deemed “women’s” work (K. B. Chan, 2005).

Without the option of going back to China and having to make a life in Canada, the Chinese had to find a way to adapt to Canada. Constrained by racial perceptions and sentiments, they were pushed into self-employment for survival and the hope of social mobility (K. B. Chan, 2005). Many of these entrepreneurship were laundromats and restaurants, mostly because these were acceptable professions for the Chinese as they were seen as non-competitive to the whites. From these entrepreneurship grew social and cultural enclaves, known as Chinatowns, which provided a space for the Chinese to congregate and build their lives and communities (K. B. Chan, 2005). Because the Chinese were restricted from the core labour market, these ethnic businesses created a refuge for those who were mistreated through discriminatory policies (K. B. Chan, 2005). Unfortunately, original Chinatowns carried negative stereotypes, noted as places that were not only dirty, but filled with prostitution, mental disorders, and drug activity—a place to avoid since it was filled with ethnic vices (K. B. Chan, 2005).

Eventually, these Chinatowns grew and developed into communities which became embodiments of the oriental mystique. To Canada, Chinatown encompasses exotic Chinese cuisines, contains cultural Chinese symbols and has a distinct flavour and character, in other

words, “Chinatown looks, smells, sounds and feels Chinese” (K. B. Chan, 2005). These communities were seen to distinguish itself from Canada, it safeguards Chinese values, beliefs and traditions, a further way of segregation in order to adapt to the new environment and have a chance of succeeding. The overall success of cultural adaptation depends on a critical approach which reminds us that institutional forces affects the adaptation process (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Canada, in implementing the head taxes of up to \$500 and the *Chinese Exclusion Act* in 1923, actively undermined the efforts of the Chinese to settle in Canada. Beyond being made scapegoats and blamed for economic and social problems (K. B. Chan, 2005), the Chinese were actively barred from integrating into Canadian society, which, further alienated them, appearing foreign to white Canadians because of their social isolations, poor living conditions and standards which contradicted what was deemed acceptable (Li, 1998). The Chinese were also considered physically unclean and morally corrupt (Li, 1998). Anything that they touched should not be touched by white Canadians. The implication here is that anything Chinese is unclean and remains unclean as long as it has been touched by the Chinese.

The idea of institutionalized racism manifested in the Canada’s treatment of the Chinese. Racism against the Chinese in Canada was legitimized and perpetuated by various laws enacted by the state, not just by individual groups (Li, 1998). Laws and the government allowed and condoned discriminatory behaviours against the Chinese (Li, 1998). Images of an inferior Chinese person throughout Canadian history have consistently reaffirmed and is ingrained in society to this day (Li, 1998). It was necessary, in the minds of white Canadians, to maintain this segregation between the Chinese so that undesirable habits and corruption would not contaminate white Canadian values (Li, 1998). Circling back to the idea that the Chinese were only tolerated as long as they were labelled “ethnic” and falls under the marginalized labour

market (Li, 1998). This segregation and distinction of an “us” versus “them” mentality is deeply-seated in Canada, thus creating difficulties in reconceptualizing Chinese people as anything beyond direct threats to Canadian values and ideals (Li, 1998).

### **Chinese Restaurants in Canada**

After the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, it became difficult for the Chinese to obtain jobs in Canada. They were laid off from work on the railroad and were pushed into labour intensive jobs such as in coal mines, logging camps, ranches and farms (Li, 1998). Because the Chinese were willing to work lower-wage positions, higher paying jobs were available for white workers, however, not everyone saw it like that. With growing hostilities in the workplace and increasing mistreatments of Chinese workers and no prospects of upward mobility, many of the Chinese were forced into service jobs like working in laundries and restaurants to make a living (Li, 1998). These laundries and restaurants then served as ways to keep employment within the Chinese as they could hire and employ other immigrant Chinese people looking for work who were unwelcomed by white Canadians.

One of the ways that the Chinese adapted to survive in Canada was through creating restaurants in response to a hostile labour market (Li, 1998). Economic opportunity had to be created within the Chinese community for themselves. Many of the Chinese were familiar with working in the restaurant business as some were servant cooks for Canadian families previously or had prior experience. In owning and operating their own entrepreneurial businesses, the Chinese were able to, create jobs for themselves, continue providing services for other people, but ultimately be employed for and by themselves (Li, 1998) They also created employment opportunities for other Chinese people and were able to act as community partners, who could

pool limited resources together in order to run these businesses. By 1931, about 26.2 percent of all Chinese in Canada were involved in the restaurant industry (Li, 1998).

### **Monosodium Glutamate and Chinese Restaurant Syndrome**

The compound MSG is the salt form of glutamic acid which breaks down in the body as glutamate (Reactions, n.d.). Glutamate is a naturally occurring molecule that is found in foods like tomatoes, parmesan cheese, mushrooms and is even found naturally in the body (Reactions, n.d.). The Japanese scientist, Ikeda Kikunae, discovered MSG in 1908 when he isolated the molecule from Japanese dashi—a broth base made from kelp and mushrooms (Sand, 2005). The identified molecule was responsible for the rich flavouring of dashi and Kikunae is credited with discovering the fifth taste profile, “umami,” after sweet, sour, bitter and salty (Sand, 2005). After this discovery, MSG was sold and manufactured under the brand Ajinomoto and was widely used across the world. The compound was mainly used to flavour food and became popular during World War II as a way to make cheap food taste better, especially on the front lines as “flavorless rations can undermine morale” (Sand, 2005). By the 1930s, MSG was sold globally and became fairly popular in the United States by canning companies, most notably Campbell Soup Company, as a way for the company to enhance the flavour of their food (Sand, 2005).

MSG as a common flavouring agent, though, is unfamiliar to western households and is viewed more commonly as a chemical to fake the flavour of food. Companies that mass produce MSG, like Ajinomoto, initially spent a lot of money and effort on educating Japanese housewives on the uses and benefits of MSG (Sand, 2005). MSG is a staple flavouring agent in Japanese culture, used similarly to salt and sugar adding taste to food. Similarly, within Chinese cuisine, Chinese cooks and chefs eventually incorporated MSG as an acceptable ingredient in



cooking, removing any negative perceptions of the ingredient to the skeptical Chinese public when MSG was first introduced by Ajinomoto in 1922 (Sand, 2005).

Beyond being used as a flavouring agent, there are other uses for MSG. It can help increase food palatability in people who have inadequate dietary intake, especially for elderly individuals who have decreased taste and smell (Beyreuther et al., 2007). MSG has also been used as a substitute for salt to help people lower sodium intake (Beyreuther et al., 2007). The body does not distinguish between naturally occurring glutamates and MSG (International Food Information Council Foundation, n.d.). It has been shown in studies, even, that glutamate in the body helps with digestion and normal functions of the digestive tract (International Food Information Council Foundation, n.d.). Overall, the Food and Drug Administration has designated MSG as a Generally Recognized as Safe flavouring agent (International Food Information Council Foundation, n.d.). Additionally, the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives published a report where glutamic acid and its salts does not pose a hazard to health and has no established acceptable daily intake (World Health Organization, 1987). Monosodium glutamate, with all its tests and experiments, has not demonstrated to the World Health Organization that it poses a threat or risk to consumers.

The popularization of “Chinese restaurant syndrome” seemingly came from a 1968 letter to the editor submitted by Robert Ho Man Kwok, M.D. to the New England Journal of Medicine where he claimed “numbness at the back of the neck, gradually radiating to both arms and the back, general weakness and palpitation” fifteen to twenty minutes after eating Chinese food at Chinese restaurants, usually serving Northern style cuisine (Kwok, 1968). In this article, Kwok does not state what is exactly causing these strange symptoms, instead, he speculates that MSG

*may* be one of the culprits alongside a high sodium content or even cooking wine. At the end of his letter, he invites fellow colleagues to investigate this syndrome further.

Chinese Restaurant Syndrome was legitimized when a research article published in 1969 by Schaumberg, Byck and two colleagues found that MSG was the cause of Chinese restaurant syndrome though it was not limited to just Chinese restaurant food (Mosby, 2009). However, as MSG had been in use commercially and widely in the United States since the 1930's, the study could not explain why this "syndrome" wasn't identified earlier (Mosby, 2009). After this initial study, into the 1970's, other studies were done to explore the effects or acceptable levels of MSG for consumption. There were studies that said MSG was the culprit behind Chinese restaurant syndrome, and others stating it wasn't (Mosby, 2009). No conclusive evidence from these studies point to MSG being the sole culprit of Chinese restaurant syndrome. Even without concrete evidence, the label "Chinese restaurant syndrome" stuck and points to a deeper reasoning for labelling the condition as Chinese, even though it is quite American as Kwok cited he did not experience these syndromes until eating Chinese food in America (Mosby, 2009).

The subsequent research done on MSG focused on the syndrome being uniquely Chinese, that it was something only experienced by eating Chinese restaurant food, and symptoms were attributed to the strange bizarre cooking methods practiced by the Chinese (Mosby, 2009). Additionally, the reason why these symptoms existed were through the excessive use of MSG by Chinese restaurants (Mosby, 2009). Combined with the "bizarre" and "deviant" practices of Chinese cooks (like the use of snake and dog in their cooking), the talk of Chinese restaurant syndrome alone, confirmed the suspicious nature of the Chinese immigrants (Mosby, 2009). The risk of the syndrome was understood by the broader public to be a "Chinese" problem, where devious Oriental practices were poisoning bodies (Mosby, 2009). The assumptions, that

somehow, Chinese using MSG posed a greater threat to the public's health compared to other groups or industries using MSG reflects how MSG in Chinese food was a risk socially constructed. Even with the report published Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives deeming MSG as a generally recognized as safe flavouring agent, the link between MSG and Chinese restaurant syndrome could not be shaken.

### **Westernization of Chinese Food**

This concept of Westernization of Chinese food lends itself to the idea that ingredients not accepted in North American cooking cannot be accepted by the dominant society. Consumers want to participate in the culture through food, but only if certain conditions are met. Because MSG is perceived as a risk, it is considered harmful when consumed, therefore and cultural cuisines that use MSG could be perceived as endangering a community. The other, recognizes that the in order to have dominant community partake in their cuisine, traditional dishes and cooking methods have to be altered in order to be accepted (Lu & Fine, 1995). Not only is this a show of westernization of the cuisine, but at a deeper level, it is conforming and confirming the dominant hegemony regarding perceptions of the other, even though these perceptions are unfound.

Due to globalization, ingredients used in today's Chinese food, especially in restaurant across Toronto, more closely resembles what traditional Chinese food truly is. However, when Chinese immigrants first arrived in North America, it was difficult to recreate dishes from home because of the limited ingredients that were available (Lu & Fine, 1995). Because of this, many ingredients used in many Canadian Chinese restaurants were substituted with what was available in the market at the time. In other words, foreign foods had to be adapted to fit in, in order to recreate similar dishes to what immigrants were familiar with (Cook & Crang, 1996).

Not only were ingredients substituted but dishes themselves were further adapted to match the taste of local, non-immigrant population. Chefs had to Westernize their food in order to attract customers (Lu & Fine, 1995). For example, beef and broccoli or even the North American invention of the fortune cookie, were all different ways that Chinese food was adapted into western society and tastes. People came to local restaurants to experience community and to experience a sense of travel without actually leaving their home (Cook & Crang, 1996). This illusion of authenticity lends itself to chefs and owners cooking traditional dishes using traditional methods for local audiences (Lu & Fine, 1995). As an extension, chefs were given free license to be innovative and creative in how they cooked the foods in order to present the flavours of their homelands while using locally available ingredients. Catering to local taste buds to present Chinese food means that local communities were more prepared to accept the new culture, as this was something they would eat (Lu & Fine, 1995). The success of Chinese restaurants is only possible when its audiences accept the food, through a careful balance of combining the correct flavour profiles with proper techniques that make the food both exotic and different (Cook & Crang, 1996) but also similar and comforting. Even with all these changes and substitutions, Chinese food is still recognizable as Chinese food (Lu & Fine, 1995). Because Chinese ingredients, brands and methods of cooking are now readily available, chefs have many tools at their disposal to create traditional Chinese dishes without these western adaptations.

The westernization of Chinese food for consumers paints a false picture of authenticity. By Chinese restaurants westernizing Chinese cuisine, consumers believe they are eating “authentic” Chinese food, when in reality they are consuming an illusion of what is considered traditional cuisine. In this sense, authenticity is another social construction and again feeds into what society feels is a real and authentic experience (Lu & Fine, 1995). Western society

consume Chinese food as a way to demonstrate tolerance of the other (Lu & Fine, 1995) and fuels the perception that western society is tolerant of the Chinese because of their acceptance of their foods. However, because the dishes have been westernized (so they would eat it), there is an inherent contradiction in consumers being accepting of Chinese culture, whether or not they are aware or actually are (Lu & Fine, 1995). Westernized Chinese food was just different enough that its otherness could be enjoyed, but Chinese food had to remain within the context of western cuisine (Lu & Fine, 1995).

### **Perceptions of Risk and Risk Communication**

Risk is made up of the probability of a hazard occurring and the perception of the negative consequences (Mitchell Turner, Skubisz, & Rimal, 2011). Consuming food is risky business as it can have drastic health implications and is a source of anxiety for consumers (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2015). Especially when it comes to ethnic cuisine—something the core audience may be unfamiliar with; it becomes increasingly important for communication to be clearly conveyed that the foreign food is acceptable and perhaps even beneficial to consume. In addition, ethnic foods that use local ingredients and are familiar to the local community, are accepted with greater confidence (Mascarello, Pinto, Marcolin, Crovato, & Ravarotto, 2017) as the consumer has additional information pertaining to the risk of consuming the food.

Consumers' perceptions of food risk is constructed more on social and cultural perceptions rather than on scientific evidence (Fabiansson & Fabiansson, 2016). In other words, people are more likely to base what they feel is acceptable to eat based on cultural and social norms than on what science deems is risky or not risky to consume. In modernity, individual consumers are responsible for their everyday safety and determines what is risky—it is up to consumers to intake information making decisions to avoid and be suspicious of what poses a risk (Fabiansson

& Fabiansson, 2016). The perceived risk is therefore a culmination of what society believes is a risk and an individual's understanding of science (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2015).

“Perceptions of risk” becomes the operable idea, not the actual hazard. Risks are continually reframed and redefined over time depending on the attitudes of different audiences (Mascarello et al., 2017). Risk, therefore, becomes a complex construction where clear communication is needed, and appropriate updates are delivered to audience members so they can continually make informed decisions (Charlebois & Summan, 2015). Behaviours of consumers are driven by what they view as risky (Mitchell Turner et al., 2011). For example, the probability of an earthquake is fairly low in Alberta, however, if people *perceive* an earthquake risk to be high and devastating, Albertans would be frantically preparing for an earthquake, when instead, they should be more worried about preparing for tornados. When it comes to food safety, perceptions of risk is a socio-cultural concept where there is a distinction between “self” and “others” as a way to maintain social cohesion (Fabiansson & Fabiansson, 2016). Anyone outside of the “self”-community is treated as suspicious, posing a risk to society (Fabiansson & Fabiansson, 2016). The other does not fully align with what the community views as a risk and introduces things into society deemed as risk, which leads to the other being viewed as a threat to the social order. In this society, acceptable foods are firmly established, and anything disturbing this tradition is a risk to society (Fabiansson & Fabiansson, 2016). Consumer behaviours are monitored by community to ensure compliance, not only maintaining a sense of security, but the illusion of belonging (Fabiansson & Fabiansson, 2016). People also tend to view chemical agents as highly risky as often they perceive it to be unnatural therefore, consumers’ fear of chemical agents are also greater (Fabiansson & Fabiansson, 2016). As MSG is viewed as some kind of chemical, consumers perceived it as a risky flavouring agent, unnatural, doing

everything to avoid consumption, even though science has deemed it time and time again to be a non-risky ingredient.

When risk is miscommunicated or not communicated at all, there is a potential for audience overreaction. The social amplification of risk, due to inaccurate and/or inadequate communication, can result in greater consumer panic and anxiety than the situation actually warrants (Charlebois & Summan, 2015). There are other implications to the organization or group, such as the loss of reputation, economic losses, etc. when risk communication is poorly conceived and disseminated. Once an opinion or attitude has been established, it becomes very difficult for audience perceptions to change unless they have felt the organization addressed the risk. Anticipating risk can elicit fear greater than the actual risk itself, which in turn perpetuates other unanticipated negative consequences (Fabiansson & Fabiansson, 2016). Risk communication is critical for organizations to practice as it provides all stakeholders, including consumers and the general public, all the information needed to make rational, informed, risk-based decisions affecting their interests and values (Charlebois & Summan, 2015). The key to building the trust between organizations and stakeholders is not just access to information, but continuous engagement between the organization and their audiences to build a credible relationship that can mitigate any crisis that may arise (Charlebois & Summan, 2015). Through this engagement process, consumers are able to develop and manage their own strategies of dealing with risk when it arises (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2015). For example, Ulrich Beck's risk society, acceptance or rejection of new foods depends on the perception of risk associated with the food (2000). This acceptance or rejection can be attributed to the amount of helpful information that the consumer receives about the food (Mascarello et al., 2017).

Media can play an important role in how risk is communicated to consumers. Through framing theory, conveyors of the information are able to construct and depict the risk in various ways (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2015). Framing happens when different perspectives of a risk are presented to an audience with different implications and values, depending on the point of view that is accepted (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames can only be presented in relation to a particular issue or event, it is not a concept that exists independently (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Isolating the different attitudes towards these issues becomes foundational as the different frames underlie the different attitudes (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The frames, therefore, are analyzed and used to assess the risk that is presented to the audience.

### **Racializing Diseases: SARS**

Chinese restaurant syndrome is not a disease or condition that has been proven to be caused by MSG. In fact, carrying “Chinese” in the name, implies that the condition has been racialized. By racializing the other, it associates the syndrome with a particular group of people when no such association is needed (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2012). Racialization is a process where humans with perceived shared traits are grouped together by the dominant society and separated from other groups (Ahmed, 2002). In the case of the Chinese, they were associated with being “dirty”, “diseased” and “unclean” (K. B. Chan, 2005). Society focuses on the perceived cause of the problem (the racialized group) instead of the *actual* cause of the problem. Because society does not perceive themselves as racist, they are blind to their racism, not recognizing that power, inequality, and domination are systemic and ingrained within the society (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2012). As Kwok mentioned in his letter, Chinese restaurant syndrome was not a symptom that he had experienced before in China, but something he experienced only when he started eating Chinese food in America (1968). The association to the name “Chinese” racializes the symptom



by associating the cause of the symptoms with the Chinese, implying that Chineseness somehow causes consumers to be ill. This is just another example of othering the Chinese, by way of naming a syndrome after it. Even though there have been calls for renaming the syndrome, the name once associated, could not be changed (Mosby, 2009).

In recent times, another disease was also racialized inciting mass panic among Canadians, that because of its Chineseness that it spread among the public. Severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, was first documented in Canada in February of 2003 (Borgundvaag, 2004). The disease was contracted by a woman and her husband who was travelling in Hong Kong and later returned to Toronto (Low, 2004). SARS was thought to have infected a person first in Guangdong province in 2002 (Low, 2004). There are still many unknowns about the origins of SARS, but researchers speculate it originated from animals (“SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome),” n.d.). Symptoms of SARs included: fever, malaise, headache and diarrhoea (“SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome),” n.d.). WHO further states that transmission of the disease is through close contact, person-to-person. There is no specific gender or race that SARS targets, and it does not come from a specific race of person—the disease can affect anyone.

However, the fact that SARS came from China was enough for people to associate the disease with the Chinese. Specifically, in North America, significant stigmas were raised against the Chinese population during this time. In New York City, not a single case of SARS was identified in the community yet high levels of anxiety and stigma surrounding SARS still arose (Eichelberger, 2007). Many Chinatowns in the United States from coast to coast found themselves deserted and empty instead of bustling and full of life (Dean E. Murphy, 2003). SARS not only targeted the vulnerable physically, but on an economic and cultural level, Asians were greatly affected. The Asian-American Business Development Center reported that

Chinatown businesses during SARS saw 30% to 70% losses, which was even more damaging on top of businesses lost during 9/11 (Eichelberger, 2007).

Similarly, in Canada it was perceived that where the Chinese were, SARS would surely be there, as if somehow the disease was only being spread by the Chinese. As the epidemic persisted, Filipinos were also stigmatized against (Leung, 2008). The public panicked and the hysteria surrounding SARS led to many racist backlashes against the Chinese and to even Southeast Asian groups (Leung, 2008). Toronto businesses were also impacted, some estimates stating 40% to 80% loss of income (Leung, 2008).

All this demonstrates that SARS was more than just an epidemic. It became a social crisis in Canada, one with racist ideology underlying it (Leung, 2008). They were held responsible for infecting healthy people. This othering of the Chinese identified and explained one societal problem, the health of society (Eichelberger, 2007). Chinatown became a metaphor for a disease in the body, and the city, representing the body, was infected, that because Chinatown was unclean. Chinatown became a site in society to be wary of because of the potential health risk it holds to everyone else in society (Leung, 2008). The Chinese were the plague and needed to be avoided. By media framing the disease and linking it to Chinatown on top of the ever changing health responses additionally contributed to the public creating their own hypothesis and conclusions as to how the disease was spreading, who was at risk, and what (or who) to avoid to try and protect against the spread of the disease. In Toronto especially, Asians were feeling the repercussions of SARS from a cultural perspective. Many people were facing blatant racism for the fact that they were Chinese or Asian in appearance. Some of the comments people heard included:

My kid's teacher told him that he was not allowed to bring certain kinds of food to school and advised not to share with classmates. (Leung, 2008, p.138)

and

It's not just SARS; it's something that is always there. For example, in my office, there is a coworker who refuses to eat at Chinese restaurants. She says they are dirty. Racism is always there and systemic racism also. (Leung, 2008, p.140)

The SARS epidemic brought to light the systemic racism that still exists in Canada today, and the deeply ingrained ideas that the Chinese are still considered "unclean" and "diseased". It demonstrated how easy society places blame on the other even though the disease itself, puts everyone at risk and does not distinguish between races. Anyone can contract SARS and can potentially infect someone else. Yet, because SARS was associated with "Chinese", the historical sentiment of blaming the Chinese for spread of diseases, legitimizes people's fears and continues to perpetuate systemic racism in Canada.

### **Data Collection Approach**

The social discourse of MSG states it is a harmful chemical used predominantly in Chinese food causing negative health effects, usually headaches, after consumption. Consumers of Chinese food claim the headache gained after eating a Chinese meal whereby the headache could be avoided if MSG was not used by the Chinese restaurants. Because of this assertion, many Chinese restaurants have taken to labelling their restaurants and food menus with the message "No MSG." For my research, I looked at a collection of 103 Chinese food menus from Toronto spanning over 50 years containing various messages.

Food menus used in this research were from the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) Archives. UTSC's Harley J. Spiller collection comprises of 10,000 menus, business

cards, restaurant matchbooks, and a variety of objects related to Chinese cookery including Chinese restaurant menus from around the world. Menus from the archive were examined in person and documented via photographs. Only Chinese food menus from Toronto and the GTA were used for my research.

From these food menus, I looked at how businesses respond to the MSG discourse through advertising, signage and messaging which is a direct tie in back to RQ3. It is crucial to my research in how businesses either confirm or deny the hegemony of MSG in discourse. I evaluated particular messages used in these menus that communicates that no MSG is used in food. These messages consisted of outright labelling such as, “No MSG in our food,” various colouring and symbol choices, and other methods used to frame the restaurants and food’s legitimacy. My analysis of these types of messages directly answered how businesses made business decisions addressing the MSG discourse.

### **Methods**

I conducted a rhetorical analysis on these Chinese restaurant menus. In my analysis of these menus, I identified how Chinese restaurant businesses respond to the risk communication of MSG through messaging found in their take-out food menus. This provided information about how businesses support the perception of MSG as a risky flavouring agent in social discourse and how the use of MSG in Chinese foods perpetuates biases against Chinese culture. More specifically, I conducted deductive research using the question, “Do Chinese restaurants use the messaging of ‘No MSG’ reinforcing biases against Chinese food in Canadian culture?” to guide my research.

In my rhetorical analysis, I looked at similar messages and symbols used for messaging in addition to the placement of the messages. Different messages were categorized as messaging

through particular phrases, semiotics or a combination of both. This qualitative analysis gave evidence of how MSG is viewed in risk communication as a synecdoche for Chinese foods in Canadian culture. Through a rhetorical analysis of different menus, I derived whether or not MSG is framed as positive or negative flavouring agent and if it is indeed communicated as a risky ingredient. For this paper, I looked at how messaging appeals to the consumer, how syllogistic arguments aid to shape perceptions of culture and finally, and how synecdoche is a useful rhetorical device in discussing MSG as a part of a whole for perceptions of Chinese culture.

Traditional Aristotelian appeals encompass the idea that successful persuasion addresses ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos is linked to the credibility or the attractiveness of the author (Killingsworth, 2005). The author should inspire authority in order to make a persuasive argument. Pathos refers to the emotions of the audience, and logos pertains to the shared reality of the author and audience (Killingsworth, 2005). I used a revised model of rhetorical appeals to examine the relationship between the author, audience and their shared reality. Killingsworth revises the traditional Aristotelian appeals by providing a framework allowing for a sharper examination of the relationship between authors, audiences and values; and how in this triune relationship a movement of positions signals a successful persuasion. In other words, Killingsworth's model moves rhetorical participants into alignment (Killingsworth, 2005). This revised rhetorical model is used to overcome differences, oppositions and divisions in three possible ways—either by forming new solidarities, reinforcing existing solidarities, or taking actions and transforming attitudes (Killingsworth, 2005).

In Killingsworth's revised model, the *author* takes up a particular position that presents a particular societal outlook inviting the audience to join in on an agreed-upon value

(Killingsworth, 2005). In the context of this paper, the author is the Chinese restaurant. The position of the *audience* is distinct from the author—there is a divide between the audience and author (Killingsworth, 2005). This divide is to be overcome so that the author and audience come to agreement. The audience in the context of my analysis, are the consumers (in Canada) of Chinese restaurant food, and to a greater extent Canadian society. Finally, the position of *value* is the common ground defining the relationship with the audience and the author (Killingsworth, 2005). This paper assumes the position that, what is risky to consume represents the shared value between the audience and the author.

Killingsworth's navigational metaphor here is appropriate in envisioning moving both the author and the audience to a place of agreement—certain Chinese foods are good to consume. The revised rhetorical model involves a movement of positions, where the author appeals to the audience, moving closer to a shared value through a medium of exchange, in this case, Chinese restaurant food menus. Further to this model, there is a resistance from the audience where the author overcoming this resistance will bring the audience to arrive at the same place (Killingsworth, 2005). The medium is important in overcoming this resistance and must convince the audience of shifting and changing their position. The initial position of the audience is to reject consuming Chinese cuisine because of the assumption that there is something risky about the consumption of Chinese food. This resistance prevents consumers from partaking in Chinese food whereby the author, the Chinese restaurants, are positioned to convince consumers of otherwise. Through the use of food menus and specific messaging, Chinese restaurants have to appeal to the consumers' fear of consuming Chinese food.

Syllogistic progression frames the perception of the relationship between MSG and Chinese culture. Syllogistic arguments could be laid out as: if A equals B and if B equals C, then

A must equal C. The progression of argument starts with the assumption that Chinese food contains MSG. Then progresses to the fact that MSG is bad for the consumer. Therefore, because Chinese food containing MSG, must mean that Chinese food is bad for the consumer.

Finally, the rhetorical device synecdoche is useful in viewing how MSG is used to represent Chinese culture. There are connotations attached to MSG which signal the attitudes and types of people associated with the flavouring agent. Food can be used as a way to influence how groups of people are viewed (Brummett, 1981). For example, in America, the association of fried chicken and watermelon with African-Americans or even the reference of “salad-days” with those of low economic class is well known (Brummett, 1981). Food carries a deeper meaning beyond sustenance for consumption, when linked with particular groups of people, connotative meaning comes to light and plays into society’s perception with that particular group. For this paper, I looked at the relationship between MSG and Chinese people. Synecdoche is used as a part (a flavouring agent) for the whole (the Chinese) (Burke, 1941). MSG as part of Chinese food extends to all of Chinese cuisine and further represents Chinese culture and people as a whole. Using MSG as a synecdoche is helpful as attributions of cultural characteristics were revealed in my analysis.

### **Analysis**

For my analysis I examined messages from 103 Chinese restaurant menus from around Ontario. From these 103 menus, four were selected for the different messages used. I looked for language surrounding the menu food items—not the list of ingredients the chefs used for various dishes, but informative messages along the lines of describing the restaurant, their cooking methods, the quality of their ingredients, etc. Menus are usually the only physical tool a restaurant has to communicate to their customers what to expect from a meal. Customers’

perception of risk is in regards to food, especially in the case of ethnic foods, largely depends on the framing of messages in a menu (Jang & Kim, 2015). Through the lens of various rhetorical devices, I analyzed these messages to see what the author (the Chinese restaurant) conveys to the audience (Canadian public) and what implications are behind those messages in their motivations of using those specific messages. While my findings indicate that Chinese restaurants may seem to perpetuate the view that MSG is a harmful chemical to consume, it seems they do so in the context of distancing themselves from being perceived as the othered by their customers. In order to draw in business, they need to shape their messaging that appeals to their customers and the wider Canadian public.

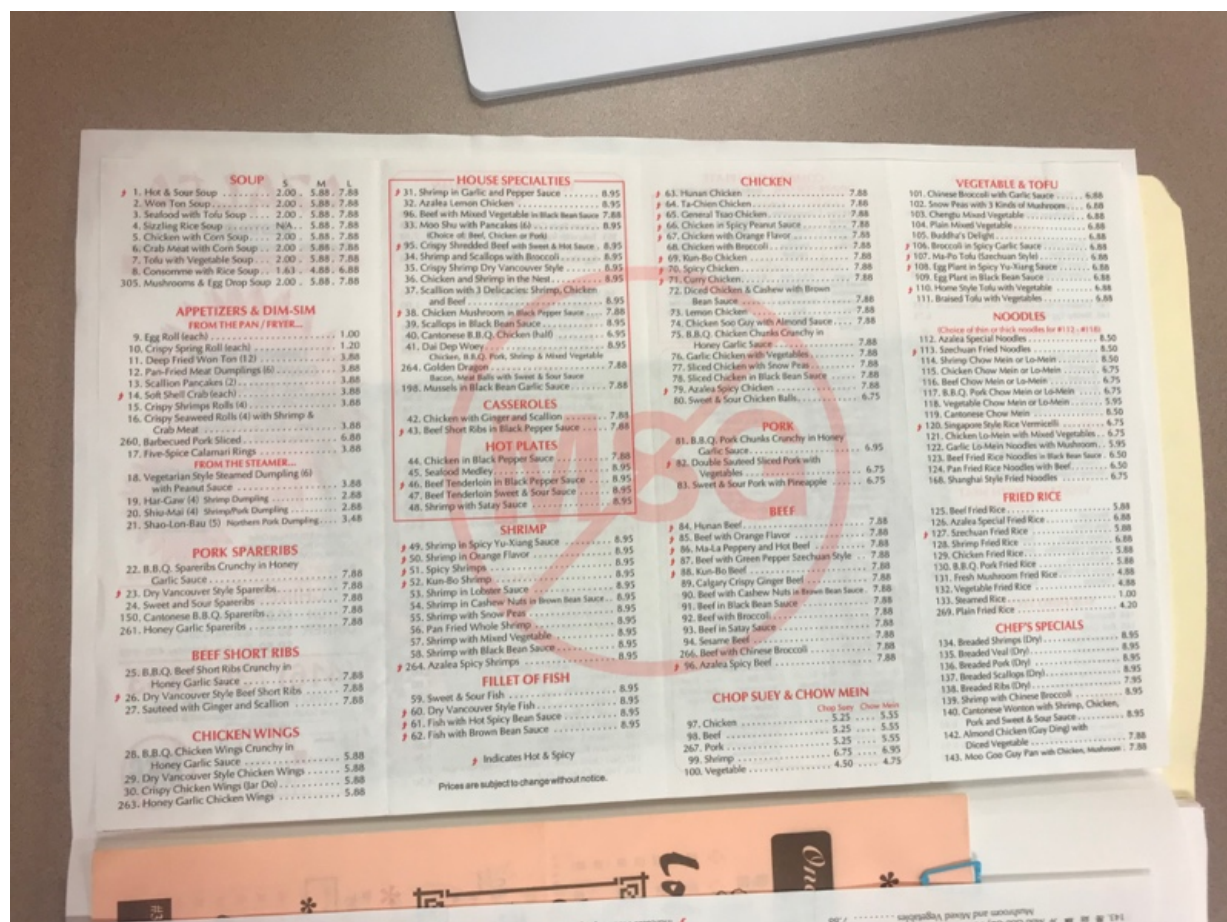


Figure 1. Take-out menu from Azalea Restaurant



The first menu from Azalea Restaurant contains a very simple message—the acronym “MSG” overlaid with the general prohibition sign; I refer to this as the “no MSG symbol”. The general prohibition sign is used to “signal a prohibited action” (“ISO 7010-P001, General prohibition sign,” n.d.). It can be interpreted by the use of the sign that MSG is a flavouring agent that the restaurant feels should be prohibited in their foods and is something they do not allow their chefs to add. The prominent size of the symbol centred on the menu covers half the menu space makes it so obvious and immediately draws the audience’s attention to the message before they can even read the menu items. The restaurant signals strongly to their customers that MSG is not a flavouring agent that is added to their dishes. This messaging is effective and clear in communicating the exclusion of MSG from Azalea Restaurant’s cooking practices.

What this message does not convey *why* MSG is excluded from the menu. Taking Killingsworth’s perspective on rhetorical appeals, it seems that the author is trying to move the audience to a place where Chinese food is acceptable to consume. The value this menu conveys is that MSG is bad for consumption and that it needs to be excluded from cooking in order to be safe to consume. Without this declaration which inevitably validates that MSG as risky to one’s health when consumed, it can be assumed that the restaurant’s consumer would otherwise not order from this particular restaurant if they believe there are adverse effects of MSG. The shared value of the prohibition of MSG in foods as the “right” value, means that the restaurant, through the restaurant menu, has communicated to their customers that their food is indeed consumable without risk because of the exclusion of MSG from their dishes.

The second menu is from the Canadian chain based in Brampton, Mandarin. Within the menu, words like “Committed,” “Quality,” “Community,” and “You” are at the forefront. There are uses of bullet fonts to emphasize different points. Notably, the message “Absolutely no

MSG” is present and listed under the heading “Committed to Quality.” Other messages surrounding the no MSG messaging include “research and taste testing ensure the highest quality food and beverage items” and “consulting chefs are brought in to develop international items.”

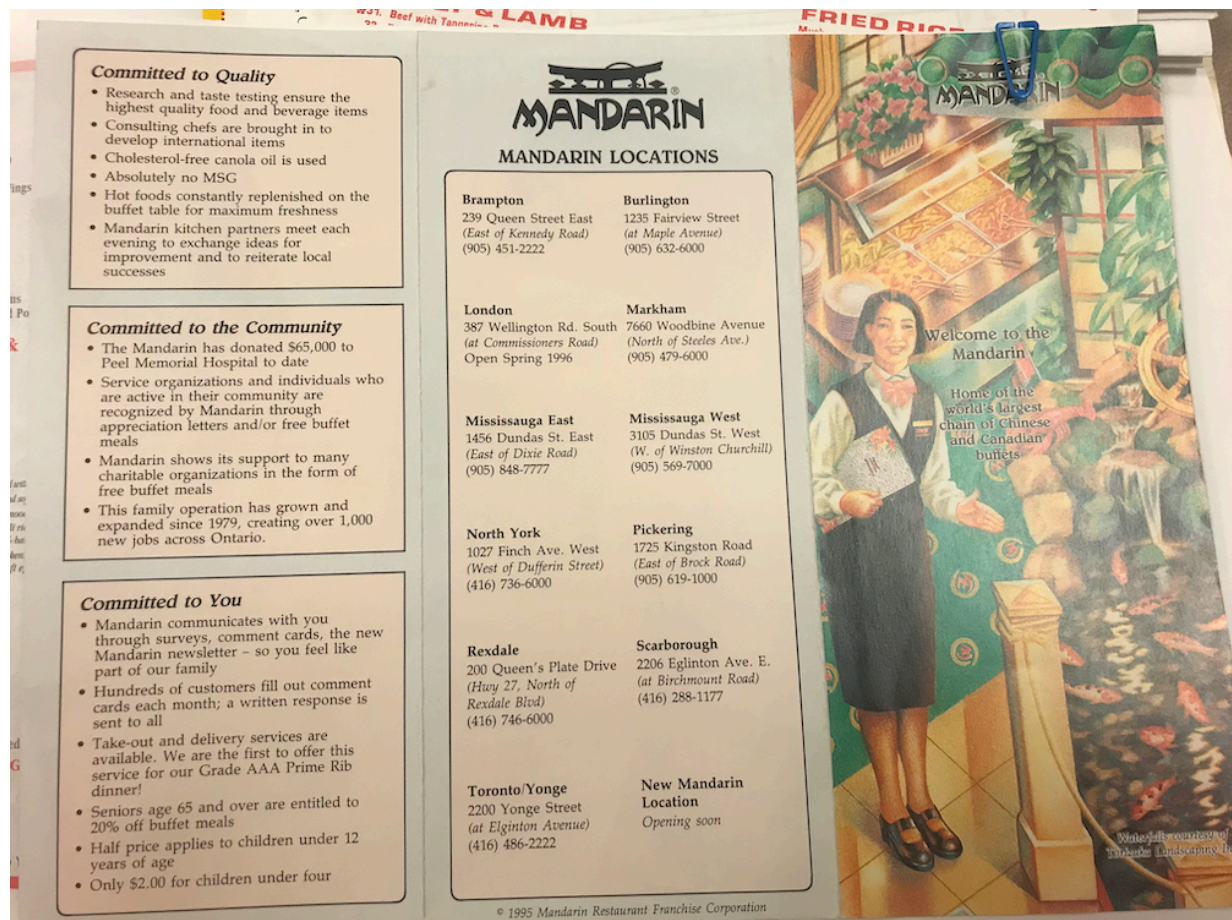


Figure 2. Take-out menu from Mandarin Restaurant

The third menu is taken from Young Lok, a Toronto based restaurant. The menu is comprised of various messages alongside the menu food items. “no MSG” messaging sits in between plenty of text. Adjacent to the symbol, the messaging is “We don’t use MSG in our cooking.” Other messaging includes “Vegetable Oil is used exclusively in cooking.”

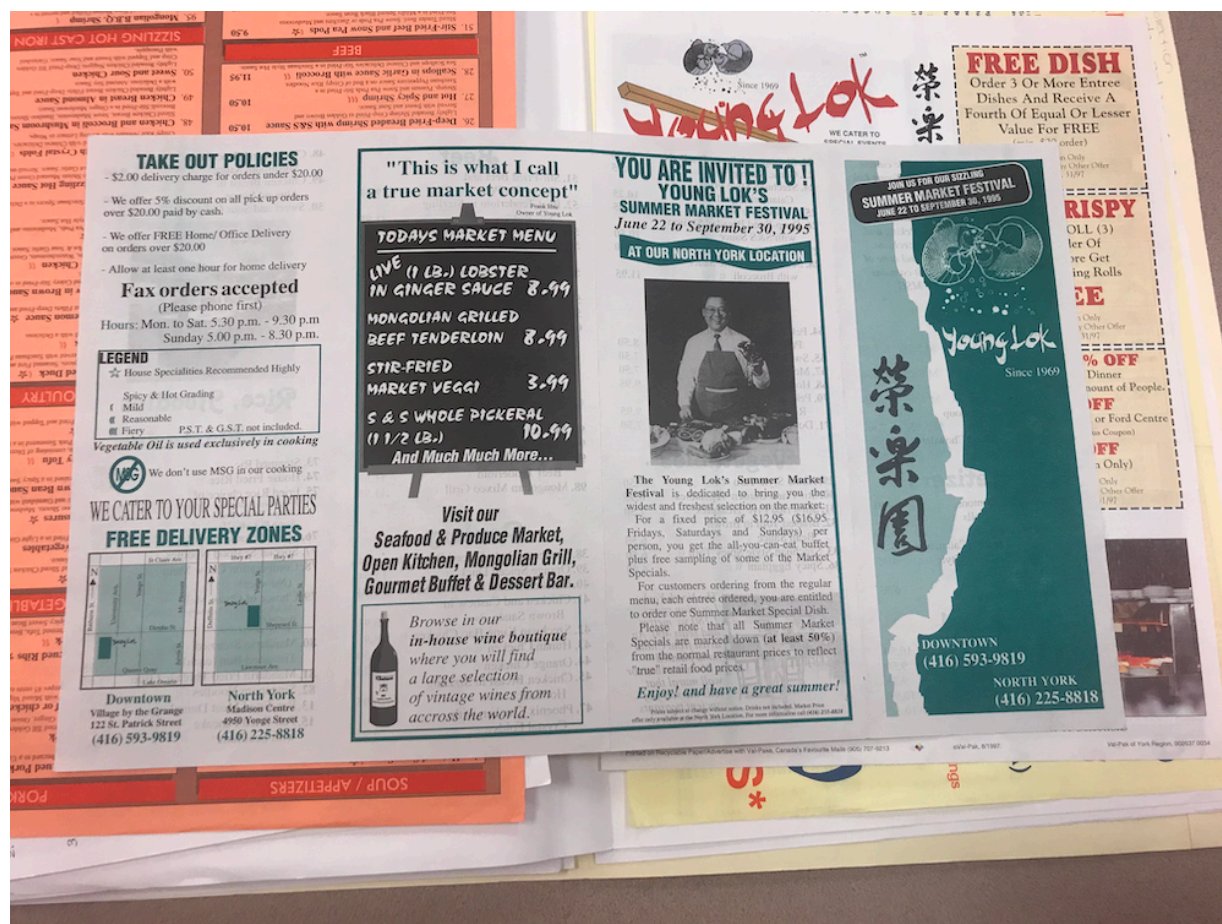


Figure 3. Take-out menu from Young Lok

These menus contain messages that not only inform the consumer of what is present or not in Chinese cuisine, but also acts as messages for persuading the consumer that their cuisine is safe to eat. The messages from these two take out menus can be categorized into particular phrases, semiotics or a combination of both. Examples of the particular phrases are “no MSG” and “don’t use MSG.”

Through semiotics, the Young Lok restaurant and Azalea restaurant use the “no MSG symbol” informing their audience that there is no MSG used in their cooking. The Young Lok restaurant takes it a step further and combines the phrase with the symbol. Through messaging, the author looks to persuade the audience into accepting that the cuisine as safe to eat. In this context, it can be assumed that the use of MSG in Chinese cooking implies that the food is risky

to eat and should be avoided. Using “no MSG” serves two purposes: 1) it immediately labels the food as safe, because dishes they do not contain this risky flavouring agent, and 2) that the Chinese restaurant (the author) shares the same value as the consumer (the audience) who believes MSG *is* in fact a risky ingredient to ingest. The restaurant persuades the audience to consume their Chinese cuisine, because it is safe to eat *because* of the lack of MSG in the food. This messaging of “no MSG” is a direct response by the Chinese businesses to the perceived risk of MSG. In other words, in order to abate the risk of consuming MSG, the explicit display of “no MSG” provides comfort and an assurance to the consumer—not only are they right in their perception of MSG has a harmful flavouring agent, but they are also proven correct in “knowing” how common it is used in Chinese cuisine. Once they have been assured of their position, consumers are more willing to welcome a Chinese meal and will happily eat and accept this version of Chinese food. Consumers are also given justification for rejecting Chinese restaurants who do not message “no MSG” and consequently the Chinese people themselves (as restaurants run by Chinese people are representative of all Chinese cultures and values) who have not positioned themselves as agreeing with the perceived risks of consuming MSG. Therefore, what is made explicit is that there are “clean” and “safe”, and “dirty” and “unsafe” Chinese restaurants and food. In a way, consumers feel positively and negatively towards Chinese food—that Chinese food delicious, but their experience could be negatively impacted by perceived risks (Jang & Kim, 2015).

Businesses label their food menus with “no MSG” as a way to convince and reassure consumers that the food they are serving is safe to eat and there is no associated health risk. In addition, the argument is further reinforced as exemplified through Mandarin’s use of the word “commitment.” The word commitment means “a pledge to do something in the future” or “an



agreement” (“Commitment,” n.d.). Mandarin establishes their credibility through the use of the word “commitment.” Commitment is a word with strong connotations associated with trustworthiness, that when someone commits to doing something, it is to carry out a deliberate action (“Commit,” n.d.). When Mandarin state’s their position as a restaurant that is committed, it further persuades the consumer that what is stated in the menu is translated to the food that they serve—as they are “Committed to Quality” through “absolutely no MSG” implying that if they were a restaurant that uses MSG they would not be a credible restaurant; they would not be a restaurant that are committed to the well-being and safety of their consumers; and they would not be serving quality dishes.

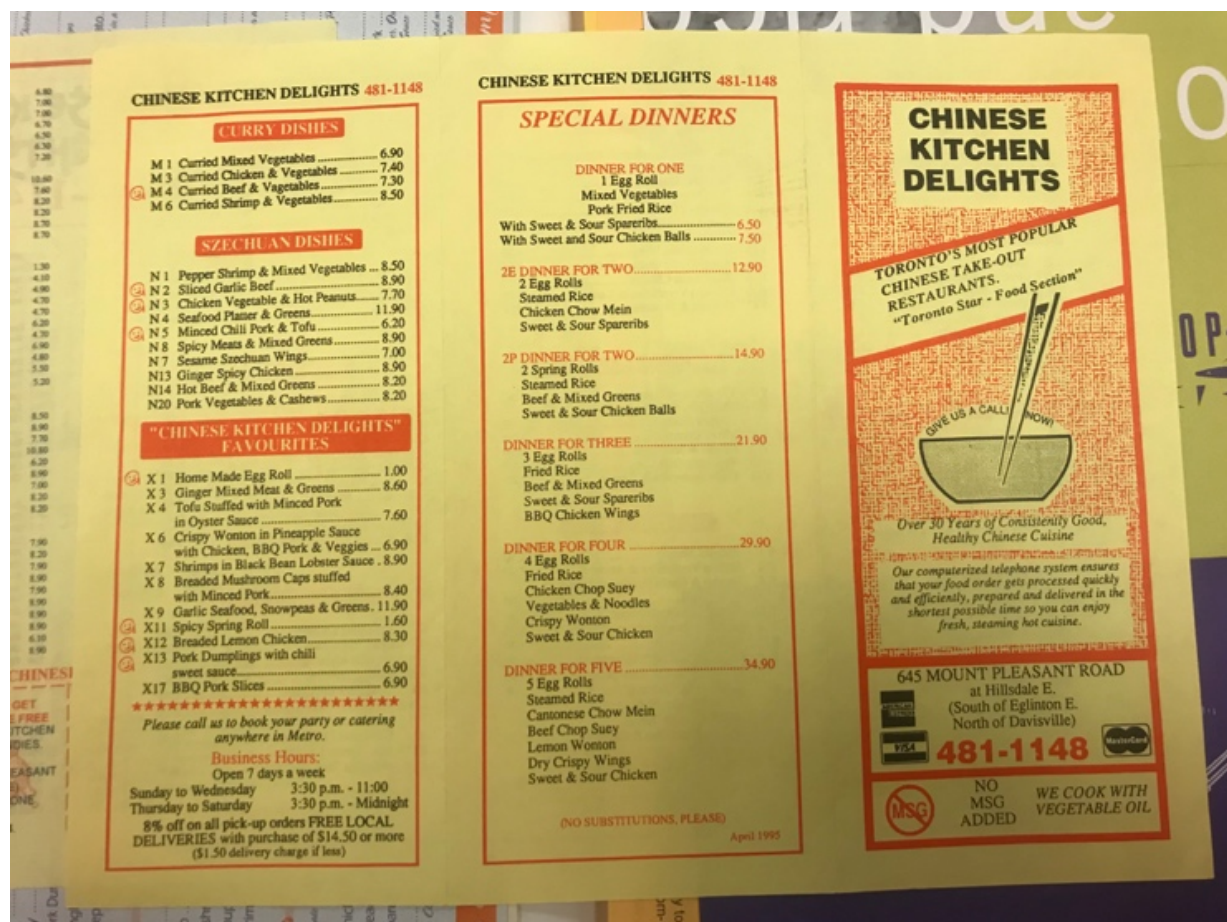


Figure 4. Take-out menu from Chinese Kitchen Delights

A fourth menu I looked at is from Chinese Kitchen Delights. This menu includes the same “no MSG symbol” as well as an additional message of “NO MSG ADDED.” Through the additional use of this message, the author reinforces that consuming MSG could somehow be harmful. The message also implies that adding MSG to food is undesirable but a familiar process to the customer. Chinese Kitchen Delights in using this message announces that their cooking practices are aligned with their customers’ expectations. Since MSG is seen as risky to their well-being, it is therefore not added to any of their food. This, again, assumes that MSG is hazardous to one’s health and is a chemical that could be intentionally added (or not). Because of Chinese Kitchen Delights’ assertions, the risk of MSG in any of their dishes is mitigated and the food served here is no longer questionable or risky to consume.

Another message that Chinese Kitchen Delight has on the food menu to inform their customer is, “Over 30 years of Consistently Good, Healthy Chinese Cuisine.” Within this short sentence, there are many adjectives speaking to the character of the restaurant and the type of food they serve. The restaurant makes a statement about their credibility in four different ways. First, as a restaurant with continued operation for 30 years, it could be understood to be a successful business able to garner customers for 30 consecutive years. Longevity of business adds to credibility as 50 percent of new restaurants fail within the first three years (Muller & Woods, 1991) and after three decades of business, it can be inferred that Chinese Kitchen Delight is well established in the community.

The use of the word “consistently” is interesting here as it means “marked by harmony, regularity, or steady continuity: free from variation or contradiction” (“Consistent,” n.d.). Describing the business with “steady continuity” alludes to the fact that the business has not have lapsed in the cooking method or the care that they first put into their food when the business was

first established. It also implies and supports the assertion of 30 years, that it has been a regular fixture in the neighborhood. The definition of “harmony” in describing consistently also connotes that the business is harmonious to the community, that it is an establishment that brings together and does not upset the balance and the ways of the community. Instead, it further implies that the way in which they cook and serve food attests to the strong values and high standards of their customers.

The last adjective that establishes credibility is the term “healthy.” Healthy can be defined as “beneficial to one's physical, mental, or emotional state: conducive to or associated with good health or reduced risk of disease”(“Healthy,” n.d.). For Chinese Kitchen Delight to describe their food as “healthy Chinese cuisine” assumes Chinese cuisine has not always associated with being healthy, that the food instead, is usually unhealthy and could pose an overall health risk. Chinese food tends to be described as greasy and makes the customer “bloated and icky” (Tuder, 2019). Chinese food is typically described as greasy and oily, something where after eating could make the consumer feel bloated or sluggish, and perhaps even sick. These are not feelings people want after eating a meal and can be a deterrent towards a certain type of food. Add on the fact that Chinese food is unfamiliar to many audiences, their willingness to eat a food that could be potentially risky also decreases (Jang & Kim, 2015).

Declaring their food as healthy implies that the obstacle for customers is the opposite—unhealthy. Chinese Kitchen Delight, in a sense, is “un-othering” themselves, putting them in a position of aligning with the dominant societal view in agreeing with the view that Chinese food is unhealthy. Perceptions of the edibility of ethnic meals are often shadowed by stereotypes of the culture it comes from, including their culinary practices (Kowalczyk, Gębski, & Milewska, 2017). There have been some sceptics towards Chinese food, especially because of the low price

of food and the unknown ingredients, that some of people's fear of unhealthy Chinese foods comes from the fact that they do not understand the cooking and preparation methods of Chinese restaurants (Kowalczyk et al., 2017). The use of MSG has largely made people think about how unhealthy Chinese food is, even though there were no notions of "unhealthy" in other foods that used MSG (Mosby, 2009). Because of this stigma of Chinese food and its questionable oriental ingredients and preparation methods (Mosby, 2009), any Chinese restaurant wanting success needed to counter this claim. In this context, Chinese Kitchen Delight sets themselves apart from other Chinese restaurants because of marketing their foods as healthy. By explicitly communicating that their food is healthy means that Chinese Kitchen Delight provides good nutrition and in the conscious of what their customers, it is "clean" food that is risk-free to eat.

With the statement "Over 30 years of Consistently Good, Healthy Chinese Cuisine," Chinese Kitchen Delight has established their credibility to their customers by agreeing and accepting the assertion that Chinese food is not always healthy. They have to convince their customers that the food they are serving is different and atypical of the usual Chinese fair, especially in using "healthy" in describing the food they are serving. It brings the customer to a place where they find the restaurant a credible restaurant, where it is *not* a health risk to eat there. Additionally, the messaging of "NO MSG ADDED" removes all negative connotations associated with MSG and greasy Chinese food. In this way, Chinese Kitchen Delight has established their credibility to their customers by firmly establishing their shared value, where Chinese food *is* greasy and unhealthy and even risky to eat because of MSG. All of the restaurant's actions and cooking confirms this world view and their food offerings are counter to the dominant thought, and therefore customers should be confident that eating at their business is not risky and instead, good and healthy for them.



Because assumptions that *only* Chinese restaurants use MSG to flavour food combined with the assumption that less than quality ingredients are used for cooking, businesses have to establish their credibility to their consumers in how they message their product offerings. There are particular phrases that explicitly state that they do not use MSG in their cooking. In this sense, to uphold their credibility, and assertion that their food is safe to eat, the businesses feel that they need to add specific and direct phrases onto their menus.

For RQ1, the data collected addresses the question of subtly. RQ1 poses the question “By treating MSG as a “risk”, how can risk communication theory help tell the story of Chinese restaurant menu messaging?” Using phrases such as “No MSG” is a form of marketing that addresses the discourse of MSG. MSG is usually positioned as a health concern and so in choosing the messaging, businesses are reinforcing the notion that MSG could be considered a pathogen.

The data collected does not directly address RQ3, “How, through this treatment of MSG as a risk, create a space for biases against Chinese food in Canadian culture?” However, the fact that “No MSG” messaging is predominantly in Chinese food menus, or more often seen in Chinese food menus, it can be conjectured that there are biases against Chinese food in Canadian culture.

## **Discussion**

My findings in the previous section show there are a variety of ways that businesses, through the messaging created and disseminated on food menus, have responded to the treatment of MSG as a risk. Chinese restaurant businesses communicate through their food menus in a way that reinforces the social perception that MSG is a health risk. The findings show that there are implicit and explicit ways that restaurants respond with their messages. I expected my analysis to

show restaurants explicitly addressing the issue of MSG in their foods. What I found in addition to explicit messages was implicit communication of how Chinese restaurants address MSG and the question of whether or not Chinese food is acceptable for consumption. Further to my research, it was interesting to find that Chinese restaurants do not counter the social perception of MSG as a risky food flavouring agent. Instead, across all the menus, the messages served to confirm the perception that MSG is a flavouring agent that is risky if consumed.

Chinese restaurants using explicit messaging used either a “no MSG” sign or a variation of “no MSG added” on their food menus. In this way, Chinese restaurants market their food as free of MSG and are open to their customers about actively not adding the seasoning. What is understood from the use of the “no MSG” labelling is that not only do the foods not contain MSG, but there is an underlying message that MSG is bad to consume. MSG should not be found in dishes because consuming the chemical is bad for the body and makes consumers prone to adverse health effects. By using “no MSG,” the restaurants serve to confirm the incorrect assertion that MSG causes all sorts of health ailments (headaches, numbness, weakness, and palpitations like what people claim to experience) (Kwok, 1968). This explicit messaging also speaks to how Chinese restaurants actively distance themselves from society’s notion of the other. The Chinese (the other) are, as a whole, do not belong in Canadian society as they have different values that make them stand out which are inherently contrary to dominant societal values. What my analysis of the menus have shown is that the use of MSG in cooking is that difference. As it is viewed by society as a risky chemical (instead of just seasoning), any persons or groups that are associated with using it in foods must be not looking out for the best interest of the collective and actively contaminating the community. The only way to break out of this and to be accepted as part of society is for the Chinese to also reject MSG and deem it a harmful

additive—even though, the Chinese (and others, including Campbell Soup Company) have been using MSG for decades with no technical evidence supporting claims of it causing adverse health effects. In order for Chinese restaurants to be accepted by society and presumably to gain customers outside of their own homogenous group, they need to adhere to dominant societal perceptions that play into the hands of the hegemony and explicitly state that they do not use MSG (this risky flavouring agent that is not risky to consume at all).

While I expected to see “no MSG” explicitly written out in the menus, I did not expect the implicit messages Chinese restaurant used. Words in the messages included “quality,” “freshness,” and “commitment” in describing the types of dishes to expect when they arrive at the table. The implicit messages do not outrightly state or imply that MSG is harmful, and it does not always mean their food is not “contaminated” with MSG. However, the question here to ask is *why* businesses would feel the need to message their food as “fresh” and “good quality”? That seems to be an assumption that is general expected when eating from a restaurant—that the chefs would take care to ensure the food they serve to customers are good. So, when Chinese restaurants describes their foods as “fresh” and “good quality”, they are stating their product offerings meet a certain standard and they are committed to the well-being of their customers as a response to maybe less favourable views on Chinese dishes as a whole. Using such language is an assurance to customers that the restaurant is not hiding anything. Assumptions of Chinese restaurants by customers may be that chefs cook with unclean and deviant practices, in some way using unfamiliar methods questionable to dominant society (Mosby, 2009)—customers have been led to assume Chinese restaurants of the past are hiding something, that there may be a sense where the menu does not tell the whole story of the food (Cho, 2010). These implicit messages are meant to counter that perception. That these particular self-identified Chinese

restaurants are not the same as other Chinese restaurants, and the food they serve will be a pleasant experience for the customer. Implied here is the notion that Chinese food often (if not always) perceived as not fresh or healthy and, in some cases, questionable to consume. The messaging of Chinese dishes as “fresh” and of “good quality” not only absolves the restaurant of deviant practices in serving food ladled with contaminants, but it also removes the particular restaurant from being included in the grouping of all other Chinese restaurants. That they have understood the risks associated with unclean food practices and have been educated by the dominant society (as a result of the “white-man” dictating what are right and wrong practices in food) to no longer continue these questionable practices. Instead, by asserting their food as “fresh” the Chinese restaurants have risen to the level of dominant society and can be included and belong in society. All other Chinese restaurants, however, who have not made a clear stance on their food by letting the community know about the quality of their food, the ingredients and cooking practices, must still remain as othered and be treated with suspicion. These implicit messages taken at a glance may appear as a way to reassure the customer of what they are getting themselves into (by eating Chinese food), however, a deeper look into these messages portrays a picture of something different, how the Chinese restaurants market their claims because if they do not explicitly claim their food as “fresh” or “healthy” or of “good quality” then the implication there is that they cannot be successful and are actively not acting in the way acceptable to society.

MSG in this research is viewed as a synecdoche representing a part of Chinese food which in turn is a representation of Chinese culture. As MSG is a flavouring agent that has been used for decades in more than just Chinese food (firstly in Japan then later in America), the fact that social discourse links MSG with Chinese food finds to be interesting. In this context, using a

sylogistic progression, MSG is not only considered a risky seasoning, but also that it is associated with the Chinese. When combined, MSG is used to associate risk with Chinese food and culture. Supported by the findings of the Chinese food menu, there are links to how risk is used to shape the perception of Chinese culture. Under the guise of science, MSG is communicated as a risky chemical that may cause medical symptoms when consumed, and it is through the guise of science that manifest fears in people which further legitimizes the dominant society's claim on othering the other. Risk is also a state of the future, it is something that *may* happen (Beck, 1992). MSG is not *just* monosodium glutamate the flavouring agent. It is a "health risk" when consumed, Chinese food and by extension, also associated with Chinese restaurants and the Chinese people in Canada. Because the Chinese use MSG in their cooking, Canadians view Chinese people as deceptive, partaking in devious practices by adding chemicals to their foods (to make it taste better) which, in Canadian's minds, is akin to them actively adding harm directly into foods and by extension our bodies. In a socio-cultural context, food can be attributed as representing culture and by extension the people group which the food comes from—in other words, the Chinese are risky and by accepting them not only as a culture but as a people, is risky and poses a threat to the social order of business. The Chinese are unassimilable to Canadian society *unless* they adhere to the dominant's social construction of what is acceptable.

The othering of the Chinese in Canada requires the Chinese to also acknowledge they are the othered. Throughout Canadian history, it was made obvious through various racist policies, the Chinese were not welcomed in Canada, spanning from when they first arrived during the gold rush in Fraser Valley to the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway and even up to the 2000's during the SARS crisis in Canada. It is ingrained in the fabric of Canada to create as "us"

versus “them” mentality. The Chinese were made to be the scapegoats of economic problems of British Columbia first, then as they moved out east, they were only allowed to work in “softer” industries such as laundry and restaurants as to not take work away from the whites. Throughout the century that the Chinese have been in Canada, there were always ways of pointing out their differences and why they were the other and do not fit into Canadian society. To a certain extent, the Chinese accepted their second-class status in Canada and actively sought to segregate themselves from dominant society creating Chinatowns all across Canadian cities where the Chinese could function in their own sub-community. Through the creation of a separate society, the Chinese acknowledge that there are differences and barriers preventing them from being “fully” Canadian.

Even in how Chinese restaurant businesses respond, currently, to the discourse that Chinese food is risky to consume because MSG is used as a seasoning, it can be seen how Chinese businesses acknowledge that Canadian society sees them as different, that they have been labelled establishments that contaminate the community by serving unclean food, *unless otherwise stated*. In how the Chinese restaurants respond, in trying to not be othered and accepted by dominant society, they in turn put the label “other” explicitly on their own culture, they validate and acknowledge several things: 1) MSG is heavily used in the Chinese restaurant business, 2) MSG is risky to consume, 3) because of this risk, Chinese restaurants are actively and intentionally excluding from their food, and 4) because the Chinese want acceptance from Canadian public as a whole, Chinese restaurants will cook and serve the food to the public in a way that fits the taste of the public, while also giving the illusion of authentic Chinese culture (even though the food has been adapted to western tastes). By validating the claims of the dominant society, Chinese restaurants are able to market their businesses by saying they are not

of *that* kind of Chinese. Instead, the Chinese businesses brand themselves as businesses who care about Canadian values and respect their fears, so that Canadian society accepts them and provides them with their patronage. Once the Canadian public starts accepting certain Chinese restaurants, others will begin to do the same, and soon the Chinese restaurant is accepted as “Canadian.” In a way, the Chinese have been othered so much that the only way some Chinese feel they can integrate into the greater Canadian society is to shift and change their actions and values in order to be labelled as “accepted” and “trustworthy.” Without the dominant society labelling the Chinese as acceptable to values and rules of society, it could be seen that the Chinese may have never been accepted as part of Canada, just a separate group that has brought their shady methods and questionable values to take up space and use resources of this country.

The messages that are used by the Chinese restaurants in this paper leads me to deduce that there are still ways of othering the Chinese in Canada that are less obvious than enacting exclusionist policies by the government. An entire societal mindset is reflected in the messages to respond to the treatment of MSG as a cy flavouring agent. It divides and segregates an entire culture in a subtle yet effective way. In choosing to construct MSG as a risk, the dominant society has set a precedent to label any group or individual who does not view MSG as a risk to society as different, and therefore members of the dominant society should respond by disallowing them into the community. It is in the guise of using (faulty) science to justify society’s fears and perpetuate systemic response of othering that poses a problem for groups trying to integrate into society. “Risks can be legitimated by the fact that one neither *saw nor wanted their consequences*” (Beck, 1992, p.34). Originally, Canadian society did not want their whiteness to be tainted and contaminated. The Chinese were viewed as an unwanted group that upset the order of societal values. The Chinese came to Canada and Canadian society responded

by segregating them as much as possible from society through laws and policies. Despite the growth of the Chinese in Canada and how they have moved up society through entrepreneurial ventures allowing them to physically move into suburban middle-class and affluent neighborhoods, there is still a reluctant acceptance of the Chinese. It seems still, that the Chinese still need to prove themselves to Canadian society as a group acting in an acceptable manner. Because of that, there are ways in which Canada remains to other the Chinese, and throughout this research, it is by linking the supposed harms of MSG to Chinese food.

### **Conclusion**

With countless scientific papers and the World Health Organization deeming MSG as generally safe for consumption, it becomes apparent that there is a deeper reason for why people still flinch when they hear “MSG” and associate it with greasy Chinese food. Canada paints an image of a multicultural mosaic country who welcomes everyone to come and become part of Canada’s makeup. Countless heritage festivals and successful “ethnic” restaurants exist as a way of supporting and celebrating immigrant culture, adding dimension to this rich cultural mosaic. However, it is apparent that there are still ways in which Canadian society still deems white-European values and perceptions as the golden standard of Canadian values. The dominant society is still very adamant about its whiteness. Society has found a way to other those whose values are counter to Euro-centric values. This paper has shown how through the communication of MSG as a risk has prompted Chinese restaurants to respond in a way to align themselves with Canadian society in order to find success as a business in a country that is predominantly white.

It is important to recognize these methods of othering. Through this perception, Canada will *only* accept the other if the other will act in a way that does not impede on “Canadian” values. There is a sense that Canadians are open to all cultures and people and they will be



accepted by society *only if* they behave in accordance with the dominant and its value system.

This perspective probes Canadians to really think about how our national image is portrayed and forces us to question what our true values are as a country. Though othering is not apparent or brazen, it does not mean that Canada has stopped segregating society in other ways.

In a broader context, especially in North America's political and social climate, how society constructs perception of risk and who poses a risk is important. Xenophobic sentiments perpetuated through the guise of health risk or science hides the underlying problem of othering and segregation of different parts of the community. This seemingly harmless assertion could have larger implications as communities lose sight of what it means to be a collective community working towards the success of a nation. When groups are scapegoated as a way to explain the economic decline or diseases introduced into society, communities are unable to overcome the issues that actually exist and instead spend precious time and effort othering the problem when efforts could be used to resolve the greater issues as when community supports one another.

This paper could be further expanded with a more thorough analysis of comparing how, if any, other cultures have been othered through the expression of food ingredients or cooking methods as a risk. Additionally, primary research can be conducted on this topic through surveying people and analysing their comments and responses to how MSG is *not* a risk. Further development of what they associate with MSG and why they believe MSG is only in Chinese food will prove interesting in societal perceptions of risk. Perspectives from chefs on what they think about MSG would also be interesting to analyse. Do they view it as an unnatural flavouring agent, or would they perceive it as something that only used to "fake" the flavour of specifically Chinese cuisine?

In popular media, chefs, commentators, food experts, and Canadian/American born Asians are calling other people out on their blatant othering of Chinese people and cuisine by villainizing MSG in Chinese food in their own Asian inspired restaurants. In 2019, the biggest backlash came from the opening of Lucky Lee's in New York City, run by Arielle Haspel (who is not of Asian descent). The restaurant serves distinctly Chinese flavours; however, they market themselves as a restaurant for "people who love to eat Chinese food and love the benefit that it will actually make them feel good" (Tuder, 2019). Even in restaurants, to this day, there are faulty assumptions of Chinese food served at authentically Chinese restaurants. There are a lot of restaurants run by whites, who use "MSG free, no MSG" as a way to distinguish themselves from traditional Chinese restaurants. This demonstrates how while they mean well (by appearing as caring for people's health), society continues to perpetuate the assertion that MSG is always associated with Chinese food and others them in an era where science has not supported claims of MSG being harmful to consume. To this day, it is not unusual to hear "please do not add MSG to the dish" at Chinese restaurants in Toronto from customers.

Canada as a country who prides itself in multiculturalism needs to take a deeper look into its identity and values that perpetuate throughout society. The fact that by linking a culture with a risk item can perpetuate fears of that culture is harmful for the progression of society. In a world where national borders become blurrier and movement of people around the world becomes a daily occurrence, it would be in society's best interest to use technical evidence to determine what is actually risk instead of coming up with empty reasons for constructing risk. As Ulrich Beck said, "scientific rationality without social rationality remains *empty*, but social rationality without scientific rationality becomes *blind*." (1992, p.30).

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