

Chapter 3

Food, Identity, and Teaching With Media: Cross-Cultural Cuisine From General Tso's Chicken to Gua Bao

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ABSTRACT

*While immigrating to the United States of America, ethnically Chinese immigrants faced many challenges. However, many found the best way to America's heart is through her stomach, creating American-style Chinese food. Learning about such cross-cultural cuisine exposes CSL students to their own culture and the colorful tapestry of Chinese food culture. This chapter will delve into the origins and development of Chop Suey (雜碎), General Tso's Chicken (左宗棠雞), and Gua Bao (刈包), along with food's relation to cultural identity in *The Search for General Tso* (2015) and *Fresh Off the Boat* (2014-present). By exploring the cross-cultural link between Taiwanese, Chinese, and American dish variations, CSL teachers could gain insight on teaching with media and designing food culture lesson plans for American CSL classrooms.*

INTRODUCTION

In intermediate-advanced Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) classrooms, the topic of culture is often neglected in favor of coursework dealing with grammatical structures and vocabulary. While there is no doubt that such coursework is important, students are ready to take the next step past acquiring language to utilizing language in real-life scenarios. Cross-cultural communication is a skill that must be developed by every foreign language learner. Therefore, a CSL teacher's ability to cultivate a classroom conducive to such development is integral to the success of their students. While students may acquire the language

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while completing their coursework, it is not guaranteed that students, especially those studying Chinese in non-Chinese speaking countries, will succeed in acquiring these cross-cultural communications skills due to lack of real-life exposure. Furthermore, if the students themselves are unsure of their own cultural identity, it might create roadblocks for CSL teachers as they attempt to guide students on the journey of discovering the link between their own culture and the target culture through cross-cultural lesson plans. Such a feat, however, is simplified through the introduction of film and television series as media stimulation.

Teaching with media allows CSL teachers to bring Chinese culture into the classroom. Culture is a concept difficult to articulate, especially while addressing a classroom learning with their second language. Culture is meant to be experienced; seen, touched, smelled, tasted, and heard. However, American CSL classrooms often lack the opportunities required to gain the experience needed to competently tackle cross-cultural situations. By presenting media focused on cuisine, CSL teachers can construct a learning environment which stimulates every sensation, creating a deep impression on every student participating in the lesson.

This paper will present lesson plans detailing how CSL teachers can present Chinese culture through media and cuisine, focusing on dishes which have roots in Chinese food culture, from Chop Suey (雜碎) and General Tso's Chicken (左宗崇鷄) to Gua Bao (刈包), by exposing students to the cross-cultural development of these dishes as Chinese chefs immigrated to the United States along with how Chinese food culture affects the cultural identity of the children of Chinese immigrants by analyzing the award-winning film *The Search for General Tso* (2015) and the critically acclaimed television series *Fresh Off the Boat* (2014 - present). By presenting Chinese culture on the screen and student's plates, CSL teachers can guide students with multisensory cross-cultural experiential learning, allowing students to discover, develop and strengthen their cultural identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In *The Handbook of Intercultural Discourse and Communication*, Ingrid Piller (2012) discusses that while lecturing to her class at the University of Sydney, she would pose the question, "What is your culture?" Her students were most likely to interpret this question as "What is your nationality?" or "What is your heritage?" Culture is a concept that is difficult to define, with anthropologists, sociologists, etc., all offering their own definitions. To the average layman, however, culture is most often attributed to be one's nationality or ethnic heritage. Culture in the real world, however, manifests in many forms, not just the concrete examples most instructors introduce in foreign language classrooms, such as traditional clothing or holidays, but also through abstract cultural phenomena such as customs, beauty standards, values, etc. Such phenomena derive from the influence of so-called "big culture," the cultures of nation states or the majority group of a nation, as well as "small culture," or communities with the ability to establish their own unique traditions and values which differentiate themselves from the "big culture." According to Piller:

There is clear evidence that culture is widely understood as nation and/or ethnicity, even if the readers I have just mentioned, along with most other textbooks in the field, also tend to include, albeit to a much smaller degree, cultures that are not nation-nor ethnicity based, such as faith-based cultures, gender-based cultures or sexuality based-cultures. Whether culture is viewed as nation, as ethnicity, as faith, as

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