

Making Soup, Talking Culture: An Ethnography of Communication Among Intergenerational Chinese Americans

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Chinese Americans are known to use soups and other everyday foods for overall well-being and health (Jiang & Quave, 2013; Koo, 1984; Liu et al., 2018). Soups play an important role especially among Chinese people, and numerous - even English - cookbooks have been printed describing the cultural importance of these recipes and act of soup making. In addition, Asian and Asian American scholars have always been interested in the cultural meanings of foods, recipes and cooking (Xu, 2008; Nor et al., 2012; Ku, Manalansan, & Mannur, 2013). However, as Lum and de Ferrière le Vayer (2016) and Leeds-Hurwitz (2016) acknowledge, until recently, foodways have largely been ignored in Communication Studies. Nonetheless, anyone who has spent time in the kitchen with family members has experienced the processes of food and food-making as tangible ways of constructing intergenerational cultural identity.

We bring together these interests as three Chinese American interdisciplinary scholars from the fields of English, Sociolinguistics, and Communication Studies to examine the actual conversations and valued ways of speaking (Philipsen, 1992) that family members have as they “pass along” this knowledge. Centering our work within an EOC framework, we will also draw from narrative, cultural and Asian American studies.

This research investigates the following questions relating to (in)tangible cultural heritage (Lum, 2014) and how Chinese Americans communicate this through teaching soup making:

- How do Chinese Americans do/communicate intergenerational sharing around soup-making?
- In what ways is soup-making/soup-talk an important cultural practice/artifact that functions and is affected by both transnational and intergenerational communication?
- What languages and code-switches do Chinese Americans deploy as they make soup?
- How these patterns of cooking practices/instructive storytellings around soup help to organize, build up, and construct meaning that complicate the way we understand ethnicity, race, and gender?

Data come from audio and video recordings of twenty Chinese American families cooking soup together in dyads or triads speaking in English and varieties of Chinese. One person is the soup-maker (the person who knows the recipe) and the other(s) is the soup-learner (the person learning how to cook soup). We are in the process of completing our data collection.

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