The "Ethnic" Restaurant:

Migration, Ethnicity, and Food Authenticity in Shanghai

SHAJIDANMU TUXUN obtained her PhD in anthropology from the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity/Utrecht University. Currently, she is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology, East China University of Science and Technology, 130 Meilonglu, Xuhui District, Shanghai, China. Her research interests include food and globalisation, gender and ethnicity, and migration and mobility (s.tuxun@outlook.com).

ABSTRACT: Based on fieldwork at Xinjiang restaurants in Shanghai, this paper focuses on the social mechanism of the negotiation of food authenticity. Centring on how factors such as capital, ethnicity, and locality play out in defining and contesting the authenticity of "ethnic cuisine," this research locates the rising Xinjiang food market in a broader context of migration, globalisation, and consumerism, and analyses an array of competing definitions about authenticity among the restaurant management, employees, and customers at the sites of production, presentation, and consumption. The trajectory of Xinjiang restaurants manifests the reproduction and transformation of cultural representations into potential economic value and unveils how conceptualisations of locality and ethnicity take on particular market-driven forms. The contested claims over authentic Xinjiang food and the creation of authenticity in restaurants echo local people's imagination about Xinjiang, ethnic identity politics in China and the development of the market economy in relation to migration.

KEYWORDS: authenticity, Xinjiang food, migration, ethnicity, Shanghai.

Introduction

Food is one of the most essential and tangible elements of human life as well as a revealing index of social and cultural boundaries. As David Sutton (2001: 3) perceptively notes, food itself "hides powerful meanings and structures under the cloak of the mundane and the quotidian." Food authenticity, meaning the "real," "genuine," or "original," stands for an aptly, if not identically, reproduced regional or ethnic food culture and the larger world of sensory experience that the consumption of that food evokes. Authenticity claims linking food to place – what the French term *terroir*, or what Trubek (2009) calls "the taste of place" – rest on assumptions that geographic conditions contribute to food's inherent characteristics and qualities. In global markets, food is increasingly valued for its authenticity, that is, its links to specific people, places, and times.

Authenticity is produced from cultural values and commercial practices that create economic value (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014). Actors at the consumption site may have conflicting ideas about what defines or constitutes authenticity, and the processes of authentication remain fluid and ongoing. In the contest of authenticity, varying conceptions of ethnicity and locality lead to very different assessments of the same product. Therefore, the valence and shape of authenticity changes as different actors engage in and interact with one another during production and consumption processes (Miller 1998).[1]

Indeed, all traditional cultural products are invented in certain times and places, yet the search for authenticity (or originality) in things, i.e., cultural products, popular music, religious beliefs, self, food, and so on has existed throughout history, especially in periods of heightened global exchange (Vannini and Williams 2009; Cobb 2014). Increasingly, restaurants and other sites where food is commercially consumed reflect the transnational movements of foodways, capital, and people, and are, at the same time, signs of the distinctiveness and imaginations of places within a global cultural economy (Lu and Fine 2005; Bak 2010; Arnold, Tunç, and Chong 2018). The commercial nature of modern food consumption, as a site of unease and ambiguity, is a crucial element in concerns about its authenticity, and it offers a vital complement to discussions of food authenticity emergent in the process of consumption (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014: 52). Whenever there are discontinuities in the knowledge that accompanies the movement of commodities, problems involving authenticity and expertise enter the picture (Appadurai 1988: 44); in terms of food, inquiries about the origin

1. Referring to the authenticity of artworks, the theory of authenticity originated in museum studies (Trilling 1973), and was later introduced into the field of tourism sociology, developed by MacCannell (1973) as the "staged authenticity" to study tourist motivation and experience. Food authenticity is regarded as reconstructed authenticity and includes the preparation, presentation, and consumption of food as well as atmosphere and service (Cohen and Avieli 2004; Ha and Jang 2010; Huang, Tang, and Chen 2019).

of the source or the expertise of the chef often occur, and different agents including the catering market, restaurant management, and consumers take part in the "authentication" process in order to determine, display, and prove the "authenticity" of the food. Therefore, a satisfactory treatment of the question of authenticity must interrelate these various dynamics.

Notwithstanding the existing studies on food in relation to immigration, postcolonialism, globalisation, and consumption (Wu and Tan 2001; Tan 2012; Klein and Murcott 2014; Klein and Watson 2016), and on restaurants where food is reproduced and served (Zhou and Yimiti 2002; Beriss and Sutton 2007; Bak 2010; Arnold, Tunç, and Chong 2018), we still have much to learn about the cultural meanings generated by food exchanges at places such as restaurants, and the power relations shaping these conversations that complicate the question of what is authentic. How do different agents link cultural production to particular times and places as a way to evidence authenticity? How do they create or depict an image of cultural heritage, food in this case, in a globalised world? How do variables such as capital, ethnicity, and locality play out in defining and contesting the authenticity of so-called ethnic cuisine?

Based on fifteen months of extensive fieldwork conducted in Shanghai between 2012 and 2013, and a number of follow-up visits from 2014 to 2021, this article will explore the social mechanism of the negotiation of food authenticity in the case of Xinjiang restaurants. In the coming sections, I will first give a brief introduction to the trajectory of Xinjiang restaurants and the formation of Xinjiang cuisine away from Xinjiang in large eastern Chinese cities, which has attracted less academic attention so far. Following this, the article focuses on interactions among restaurant management, employees, and consumers. The contested claims over authentic Xinjiang food and the creation of authenticity in restaurants reflect and echo local people's imagination about Xinjiang, ethnic identity politics in China, and the development of the market economy in relation to migration. Moreover, the trajectory of Xinjiang restaurants and Xinjiang food in cosmopolitan eastern Chinese cities manifests the reproduction and transformation of cultural representations into potential economic value, which, in turn, unveils how locality and ethnicity take on particular market-driven forms and complicates the criteria of what constitutes authentic Xinjiang food.

Migration, ethnic food, and the restaurants

Xinjiang, migration, and Xinjiang restaurants

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Xinjiang for short, is China's largest region by area. Located in the country's far northwest, it covers roughly a sixth of its landmass (1,664,900 square kilometres). Its population is divided between Uyghurs (11.3 million), Han (8.6 million), and other officially recognised ethnic minorities (3.7 million).[2] The region's border runs 5,600 kilometres next to Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia, and a sliver of India. Michael Clarke (2011: 10) places Xinjiang as a geopolitical nexus between the five great cultural and geographic regions of Eurasia-China, the subcontinent, Iran, Russia, and Europe.[3] Uyghur food is believed to be a mixture of Central Asian cuisines and Chinese cuisines (Cesàro 2007). Within China, Uyghurs are distinctive in terms of culture and appearance as one of the most populous Turkic-speaking ethnic groups. Outside of Xinjiang, Chinese citizens address Uyghur people as Xinjiang people (*Xinjiangren* 新疆人) and Uyghur food as Xinjiang food (*Xinjiangcai* 新疆菜),[4] showing that Uyghurs represent and signify Xinjiang in most eastern Chinese citizens' imagination of the region.

Xinjiang food contains regional (Xinjiang), ethnic (Uyghur), and religious (halal, meaning in accordance with Islamic law) elements. There are different categories of halal signs in China, including 清真 (*qingzhen*) in Chinese, halal or *Al'Taham Al'Islami* (meaning Muslim food) in Arabic, and *musulmanchä* (Muslim style) in Uyghur.[5] Classifications for different types of food are issued by local Islamic Associations. *Qingzhen*, the Chinese word for halal, literally means "pure and true"; it is inevitably associated with Islam in the sense of being spiritually and physically "pure," abiding by religious taboos, and being hygienic in diet. In particular, the concept of *qingzhen* is central to Hui Muslim identity (Gladney 1998b). However, there is a great deal of overlap between Hui and Uyghur understandings of this term. The common context in which *qingzhen*/non-*qingzhen* categories are used is when describing a restaurant, eating house, or dining hall.

Generally, the often-mentioned Xinjiang dishes include the wheat flour/rice-based staple food shared across Central Asia such as naan bread, *leghmen* noodles, pilaf (*polo* in Uyghur), and different types of lamb-based kebabs. However, the menus of Xinjiang restaurants contain a variety of foods that fit the category of Northwest regional cuisine (*Xibeicai* 西北菜) in the catering business, including different types of cold dishes (*liangcai* 凉菜) and stir-fried dishes (*chaocai* 炒菜) alongside the "typical Xinjiang food" mentioned above. There are other Xinjiang foods that are mentioned by Uyghur migrants in Shanghai with nostalgia for home such as haggis (*yangzasui* 羊雜碎; *öpkezasüy* in Uyghur), a rice and lamb meat mixture stuffed into lamb intestines and served along with lamb lung, and regionally distinctive food such as the salty milk tea of Ghulja (Yining) in northern Xinjiang. These foods are provided at the *juma* bazaars[6] in

2. According to the statistics bureau of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (2015: 2), the overall population of the region is 23.6 million, of which the Uyghur population is 11.3 million, accounting for 47.89% of Xinjiang's population. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Local Chronicle Codification Committee 新疆維吾爾自治區地方編纂委員會, Liao Yunjian 廖運建 (ed.), 2015, 新疆年鑒 (*Xinjiang nianjian*, Xinjiang Yearbook), Urumqi: Xinjiang nianjian she.
3. Uyghurs and Xinjiang have attracted a wide range of research interests across different disciplines (Gladney 1990; Ben-Adam 1997; Bellér-Hann 1998, Gladney 1998a; Bellér-Hann 2001; Bovingdon 2004; Gladney 2004; Harris 2005; Baranovitch 2007; Bellér-Hann, Cesàro, and Finley 2007; Schluessel 2007; Zang 2007; Bellér-Hann 2008; Chen 2008; Dautcher 2009; Clarke 2011; Abramson 2012; Joniak-Lüthi 2016).
4. Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical foreign language terms refer to Mandarin Chinese.
5. Uyghur is primarily written in an Arabic alphabet. The transliterations of Uyghur words and names in this paper follow the Uyghur Latin Alphabet (ULY) based on Latin script, which was amended and identified by the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regional Working Committee of Minorities Language and Writing in January 2008.
6. The food markets in front of mosques on Fridays (*juma*, the collective prayer day for Muslim men) have become a new business opportunity for those who have financial problems or cannot rent a store because of the bias against outsiders in the city. After the prayers end at around 1 p.m., the streets are full of food stands and consumers. According to a Hui Muslim informant who travelled around different eastern coastal areas, the *juma* bazaar (Friday markets) have become quite common in a number of cities (interviewed in 2013). Most of the booths and stalls are run by Uyghurs, where Uyghur foods such as pilaf, shish kebab, steamed stuffed buns (*manta* in Uyghur), roasted buns (*samsa* in Uyghur), haggis, and homemade pastries and desserts (*tatliq türme* in Uyghur) are sold. There are also halal butchers, as well as vendors that sell halal daily necessities, dry nuts, fruit, and religious paraphernalia such as white hats.

front of mosques on Fridays, and only very few restaurants owned by Uyghurs sell these dishes upon request or reservation, for they take great effort to prepare and might not suit local tastes.

The popularity of Xinjiang restaurants and reconstitution of Xinjiang cuisine outside of Xinjiang can be attributed to migration into and out of Xinjiang since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy at the end of the 1970s. With a relaxation of state migration policies in the 1980s, an increasing number of internal migrants made their way to cities in the eastern half of China in order to share in the opportunities brought about by the developing market economy. Minorities in China were part of this trend of seeking social mobility in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Iredale et al. 2001; Iredale, Bilik, and Fei 2003; Tang, Gu, and Yu 2012; Ha and Jang 2014). Shanghai is a globalised financial centre and the largest city in China, with a population of more than 24 million as of 2019; migrants accounted for about ten million of this population in 2017.[7] The ethnic food business has been one of the main channels through which minority migrants gain social mobility. The overall development of Xinjiang restaurants in inland cities has gone through three phases since the 1980s:

(1) From the 1980s to the 2000s: The early wave of Uyghur newcomers first turned to self-employment in food service because it required only a small investment and could be administered by family members. Shish kebab (*yangrouchuan* 羊肉串, *kawap* in Uyghur), naan stores, and small-scale restaurants initially fanned out around college campuses targeting primarily Muslim students. Xinjiang restaurants and food stalls were also popular in ethnic enclaves such as Xinjiang village (*Xinjiangcun* 新疆村) in Beijing's Weigongcun District close to Minzu University of China (Zhuang 2000; Wang and Yang 2008a, 2008b). Most of the restaurant owners were primary or middle school graduates. Their inadequate language skills and low financial status, their need to redistribute earnings to immediate and extended family members, and local bias against outsiders made it difficult for them to expand their operations into upscale restaurant chains. According to my informants, the overall management of the restaurants, such as public relations, staff, and customer service, was ineffective at this period.

(2) From the 2000s to the 2010s: The number of Uyghur migrants increased rapidly with the launch of state policies such as a general expansion of college enrolment and the Xinjiang Class program (*Xinjiangban* 新疆班), a program initiated in 2000 that funds middle school-aged students from Xinjiang, mostly ethnic Uyghurs, to attend school in predominately Han-populated cities located throughout eastern China. Facilitated by better transportation links, the media, and the prospect of better market opportunities, an increasing number of businesspeople and Uyghur youth who aspired to experience a different urban life sought to spread their wings in developed coastal cities. Most of the Xinjiang restaurant investors at this period were themselves ethnically Uyghur, including several students who graduated from local universities and engaged in start-up businesses. Overall, the visibility of Uyghurs, Xinjiang food, and Xinjiang restaurants reached its peak during this period. Dance performances, including different types of Uyghur, Tajik, Indian, and Arabic belly dance started to become a major marketing strategy, attracting an increasing number of professional Uyghur dancers.

(3) Since the 2010s, several chain restaurants have emerged in the Yangtze River Delta and major cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou, and Xi'an. Meanwhile, local catering companies in Xinjiang have started to expand their businesses throughout China and abroad. The Herembag restaurant in Ürümchi for instance, opened a few branches in cities such as Qingdao and Changsha, and later a branch restaurant called Eden Silk Road in Los Angeles.[8] Recent developments such as the "one belt, one road" initiative in 2014 and the integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta in 2019[9] have been another important factor in making Xinjiang restaurants more popular. Non-Uyghur investors, including Han Chinese, have also got involved in Xinjiang food markets, particularly in the Yangtze River Delta and eastern coastal areas. It is commonplace for those with business experience in Xinjiang restaurants to find partners and invest in independent businesses elsewhere.[10] The concept of Xinjiang cuisine[11] was constituted and branded during this period and kept attracting investors. According to the popular apps Meituan 美團 and Dazhong dianping 大眾點評,[12] which list all the consumption sites and restaurants with detailed information and individual comments, there were an estimated 1,500 Xinjiang restaurants in the Yangtze River Delta in 2020. The Xinjiang catering business has achieved the remarkable feat of expanding from small kebab stands and restaurants catering mostly to Muslim minority groups, to middle-upper tier chain expansion, to catering to a wide range of consumers in a period of less than 30 years.

The growth of Xinjiang restaurants outside of Xinjiang reflects the increased migration of ethnic minorities, on the one hand, and the successful branding of Xinjiang food on the other. State representation of ethnic minorities has formed a static impression of Xinjiang among citizens living in greater China. "Singing and dancing" (*nengge shanwu* 能歌善舞) in colourful costumes constituted and has lingered in the imagination about minorities among the Han Chinese majority, and has led to its re-creation in the Xinjiang restaurants. Ethnicity and class play important roles in the politics of creating a successful Xinjiang restaurant. Uyghur and

7. China Statistics Press 中國統計出版社, 2020, 上海統計年鑒 (*Shanghai tongji nianjian*, Shanghai Statistical Yearbook), http://tjj.sh.gov.cn/tjnj/nj20.htm?d1=2020tjnj/C0201.htm (accessed on 5 May 2021).
8. "新疆海爾巴格餐飲走進美國加州: 新疆美食受追捧" (*Xinjiang Hai'erbage canyin zoujin Meiguo Jiazhou: Xinjiang meishi shou zhuipeng*, Herembag restaurant and Xinjiang food gained popularity in California, United States), *Chinanews.com* (中國新聞網), 21 September 2015, www.chinanews.com/sh/2015/09-21/7535846.shtml (accessed on 5 May 2021).
9. The Yangtze River Delta region, consisting of the metropolis of Shanghai and the provinces of Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Anhui, is one of the most dynamic growth engines in China. The Yangtze River Delta region has been able to contribute about a quarter of China's economic output, despite its land area being merely 3.7% of the country's total. In 2019, the integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta region was elevated to a national strategy, adding momentum to the region's growth. See "The Big Thing: The Integrated Development of the Yangtze River Delta Region," *China Daily*, 8 September 2020, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/regional/2020-09/08/content_37539355.htm (accessed on 20 April 2021).
10. I occasionally get messages from informants about opportunities to run/manage a Xinjiang restaurant. Experienced personnel in management or service, especially ethnic minorities, are highly valued and are often offered a higher salary than their current job.
11. Linking a community and its food, Cesàro (2007: 185-202) defines Uyghur cuisine as "not just a set of dishes, but also a long-standing tradition and a number of social practices and values expressed in the domain of food."
12. Dazhong dianping offers a search engine for finding local businesses, user-generated reviews, detailed business information, featured discounts, group buying, and other merchant services.

other non-local investors may find it more difficult to rent space because of bias against them as (ethnic) outsiders. As a result, most Uyghur-owned restaurants remain in the lower-middle tier, while middle-upper tier restaurants are generally owned by majority Han Chinese. However, it is easier for Uyghur owners to possess the cultural capital necessary to serve what customers perceive as "authentic" Xinjiang food. As the examples from my own fieldwork will illustrate, Han Chinese owners and other restaurant personnel have to work much harder to create, claim, and reclaim authenticity.

Shanghai style Xinjiang cuisine

As part of my fieldwork, I worked as a receptionist for three months at a high-end Xinjiang restaurant (which I will call the XY Restaurant) in Shanghai in 2013. As related in the restaurant's staff handbook, two young Han Chinese men from western China came to Shanghai with dreams of starting a business. They started with a small barbeque shop, which subsequently became a small Xinjiang noodle restaurant. In 2003, they established the first XY Xinjiang Restaurant at X area, which is considered one of the most prosperous central quarters in southwest Shanghai. In the following decade, XY opened chain restaurants scattered all over the city, with the ceaseless effort of establishing a "XY entrepreneurial culture." By the end of 2020, it had expanded from six to 18 outlets in Shanghai, Suzhou, and Nanjing, acting out its initial business blueprint to "occupy" the Yangtze River Delta.[13]

Coupled with careful marketing, XY has claimed itself as "improved" Shanghai-style Xinjiang food (*gailiang Haipai Xinjiangcai* 改良海派新疆菜) to distinguish its cuisine from other regional/ethnic food catering industries. Opened in 2010 during the World Expo, the branch at which I worked is the biggest branch. The restaurant, designed by a French architect, reflects a mixture of Central Asian and Middle Eastern architecture. Shanghai-style Xinjiang food hence has become a marketing strategy to bring the legacy of Shanghai style together with its current international environment, situating itself in a cosmopolitan environment as an "exotic and mysterious" restaurant connected to Xinjiang and the Silk Road. The official website states:

> The mission of the XY team is to disseminate the culture of Xinjiang by bringing the ancient ethnic civilisation and customs to your side with a natural and joyful fusion dining experience. Come relax in the pure and authentic music, enjoy delicious Xinjiang cuisine, and start your Xinjiang journey NOW!

At the restaurant, the food for customers is usually served on Westernised tableware. Elegant plates,[14] bowls and cups with steel spoons stamped "Made in Germany," and chopsticks (sometimes forks and knives if required by the customers) are set out on paper placemats. Small vases are placed in the middle of each table with fresh flowers. Unlike most of the small-scale Xinjiang restaurants that are equipped in a lower-middle-class manner, the utensils and décor at XY restaurant indicate its high-class nature. In the evenings, customers who have seats reserved close to the dancing stage will enjoy a performance by professional Uyghur dancers and will probably be invited to belly dance (categorised as Arabic dance) with a snake around their neck at the end of the performance.

The reproduction of the space and atmosphere with welcoming (*reqing* 熱情) minority and exotic Uyghur women who can sing and dance creates an imagined authentic place where one can taste, explore, and experience the "real" Xinjiang and Xinjiang food. As this account illustrates, the way that Shanghai-style Xinjiang food is defined, produced, and served is an interactive process within which certain cultural attributes are given material form and linked to ethnicity and locality. However, it seems that the "Xinjiang" nature of the food matters more to the consumers than its "Shanghai style," which had been the restaurant's attempt to localise the presentation of Xinjiang food. The inquiries from customers we got at the reception area about authenticity were more often about its Xinjiang flavour than its Shanghai style. The comments from customers on the popular apps about Xinjiang restaurants also mainly focused on its Xinjiang nature, which covered the source, the taste, the exotic decoration, and dance performances. This reflected a greater concern with the perceived authenticity of the restaurant than its ability to adapt to the local setting. The production and presentation of the food, as well as the atmosphere the management created by providing dance performances, reflect customers' opinions and choices of Xinjiang restaurants, echo local people's imagination of Xinjiang, and highlight the restaurant's strategy through which the "ethnic" becomes the "global." According to follow-up research, when one talks about the XY restaurant, one talks about a representation of Xinjiang restaurant in Shanghai; when one talks about "typical" Xinjiang food, one talks about big plate chicken (*dapanji* 大盤雞) and shish kebabs.

Reception is the threshold and the "face" (*mianzi* 面子, literally reputation) of the restaurant, as I was told by the person in charge of reception, a Uyghur woman in her thirties. The main task of reception staff is to welcome and lead customers to the table in a colourful traditional ethnic costume, then to point out the specialities of the restaurant that it uses to differentiate itself from other counterparts in the catering business. Being a Uyghur woman who speaks fluent Mandarin and English, I fitted perfectly into the "image" that the reception intended to create. My language abilities were an asset, since the majority of customers were Han Chinese with occasional English-speaking foreigners. Uyghur appearance "represented" and "claimed" the restaurant as having authentic Xinjiang food. The assumption was that, as a *Xinjiangren* myself, I was supposed to know what (authentic) Xinjiang food is. On most occasions, my presence as a Uyghur woman in a traditional dress seemed to already answer the inquiry about authenticity, showing that the combination of ethnicity and locality already created an "authentic space" for customers.

13. XY also positions itself towards the international market; it was invited to attend World Expos to exhibit "The bite of the Silk Road" (*shejian shang de sichou zhi lu* 舌尖上的絲綢之路) and "Silk Road culture" (*Zhongguo sichou zhi lu wenhua* 中國絲綢之路文化).
14. In a 2016 conversation, the chief manager asked my opinion about serving big chicken plate (*dapanji* 大盤雞) on a new plate decorated with the pattern of an *atlas* (*aitilaisi* 艾提萊斯). An *atlas* is a type of tie-dye coloured silk shared across Central Asia; it is a regional handcraft speciality in the Hotan (Hetian) region in Xinjiang. The manager told me that the plate itself is a copy of a famous French luxury brand, so they made minimum changes to the pattern and got them made in a factory in Zhejiang. "Ethnic style is the global style" (*minzu de jiushi shijiede* 民族的就是世界的), she said at the end of the conversation.

Likewise, the Uyghur identities of the staff, along with the "exotic" dancing, were enough to establish the restaurant and its food as authentically Uyghur and therefore desirable for consumption in the minds of many non-Uyghur customers, regardless of the actual origin of the restaurant's food. For instance, lamb kebabs or shish kebabs are a staple of the Uyghur diet. The lamb is soaked with chopped onions in advance and grilled with a spice mixture of cumin and different types of pepper. Informants over the age of 30 told me that, in the minds of Han Chinese, the image of Xinjiang shish kebabs is associated with a Hui actress named Mai Hongmei 買紅妹, who played the Xinjiang girl Maimaiti (*Xinjiang nühai Maimaiti* 新疆女孩買買提) in a short sketch in the Spring Festival Gala in 1996. Though Maimaiti is a typical male name in Uyghur, her impression of Maimaiti, calling customers with a "thick accent" while grilling shish kebab in a bazaar, left a profound image of Xinjiang food among the audiences, particularly in a period where television was the main source of media in China. For this reason, Han Chinese consumers of Xinjiang food often expect to eat lamb kebabs at Xinjiang restaurants and view their presence on the menu as a sign of the restaurant's authenticity. However, lamb is relatively expensive in China compared to other meat products such as pork and chicken. According to my informants, the main salespeople in the lamb market are Hui Muslims, who provide lamb from Inner Mongolia and elsewhere, rather than from Xinjiang, since the price of lamb transported from northwestern China is much higher. Balancing trust (whether the lamb is really from Xinjiang, for example) against cost, businesspeople in the catering industries usually go for the lamb from Inner Mongolia. In practice, however, the customers expect and hence will be told that the lamb is from Xinjiang. The cultural environment and atmosphere provided by the high-end restaurants and the expected "ethnic" elements such as music and the smell of cumin seeds at the kebab stands in Uyghur-owned restaurants lead most customers to not question whether the lamb is authentically from Xinjiang.

Nevertheless, establishing food authenticity is more complex among the restaurant's staff, especially those from Uyghur and other Muslim minority groups, as well as among Muslim customers. This is chiefly because of the religious expectation that the food genuinely meets halal standards. The staff handbook I was assigned to study, along with several corporate cultural training sessions I attended, insisted that the core value of the XY enterprise was serving halal food. According to the official website, XY is committed to serving customers "clean and real" food through the "four specials" of halal: special transport vehicles; special reservoir vessels; special weighing apparatuses; and special processing and sales, which means that halal products are completely separated from non-halal products and sources in the entire process of purchasing, processing, and producing the food. To reinforce this standard, the XY management established ethnic affairs supervisors (*minzu shiwu zhuguan* 民族事務主管), Muslim staff in each restaurant branch whose responsibility it was to make sure the ingredients were halal. In this way, "Slowly, we gained the trust of the local Muslim community," the CEO mentioned in a newspaper interview, "including the local Islamic association." In the context of ongoing food safety scandals (Yan 2012; Klein 2013), halal has become a means of cultural branding for both Muslim and non-Muslim customers. On the occasion of halal consumption, however, trust becomes a tricky point in the negotiation of authenticity between the restaurant management, Muslim staff, and Muslim customers. Halal certificates are assigned by the state to the local Islamic association, yet certification leaves much to be desired in the context of corruption and in terms of halal scandals in the media. The case below, which I call "the chicken issue," tells us the consequences of being caught violating halal principles.

Dapanji, literally "big plate chicken," transliterated as *dapenji* or *toxa qormsi* (stir-fried chicken dish) in Uyghur, gained popularity in Xinjiang in the mid-to-late 1990s. It is a stew of an entire chicken, cut up and cooked with potatoes, carrots, onions, green peppers, and a thick and spicy tomato sauce in a mixture of spices including Sichuan pepper, cumin, garlic, ginger, dried chili peppers, ground white pepper, star anise and so on; it is usually served on a big plate. *Dapanji* was invented in Shawan, northern Xinjiang, by a migrant from Sichuan who mixed hot chilies with chicken and potatoes in an attempt to reproduce a Sichuan taste. The dish was served by restaurateurs along the Xinjiang highways as a quick fix for the often-untimely arrivals of hungry truck drivers (Cesàro 2007). However, its rich flavour and heartiness quickly made the dish a favourite of the region and across the rest of China. It is usually served with hand-stretched noodles.

According to Jesor (pseudonym), the Uyghur chief ethnic affairs supervisor assigned by the restaurant management, a "chicken issue" started when several sub-ethnic affairs supervisors at different chain restaurants found out that recently supplied chicken had no halal certificate sign that indicated halal food except for a single Uyghur script of a brand name. Some of the supervisors reported that the chickens were not slaughtered from the neck in accordance with Islamic law. Jesor told me that the issue escalated, and a group of Muslim staff intended to resign. In one of the chain restaurants, the manager, a Han Chinese man, chose to ignore the issue and kept using the apparently non-halal chicken in both the *dapanji* dish served to customers and the staff meals, even though a few Muslim staff claimed that "the chicken tasted harder than usual." The issue was eventually exposed online anonymously, which led to several regular Muslim customers questioning the waiters about the source of the chicken. As the chief ethnic affairs manager, Jesor was given full authority to handle the problem.

The final settlement of the issue went through ups and downs because Jesor found it too difficult to persuade the Muslim staff to stay by simply promising to guarantee that the food would be halal. At the same time, some Uyghur cooks refused to cook without the guarantee of halal ingredients, and the involved chain restaurant had problems offering most of its profitable menu items, including *dapanji*, shish kebab, pilaf, roast mutton chops, and so on, which were all prepared by Uyghur cooks. Some Muslim staff found the Han Chinese manager's suggestion that "When you live outside your hometown, you just need to shut one eye" intolerable. After five days of negotiation, the staff finally decided to stay because Jesor took them to inspect the XY halal logistics and promised to keep inspecting the source of halal foods with the supplier partner so there would be no more violations. The issue was fixed and the managers of the chain restaurants who were involved were fined by the management for violating the core value of the enterprise.

During my fieldwork, a list of restaurants with dubious claims to being halal in Shanghai was circulated online, mostly by Hui Muslims.[15] The list of restaurants was compiled carefully with warnings about those restaurants that were not owned by (pious) Muslims, including those that sold alcohol, for instance, such as XY restaurant. There were other non-Uyghur-owned Xinjiang restaurants without halal certificates that fetishized Uyghur staff (reception in particular) and dance performances as symbols of authenticity.[16] According to my Muslim informants, in this situation, the trust of Muslim customers about halal relied largely upon ethnicity, namely by noticing that the staff were Uyghurs, where ethnicity becomes one criterion of authenticity. In this way, as for non-Muslim customers, the presence of authentic Uyghurs in a restaurant engendered a sense of authenticity. In the case of these Muslim customers, however, the authenticity provided by the Uyghur staff stemmed from a shared moral understanding concerning the importance of halal food, for which the staff became guardians. In the case of non-Muslim customers, the Uyghur staff provided a different kind of authenticity in their role as representatives of an exotic, imagined other. However, the question of Uyghur authenticity has also become increasingly complex as mobility increases in China, as the following incident of a Han Chinese customer illustrates.

Consumption, ethnicity, and the local middle class

The following vignette about consumers' questioning, confirming, and reconfirming authenticity happened regularly at the reception area through conversations or via phone call reservations, which reflects a great deal about their opinions on the consumption of Xinjiang food – in the following case, a typical sort of Xinjiang food. Known throughout Central Asia as "rice pilaf," Uyghur *polo* (*shouzhuafan* 手抓飯, literally "grab with hands," often abbreviated in 抓飯 *zhuafan*) is a mix of lamb, rice, carrots, onions, and sometimes dry fruits such as raisins and apricots, slow cooked in oil. *Polo* is the most popular local dish in Xinjiang, cooked at home for guests and served at collective ceremonies such as weddings and funerals; it has become prevalent in Xinjiang restaurants with a slightly different manner of display: the lamb served on top of the rice would be cut into tiny pieces, for example. Traditionally, a big piece of lamb "should be" set on the top of a big plate of *polo*, which is supposed to be grabbed by the hands, but this is considered at the very least unhygienic and possibly wild and uncivilised for Han Chinese customers in Xinjiang restaurants. Although served with spoons or forks, the translation of *polo* – "grab with hands" – has itself become a selling point stimulating the curiosity of customers more than a literal description of how one will actually be expected to consume the food at a Xinjiang restaurant.

All XY restaurants are smoke-free; therefore, customers always smoke outside the entrance, where a group of receptionists often stand in traditional ethnic clothes. It was a Friday, the "veiling day" for female receptionists, including myself. A new policy was stipulated in reception by the restaurant management that every weekend, the women at reception should veil their faces.[17] The policy is a way to reproduce what the management wanted to market as an exotic image of a Uyghur woman, although Uyghur women don't typically veil. In the evening, a middle-aged Han Chinese woman started a conversation after lighting up another cigarette. In a tone of contempt, she addressed the receptionists:

> The *zhuafan* was definitely burnt today. I can still taste that even though it was displayed beautifully. I have been to most of the Xinjiang restaurants in Shanghai, and the best *zhuafan*, as far as I know, is the one made by *Xinjiangren* in front of the mosques on Fridays (*juma* prayer days). But even that could never surpass the *zhuafan* I had in Kashgar, which was absolutely the tastiest food on Earth (*renjian meiwei* 人間美味). I think the best *zhuafan* is made at home or in small restaurants in the alleyways in Xinjiang. When I was in Kashgar, my friend's Uyghur friend invited us home, and that was the most beautiful memory of my life. Xinjiang people are generous (*dafang* 大方) and pure (*danchun* 單純).[18]

She scowled at two other smokers who seemed not so convinced and justified her comments by sharing stories of several trips she had made to different places in Xinjiang. She certainly did not forget to make fun of our veiling and how funny our costumes looked, which she claimed "had never been seen at any public place in Xinjiang." She stayed about half an hour talking to us, and the person in charge of the reception exchanged chatting app account information with her. We talked about her trip to Xinjiang for a little while. Then she said, "Let me know when the *zhuafan* is at least okay, up to your standard" to the Uyghur staff member in charge of reception, smiled for the first time, and went inside.[19]

Encountering such a situation at reception became routine. Although still few, the number of non-Uyghur customers who claim to have authentic knowledge of what counts as "real" *Xinjiangcai*, sometimes on the basis of their own personal travels, is growing. The mobility of local people has increased rapidly with the development of China. Xinjiang, once an imagined place in the far west, now seems closer. By sharing the sights and sounds of her Xinjiang visit, and simply by laughing at our inappropriate costumes, the customer gained privilege and power in comparison with other local people, through defining what the real Xinjiang and authentic Xinjiang food is. Her knowledge of Xinjiang food, in Bourdieu's terms, thus became a new arena of taste through which class distinction could be generated, leading to an increase in her status (Bourdieu 1984).

Sometimes, other Xinjiang people, as they introduce themselves: "I am also *Xinjiangren*/from Xinjiang,"[20] would come and talk to

15. Hui is the largest Muslim ethnic group in China; Hui people are scattered throughout China, and halal has always been an integral part of their identity (Gladney 1998b, 2004).
16. According to my Hui informants, they had experiences in Xinjiang restaurants without a halal sign where the Uyghur staff told them their concerns about whether the meat in the restaurant, especially the chicken, was halal. The Uyghur grillers in the kitchen buy lamb and beef from local Hui Muslim butchers for barbeque.
17. The image of Uyghur women as veiled has been deeply rooted in China since the famous singer Wang Luobing 王洛賓's song "Lift your veil" (*Xianqi nide gaitou lai* 掀起妳的蓋頭來), which is adapted from Uyghur folk song "Yariya," became popular.
18. Fieldwork notes, February 2013.
19. Ibid.

us. Most of them were Han Chinese who grew up in Xinjiang. They would always be excited to discover they were town fellows with some of the Uyghurs at reception, telling us how grateful they were to be able to discover Xinjiang food in Shanghai. Usually, the conversation would come to an end with a group photo shoot. These conversations generally indexed the strong regional ties of so-called Xinjiang food as observed and commented upon by these kinds of customers. On the one hand, Xinjiang food is considered synonymous with Uyghur food, but on the other hand, Han Chinese who have lived in Xinjiang are comfortable identifying themselves as such.

For customers such as the aforementioned Shanghainese, eating *polo* contains elements beyond personal culinary interests. In his discussion of ethnic food, Mintz states that the notion of the "romantic ethnic… enables the individual to pursue some different lifestyle, [and] comes into its own by means of the market" (1996: 81). This analysis contributes to an understanding of customers' romanticising of ethnicity and locality, as well as how such desires then generate new markets such as the Xinjiang food industries. Ethnic food such as *polo* has been regionalised and romanticised, and the Xinjiang food market offers an environment where culture can also be consumed alongside the food itself. As shown in the narrative of the customer, the search for the exotic through food is often related to a quest for authenticity.

Clearly, customers' responses to consuming ethnic food and discussing its "exoticness" often include indexing a sophisticated knowledge about the foods that they eat and sometimes come in the form of pride. Authenticity seems connected to class status competition among Han Chinese here, and the aforementioned Shanghainese customer was engaged in performing her superiority in a status game by establishing her knowledge of authenticity from travel, whereas in the past, simply eating at a restaurant would be enough to establish one's status as authentically cosmopolitan, which constitutes a Shanghainese identity (Wu 2010). As with Joshua Esler's (2020) findings of Han Chinese interest in Tibetan Buddhism, where Han Chinese searching for authenticity/purity found through a minority group something lacking in Han Chinese experience, the customer seemed to form a temporary alliance with the Uyghur staff at the reception, through which the state narrative of ethnic inferiority was provisionally subverted as part of status competition among Han Chinese.

In this section, *polo* displays distinctive meanings through the travelling of ingredients, regions, and production and consumption by different people. Becoming increasingly commercialised, *polo* also demonstrates levels of urbanisation and modernisation inside the ethnic group and region. Making or consuming the dish can show loyalty to the regions of different ethnicities, indicating local patriotism. Such analyses may help us to better understand the reasons behind the rapid spread of Xinjiang restaurants all over China and the contested authenticity of Xinjiang food.

Conclusion

For most local customers, the majority Han Chinese, a Xinjiang restaurant is an exotic space where the "singing and dancing" performance accompanies the exotic dining experience. In a prevailing image of the ethnic minorities of China, their hospitality and colourful traditional dress are expected by majority Han Chinese. Such hospitality has been reproduced and contained behind the food offered in Xinjiang restaurants, which constitutes local consumers' search for authenticity. It reflects what Schein (1997) defined as "internal orientalism," which describes a relation between imagination and cultural/political domination that takes place inter-ethnically within China. Taking gender as a perspective, Schein stressed how the "orientalist" agent of dominant representation is transposed to that sector of the Chinese elite that engages in domestic othering.

Uyghur and non-Uyghur caterers have internalised the majority fixation with the ethnic "other" and constructed their businesses on this assumption. For a true gastronomic experience, local middle-class customers want the "exotic minorities" to be present; they are the indispensable element of the authentic Xinjiang cuisine[21] package. Like the XY restaurant chain, most Xinjiang restaurants in Shanghai, regardless of whether they were owned by Han Chinese or Uyghurs, found that success came not only from presenting what customers believed to be authentic Xinjiang food, but also from the presentation of Uyghur staff as "exotic" others. For instance, according to the commentators on the popular app Dazhong dianping, the W restaurant in Shanghai was considered one of the most authentic Xinjiang restaurants in the city for more than ten years. One of the oldest Xinjiang restaurants in Shanghai, W restaurant, like XY restaurant, paid close attention to displaying Xinjiang décor and providing an exotic arrangement of food and traditional music to create a "Xinjiang atmosphere." Most importantly, the all-Uyghur composition of the staff and the manner of their service resembled middle-tier restaurants in southern Xinjiang, where the Uyghur owner was originally from.

In restaurants such as XY, however, Uyghur receptionists and dance performances by Uyghur women are not sufficient proof of consuming the real thing – the authentic for customers with knowledge about so-called Xinjiang food,[22] such as the customer in the above example who shared her experience of travelling to Xinjiang. In such a case, the locus of authenticity has shifted from local restaurants to Xinjiang itself, which reflects the greater mobility of Han Chinese. The lower-end small-scale restaurants and naan/kebab stands owned by Uyghurs, however, seem to be involved less in the competition for authenticity because the smell of the cumin seeds, the rough-looking Uyghur male griller, the Mandarin they speak with an accent, and the music, in all senses fit well into the perpetuated imaginations of Xinjiang, Xinjiang people, and Xinjiang food, thereby passing as authentic for local customers. The criterion for authenticity hence becomes more complex as it continues to be used as an arena for status/taste competition. Yet it might still

20. Fieldwork notes, March 2013.
21. Following Mintz's definition of cuisine, what makes a cuisine is not only a set of dishes or cooking methods, but the existence of a community of people who eat those foods and, more importantly, have feelings about them.
22. Popular documentaries such as *A Bite of China* also contribute to regional food-based destination images and knowledge. *A Bite of China* (*Shejian shang de Zhongguo* 舌尖上的中國) is a Chinese documentary television series that originally aired in 2012. Directed by Chen Xiaoqing 陳曉卿 and narrated by Li Lihong 李立宏, it is a three season-documentary, introducing the history and stories behind foods of various kinds in more than 60 locations all around China.

be hasty to conclude that there is a potential for legitimate cultural exchange in the restaurant, as it is always an otiose pursuit; as all parties follow an assumed code of behaviour, it is unlikely that the ethnic dining experience can transform outside relationships.

Moreover, what we could see through the consumption of Xinjiang food is the tension between the expectations of local consumers and Uyghurs, and how the cultural politics of authenticity reveals that tension: on the one hand, Han Chinese, and particularly Han Chinese living in Shanghai, are interested in becoming cosmopolitan, while on the other, Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the city are searching for a kind of home-away-from-home in a strange and precarious place. However, these almost completely opposite desires are putting them into contact with each other to produce a certain kind of cultural phenomena.

So far, we have traced the creation, consumption, and identification of Xinjiang food in China as a discourse of authenticity. The ethnographic research on competing definitions of authenticity among the restaurant management, employees, and customers shows that the notion of "authentic Xinjiang food" is always claimed, experienced, and expressed by different agents. In other words, authenticity is never fixed, solid, and one-dimensional, but is fluid and refracted through location and situation, which reflects a broader picture of migration, ethnicity, and class. Appadurai (1988: 44) observed that there is an increasingly ironic dialogue between the need for ever-shifting criteria of authenticity in the West and the economic motives of producers and dealers. Instead of "cultural homogenisation" through globalisation, what we often see from ethnographic accounts of actual restaurant practices are new diversities emerging through processes of "localisation," as consumers fit globalised foodways into their own changing patterns of consumption and as transnational corporations themselves adapt to local tastes, culinary categories, and styles of interaction (Watson and Caldwell 2005; Watson 2006).

In the case of the Xinjiang restaurant, authenticity operates in an arena constituted by migration, consumption, globalisation, the making of the local middle-class, and majority Han concepts concerning the "ethnic" other – an arena constituted by the intersection of the social and cultural dimensions of their lives. The trajectory of Xinjiang restaurants in east coast Chinese cities manifests the reproduction and transformation of cultural representations into potential economic value. This transformation, in turn, unveils conceptualisations of locality and ethnicity that take on particular, delimited, and market-driven forms. As such, the "authenticity" of Xinjiang food is subjected to capital, ethnicity, locality, and class.

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