**Happy China Sichuan Cuisine**

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**Restaurant Review**

Finally, a typical school day is coming to an end and I just realize that I have not had dinner yet. My mind starts to think about the food options for dinner.

“What should I eat tonight? West Union Food? Not today, I have had that for more than 5 straight meals? HMart? Hmm. Kind of far and Korean food does not have real vegetables… ” [[1]](#footnote-1)

Few minutes later, I have decided.

“Happy China it is. It is close to campus, cheap, quite authentic and, most importantly, it has stir fried pea sprouts (豆苗).”

Described above is a typical occasion in which I decide to go to Happy China Sichuan Restaurant for food. It also illustrates why Happy China has been popular among students who enjoy or crave for Chinese food, especially those who grew up in Chinese (food) culture. Yet, students only represent a small part of the customer base. Customers from different ethnic and career backgrounds come here on different occasions, from family gatherings and formal dates to casual lunch and take outs. The broad range of customer base makes Happy China an interesting restaurant compared to other authentic Chinese restaurants where non-Chinese customers rarely visit. When observing the customers dining in or picking up take out, one will see a miniature American Chinatown, where Western and Eastern culture collapses.

**Location and Diners**

Happy China is located on Durham-Chapel Hill Boulevard, a 10-minute drive from Duke University campus and Downtown Durham. With few authentic Chinese restaurants in Durham area, Happy China provides a primary source of Chinese food to the local community. Duke students and staffs and local residents of different ethnic backgrounds form the majority of the customer base. In fact, Chinese and non-Chinese each forms half of the customer base.[[2]](#footnote-2)

After the closing of Grace’s Café[[3]](#footnote-3), Happy China becomes the only notable Chinese restaurants that provides Sichuan styled dishes and is easily accessible to Duke students. Speaking of personal experience as a student, location is the tmajor factor that makes it my most frequented Chinese restaurant. During academic years, students are normally busy with schoolwork, social and club activities that they rarely dine out. Even if they do, the restaurant is normally within walking or Ubering distance. With Szechuan Garden in Morrisville, Gourmet Kingdom in Carrboro, and Szechuan Taste in Cary (all around half an hour drive away from Durham), it automatically becomes the go-to Sichuan restaurant for Duke students and staffs.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Local families, workers and visitors are also their customers. When I dine in Happy China for dinner, I will normally see some locals standing besides the front desk waiting for take outs. As I am being seated, I will normally see a table or two of local families and sometimes a table of visitors brought in by locals. Cultural absorptions are sometimes observed. I have seen two adorable Caucasian couples in their 70s used the chopsticks to eat. In fact, as Sam, a Happy China server, pointed out, “non-Chinese families sometimes also dine in family style like we (Chinese) do, visitors would sometimes ask for recommendation for authentic Chinese food, too.” In some sense, Happy China serves as a gateway to Chinese culture for the local non-Chinese communities, opening them to a taste of Eastern culture.

**Food/Menus and Operations**

Happy China offers Sichuan Style cooking and some other popular traditional Chinese dishes like stir fried seasonal vegetables. It also provides some popular American Chinese favorites, catering to the American general public. In fact, it has two versions of menus that allow diners of different tastes to choose from. As Happy China gained publicity among local communities and online food critics, non-Chinese began to explore the authentic sides of the menus. As pointed out earlier, around 50% of non-Chinese diners seek authentic Chinese food options. This is also a manifestation of culture dissemination. Similar to a Chinatown where locals assimilate Chinese culture, Happy China became one of the major sites in the Durham area where Chinese culture disseminates into the local communities.

As for operations, Happy China NEVER closes the restaurant. Manager herself explains, “we open every day of the year, even under snowstorms. The only occasions we would close the restaurant are major utilities problems.” This particular decision makes it convenient for diners, as they would never be disappointed when they spontaneously visit Happy China. The main chef is from Sichuan and has numerous years of cooking experience. Similar to other Chinese restaurants, the helper chefs are Mexicans. Grace’s Café’s owner, Jack, once told me, “Mexican helper chefs cook exactly the way you teach them, allowing me have a better control over food quality.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, sometimes they would come to work drunk. I respect their culture and through negotiation, they start to drink only on the night where the next day is off.” This is another occasion where Chinese restaurants allow people from different cultural background to interact and compromise. I would guess that similar discussion must have happened in Happy China since the food has consistent quality and quantity.

Good portion, Fast Service[[6]](#footnote-6), and reasonable price are what makes Happy China a successful business. One of the critics, Anna M., on yelp.com pointed out, “The food comes out surprisingly fast, and portion sizes are fairly large. Definitely give Happy China a try if you're craving authentic Chinese cuisine.”[[7]](#footnote-7) A good business reputation attracts people from different ethnicities and background. As customer base grows, Happy China serves as a hub where local communities samples Chinese food culture.

**Conclusions**

From customers, employees to food critics and local communities, Happy China plays an important role on bringing new cultural perspective to a non-Chinese dominant American southern society. To Chinese international students, it serves as a place to enjoy food from home. To local Caucasian families, it is where they experience Eastern culture and food. It is also important to note the relationship between Duke students and Happy China. Happy China provides a food option that is rare in the community. The additional student discount, accessibility to students and good portion of food make students their major customers, leading to a successful business. One could also see Happy China as a miniature Chinatown in a community where only small pockets of Eastern culture can be found. In its early establishment, it strives to cater to general public and the majority populations by providing Americanized Chinese food. Overtime, Chinatown, both literally and metaphorically, starts to motivate local communities to take in and explore the cultural difference and authentic Chinese food.

1. To me and many ethically Chinese students, vegetables need to be stir fried. Not kimchi, … and certainly not salad. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to the manager. 外國人is translated to non-Chinese here. Chinese often refers to non-Chinese or non-Asian foreigners with their hometown centric logic. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Grace’s Café was a Chinese eatery on campus, features some Chinese and Korean cooking. It takes Duke food points and is easily accessible for students, making it popular among students. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The other major reason is the 10% student discount offered for Duke students. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We did not get to ask about the relationship between Mexican helper cooks and main cook. However, I believe Chinese restaurant’s kitchen shares a lot in common, in this case, Mexican helper cooks. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 上菜快 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.yelp.com/biz/happy-china-durham [↑](#footnote-ref-7)