

## **The Golden Dragon Wok: A Visual Survey of the Evocative Essence of Chinese Restaurant Signage Designs in an American Chinatown.**

Ethnic entrepreneurs in America often carve out an economic niche in the food and beverage industry, showcasing restaurants as an authentic experience especially in American chinatowns. The main goal of this research is to offer a visual analysis in explaining how design elements found in San Francisco's Chinatown restaurant signages contribute to their impressions as a marker of gastronomic identity. A total of 63 restaurants were analyzed via a framework based on the choices of languages as well as other design components represented on their signages. 90% of the eateries positioned Chinese characters above and before English alphabets on their main signboards, fostering a visual significance in contributing to the gastronomic identity of Chinese restaurants in San Francisco, California. Considering the enormous linguistic and stylistic differences, a mish-mashed miscengenation of signages from these eateries has also added a unique flavor to Chinatown, much like the different types of food they offer.

Shorter description below: Visual elements on restaurant signage in San Francisco was analyzed to suggest how design can foster a visual significance in the gastronomic identity of Chinese restaurants.

Keywords:

Signage, typography, chineness, Chinatown, restaurant, gastronomy, San Francisco, elements, principles, design, graphic, dim-sum, globalism, social, identity

## Biography

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## Introduction

There is an old saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” but across Chinatowns in the United States, the Chinese American society has maintained an interesting discourse that arguably could end up amplifying stereotypes of Chinese immigrants as unassimilated foreigners in the United States. The idea of investigating Chinese identities through the narrow lens of restaurant signage begins from a historical context that traces the first wave of Chinese traders and labors who were lured to the Pacific coast of the United States during the California Gold Rush of 1848-1855 caused by the instability in China caused by the weakening of the Manchu dynasty which led to the Opium War in 1839 - 1842 and Taiping Rebellion of 1850 – 65 (Messenger, 2013), Chinese laborers left the mainland to seek better livelihood elsewhere. Chinatowns in the U.S. did not develop when the first Chinese settlers arrived but it came about as there was safety in numbers for Chinese immigrants to congregate as they faced an inhospitable racial environment (Kwong, 1996; Shah, 2001).

The resentment towards the Chinese was largely a result of their willingness to work for far less money under worse conditions, which resulted in “The Chinese Exclusion Act” (1882 – 1943), a federal law which excluded people based on nationality and the formation of the Anti-Coolie Association in 1867, a white labor group which essentially opposed Chinese immigration and settlements (Shah, 2001). The Chinese settlers were driven out of small towns and villages and they sought refuge in larger cities. As a result, Chinatowns were formed in the 1880s, first on the West Coast and later in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and Washington (Kwong, 1996).

There are more than 41,000 Chinese restaurants in the U.S., outnumbering national franchises such as McDonalds, Burger Kings, Wendy’s, Domino’s, and Pizza Huts combined (Chan, D.R., 2013, May 6). According to Chan (2013, May 6) many of these restaurants, with the exceptions of Panda Express’ 1500 restaurants and P.F. Chang’s at 200 across the country, the majority of Chinese restaurants in Chinatown often rely on family labor and are often owner-managed. This assertion brings us back to the early days of American Chinatown where the support of family, clan associations and secret societies were formed to provide protection, economic aid, social services and jobs (Rast, R.W., 2007). Early Chinese settlers formed a tightly knit community that was capable of fending for themselves from larger and hostile external forces. This form of self-supporting has also resulted in self-

segregation which allowed Chinatowns to preserve their unique economic culture due to resentment toward the Chinese in which their livelihood was confined to less desirable fields such as wholesale and retail trade (King, H. & Locke, F. B, 1987). As such, modern Chinatowns have become the place that inadvertently perpetuate a stereotypical representation of what uniquely is the Chinese identity due to its historical development (Lyman, S. M, 1974). It is with this sense of curiosity that this research direction is based on the premise that if the Chinese community in Chinatown has managed to preserve its unique minority position within a larger group in America, to what extent and how does its identity translate into its gastronomic identity?

### Research Approach

In exploring the design elements in San Francisco's Chinatown restaurants signage that contribute to their impressions, three steps were taken. The first step was to define the borders of San Francisco's Chinatown. Horizontal boundary with four streets, namely: Kearny, Grant, Stockton and Powell were identified while vertically, Bush, Pine, California, Sacramento, Clay, Washington, Jackson, Pacific and Broadway streets were added within a 24-block area. The second step was to identify and define the types of eateries from the survey. Please note that "eatery" or its plural form "eateries" is used when the different types of restaurants are mentioned as a group.

A total of sixty three (n=63) eateries that offer Chinese foods, further broken into thirty four (n=34) Chinese restaurants; two (n=2) Chinese vegetarian restaurants; six (n=6) Chinese restaurants and cafe that sell dim-sum, dessert, noodles, and wonton; six (n=6) cafes; two (n=2) Chinese bakery shops; five (n=5) Chinese seafood restaurants; and eight (n=8) Chinese restaurants that offer various combinations of Chinese foods. To qualify, these businesses must sell Chinese or Chinese-related foods and those eateries that do not offer seating areas for their customers are omitted from the survey.

In addition, only eateries with streetfront signage, herewith referred to as "frontal signage" positioned above street levels are included. Refer to image 1 for a visual reference for the four types of signage: awning, frontal, side signboards, and die-cut letters. Die-cut letters are dimensionalized individual Chinese characters or English alphabets that are custom

created to spell out the name of the eatery which are then mounted onto areas designated to display them. Where applicable, frontal signboards must extend throughout the length of the facade of the restaurant. A side signboard is an additional signage to the frontal signboard and is usually smaller in comparison to the frontal signboard. It is usually mounted vertically from the side of the restaurant building. Both frontal and side signboards must be above street-levels to be included in the survey.



Image 1: The three types of signboards: side, frontal signboards and awning.

The final step is to devise a framework to define the evocative essences of design elements on the signage in San Francisco Chinatown's restaurants. They are divided into "linguistic characteristics" to identify the languages as they appear on the signage and "signage components" which tracks the various design elements found on the signage (Refer to diagram 1 for the framework).

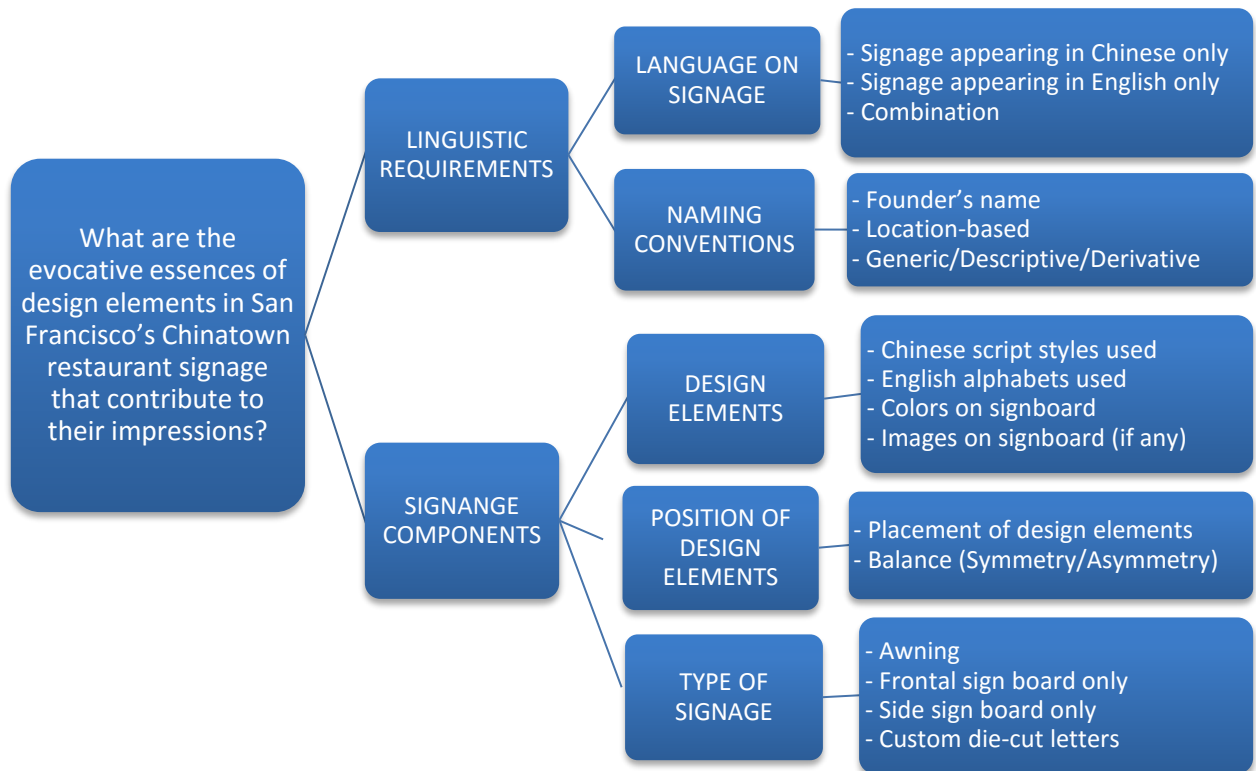


Diagram 1: Signage analysis framework

Under “linguistic requirements,” two sub-categories “language on signage,” which seeks to identify the language(s) used on the signage and “naming conventions” which is about how the eateries are categorically named: i) founder’s name; ii) location-based; and iii) generic/descriptive/derivative. “Generic” is defined as restaurants that use initials only such as ABC. “Location-based” is assigned to restaurants that are named by their locations or they can be named after a real or fictitious location. For a signage to be considered “descriptive,” the eatery must include a name and a description for the nature of a restaurant’s business such as New Fortune Dim Sum and Cafe. “Derivative” type of names are those based on the spelling of English names that are transliterated from its Chinese counterparts such as “Wing Sing Dim Sum.”

“Signage components,” as one of the two evocative essences are further divided into three categories: i) design elements; ii) position of design elements and, iii) type of signage.

“Design elements” are components that can be found on all the signages surveyed which include the choices of Chinese characters, English alphabets, colors used on the signage and any images/graphics or symbols found on the signage.

How the components are arranged and presented on the signage, in particular, the typestyles (both in Chinese and English) and images (if any) are regarded as “placement of design elements.” These components of design seek to further investigate aspects of balance: symmetry or asymmetry. To be considered symmetrically balanced, the distribution of components found on the signage must be equally distributed on both the left and right sides of a horizontal or vertical signage with the center as its axis.

Findings:

The following section reports the five key findings as outlined in the signage analysis framework in diagram 1. “Language on signage” and “naming conventions” are grouped under one discussion while “Design elements in general” is further divided into four sections of “Scripts and characters on signboard,” “Images on signboard,” “Position of design elements,” and “Type of signage.” “Position of design elements” are further extrapolated followed by the “Type of signage” which concludes the analysis of the study.

Language on signage and naming conventions

The placement of one language over another seems to suggest a hierarchical order. In the survey, 90% of the eateries surveyed positioned Chinese characters above and before English names on their main signboards (both awnings and frontal signboards). In doing so, English is relegated to a subordinate level. By prioritizing the Chinese characters on signages, the Chinese characters have become a linguistic and cultural marker in a predominantly English-speaking environment. However, a staggering 97% of all the eateries surveyed have both Chinese and English on their signage, leaving only “Chinatown Restaurant” and “Brandy Ho’s Hunan Restaurant” as the only two restaurants that do not use any Chinese but English only on their signage. Out of the 10 restaurants that are based on founder’s name (Louie, Mee Mee, You, Finn, Brandy Ho, Hon, Chef Hung, Yee, Man Kee, and Kan’s), only three resorted to Americanizing their names, namely Louie, Finn, and Brandy Ho while the remaining derived their restaurant names transliterated from Chinese. Refer to table 1 for naming conventions.

| Naming conventions on signage | Out of total | Percentile |
|-------------------------------|--------------|------------|
|-------------------------------|--------------|------------|

|                |              |     |
|----------------|--------------|-----|
| Founder's name | 10 out of 63 | 16% |
| Location based | 17 out of 63 | 27% |
| Descriptive    | 19 out of 63 | 30% |
| Generic        | 7 out of 63  | 11% |
| Derivative     | 10 out of 63 | 6%  |

Table 1: Naming conventions

Any form of standardizations of transliterations into English was complex. This is because early immigrants were almost entirely from two clusters of seven counties of the Kwangtung province, a region in southern China which preserves a unique dialect called Cantonese, which is still widely spoken in southern China, Southeast Asia and in American Chinatowns. In due time, Hong Kong Chinese who mostly identify as “Cantonese” have also migrated and represent a sizeable portion of the Chinatown population. With many dialects pronouncing the writing system differently, fortunately, the way the character is written is relatively uniformed. Notice that Kwangtung is spelled in Wade-Giles while it is “Guangdong” in the Pinyin system. However, there are two major divisions in the system of writing between traditional and simplified Chinese characters (refer to diagram 2). All the eateries surveyed have maintained the use of traditional Chinese characters for their signage. Traditional Chinese is being used in the U.S. and places such as Taiwan and Hong Kong while the simplified version is used throughout mainland China and elsewhere such as Singapore and Malaysia.

|             |        |        |       |     |
|-------------|--------|--------|-------|-----|
| Traditional | 金      | 龍      | 鐵     | 鍋   |
| Simplified  | 金      | 龙      | 铁     | 锅   |
|             | Golden | Dragon | Steel | Wok |

Diagram 2: Examples of traditional and simplified Chinese characters used today

The Chinese writing system is comprised of characters while The English language, through a set of 26 letters in various combinations which phonographically aid in the pronunciation of the language. Chinese characters communicate as logograms that represent a word or phrase with semantic information. While the Chinese characters can be written in both traditional and simplified forms, they can also be pronounced differently in different



dialects. From the outset, putting the two forms of writing together is an incompatibly difficult task due to their inherent forms and nature of the language. In acclimatizing to local linguistic requirements of English-speaking contexts, the mixing of Chinese and English present multiple possibilities. It is widely known among Chinese speakers that Chinatown is misguidedly translated as “street of the Tang people” in Mandarin as well as other Chinese dialects. While restaurants could literally translate word for word such as “Four Seas Seafood” into its Chinese counterparts into English (refer to image 2), another restaurant named “Chinatown Restaurant” (refer to image 3) while generic as a name, is also suggestive of its location in Chinatown. On the other hand, the restaurant has a totally different Chinese name that does not translate into “Chinatown Restaurant.” Its Chinese name, written as 新杏香, literally translates into “New Fragrant Almond.” Another restaurant which uses English initials, “ABC Cafe Restaurant” and its Chinese name, “ABC大餐廳” seems to straddle between both languages but 大餐廳 is translated as “grand restaurant” and has made no mention of “Cafe” as it is in English (refer to image 4).



Image 2: Four Seas Restaurant



Image 3: Chinatown Restaurant



Image 4: ABC Cafe Restaurant

### Design elements in general

According to Bowers (1999), all visual forms interdependently interact with three basic components: elements, characteristics, and interactions. Elements are made up of basic dots, lines, planes and volumes with varying characteristics of size, shape, texture and color. As elements with varying characteristics interact, they influence each other via their position, direction and space in which they exist. They are effectively combined to have an impact through the advancement of printing technology that allows restaurants to reach out to their customers more enticingly. “The Boiling Shrimp” and “Hunan House” display photographic images from their menu onto their signage, effectively turning the signage into a pseudo-menu (refer to images 5 & 6). While a wide variety of typestyles are available with the increased availability of printing and publishing technologies, the right choice of design elements is still important as it plays an important role in the viewer’s understanding of the message, perception and memory retention.



Image 5: Hunan House’s side signboard.



Image 6: The Boiling Shrimp’s awning with photographic images from their menu.

The naming convention for descriptive-based restaurants seems to be tailored to facilitate communication with customers as there is an established familiarity with their gastronomic identity that little textual or graphical instruction is needed. After all, with names like “New Fortune Dim Sum & Cafe” and “Man Kee Seafood Hot Pot,” further explanation of the

nature of business is not required. However, psychological research has suggested that when visual features were inconsistent with meaning of words, viewers took a longer time to respond (Jass & Childers). In other words, the choices of typeface must complement the meaning of words itself in order to be effective and clear. An interesting challenge facing sign makers is to articulate a sign that is not only visible but also one that “advertises” a restaurant’s nature of business. Wendy’s is often remembered and perceived to make old fashioned hamburgers because of the typeface and image of Wendy. Therefore, typefaces and images/graphics are used as tools to “speak” to consumers on occasions when the spoken word is simply not feasible. Logos and logotypes best exemplify the fused nature of typography and graphical elements. Only eight eateries incorporated identifiable logo/symbols/graphics on their signage.

#### Scripts and Characters on Signboard

Typestyles can be varied to offer aesthetic appeals, which can repel or attract customers/viewers. Bold text are utilized to place emphasis such as the one found on side signboard of “Four Seas” (refer to image 2). The placement and presentation of one language over another on the signboard suggests hierarchical order. Mixed with colors and images associated with food, the viewer’s perception can be manipulated. In an experiment conducted by Childers and Jass (2002) in which a copy of a car advertisement was presented in the practical typeface and in luxury type style, the results of the experiment indicated that participants perceived the information and product differently, depending on the physical appearance of the typeface. However, for a strong brand to be created, consistent use of the same typeface contributes to cohesiveness and can enhance consumer memory. A glaring example is Johnson and Johnson’s which is associated with “gentleness” because the logo is consistently used not only on advertisements but on labels of their products.

In describing the typographic styles found on the signage as design elements for the research, please refer to table 2 for samples of Chinese scripts and English letters from Linotype.com for reference. The specific typestyles identified in all the surveyed signages do not necessarily resemble the samples as they are provided for visual reference only. For comparative and cross-referencing purposes, the English letters will share the same categorical references applicable to the Chinese scripts. In other words, while both are

different linguistically, how they appear can be divided into the following styles: old style/traditional, calligraphic, freestyle, handwriting and modern.

Like its Chinese counterparts, English typestyles are stylistically divided into five categories with the exception that the Old style/traditional category is further divided into “san serif” and “serif.” San serif is identified as fonts that do not have the small projecting features called “serifs” at the end of strokes. Typefaces such as Helvetica, Arial, Avant Garde, just to name a few are samples of English alphabets that are serif-based while fonts such as Times Roman, Garamond, Caslon and so forth are some samples of sans serif fonts. For the survey, calligraphic styles are expanded beyond styles that we commonly associate with hand lettering styles found in testimonials. Free-style/handwriting is about describing typestyles that have a freehand and decorative style. In typography, modern is a style of typeface developed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century characterized by high contrast between thick and thin strokes but for the purpose of this study, modern is definable as fonts that are stylistically decorative. If any of the four styles are combined in their usage on the signage, they are to be marked as combination.

| Samples of scripts in traditional Chinese characters from linotype.com |      | Samples of English typestyles from linotype.com |                              |
|--|------|---|------------------------------|
| Old style/<br>Traditional  | 金龍鐵鍋 | Old style/<br>Traditional san serif             | The Golden Dragon Wok        |
|  | 金龍鐵鍋 | Old style/<br>Traditional serif                 | The Golden Dragon Wok        |
| Calligraphic   | 金龍鐵鍋 | Calligraphic                                    | <b>THE GOLDEN DRAGON WOK</b> |
|  | 金龍鐵鍋 |   | <i>The Golden Dragon Wok</i> |
| Freestyle/<br>Handwriting  | 金龍鐵鍋 | Freestyle/<br>Handwriting                       | <i>The Golden Dragon Wok</i> |
|  | 金龍鐵鍋 |   | <i>The Golden Dragon Wok</i> |
| Modern/<br>Stylistic   | 金龍鐵鍋 | Modern/<br>Stylistic                            | <b>The Golden Dragon Wok</b> |
|  | 金龍鐵鍋 |   | THE GOLDEN DRAGON            |

Table 2: Samples of Chinese scripts and English typestyles

Out of the total of 34 awnings with Chinese scripts (refer to table 3), 47% of them feature calligraphic styles as a typographic choice. Meanwhile, out of the 27 frontal signboards with



Chinese scripts, 44% of them also used calligraphic-based scripts. As for signages with English alphabets, 44% of awnings feature Old style san serifs typestyles. On frontal signboards with English characters, 45% of them chose Old style san serif as the typestyle of choice. The customized die-cut characters for “House of Nanking” is freestyle while “Chinatown Food Court” features all English-only characters in modern typestyle with outlines to distinguish its name from the background.



Image 7: House of Nanking’s multi-colored, predominantly English-based design on their side sign board.



Image 8: Brandy Ho’s Hunan Food has misplaced an apostrophe in its original name when stacked vertically.

What stood out is “House of Nanking” whose side signboard is a multi-colored, predominantly English-based design that also has smaller Chinese characters centrally balanced in a black background (refer to image 7). Not to be outdone was Brandy Ho’s Hunan Food with a non-traditional black as background with contrasting red and white English alphabets on their signage (refer to image 8). The stylistic treatment for signage at these two restaurants are significantly different as they use black color as background for the signage. Black is not a popular color as reflected in the survey but understandably as a background, it contrasts well with white and other lighter colors.

| Chinese script styles for restaurant names on awnings |              |     | Chinese script styles for restaurant names on frontal signboards |              |     |
|---|--------------|-----|--|--------------|-----|
| Number of awnings = 34                                |              |     | Number of frontal signboards = 27                                |              |     |
| Old style   | 10 out of 34 | 29% | Old style  | 5 out of 27  | 19% |
| Calligraphic  | 16 out of 34 | 47% | Calligraphic   | 12 out of 27 | 44% |
| Freestyle/handwriting                                 | 4 out of 34  | 12% | Freestyle/handwriting  | 7 out of 27  | 26% |
| Modern  | 3 out of 34  | 9%  | Modern   | 3 out of 27  | 11% |
| Combination   | 1 out of 34  | 3%  | Combination  | 0 out of 27  | 0%  |

Table 3: Chinese scripts on signage and frontal signboards

| English alphabets for restaurant names on awnings |              |     | English alphabets for restaurant names on frontal signboards |              |     |
|---|--------------|-----|--|--------------|-----|
| Number of awnings = 34                            |              |     | Number of frontal signboards = 27                            |              |     |
| Old style serif                                   | 13 out of 34 | 38% | Old style/traditional serif                                  | 10 out of 27 | 33% |
| Old style san serif                               | 15 out of 34 | 44% | Old style/traditional san serif                              | 12 out of 27 | 45% |
| Calligraphic                                      | 6 out of 34  | 18% | Calligraphic   | 5 out of 27  | 15% |
| Freestyle/handwriting                             | 0 out of 34  | 0%  | Freestyle/handwriting  | 0 out of 27  | 0%  |
| Modern  | 0 out of 34  | 0%  | Modern   | 2 out of 27  | 7%  |
| Combination                                       | 0 out of 34  | 0%  | Combination  | 0 out of 27  | 0%  |

Table 4: English typetypes on awnings and front signboards

### Images on signboard

According to Jass & Childers (2002), an advertising message comprises of three important components: a visual image, a verbal message and a voice used to convey the intended communication. In this case, the “voice,” is not a physical voice but one that resonates with the audience as he/she is required to “decipher” the visual images and verbal message to translate into a “voice” that is comprehensible only to his or her own experience. Suppose we begin with an image of “chinese restaurant.” The two words conjure up a particular mental image of wok-prepared food, chop sticks, realizable through the purchase and consumption of food.

The act of consuming images is a pleasure that we derive from using symbolic properties. Research has demonstrated that in advertisements that utilize symbolic visuals, advertisements can communicate complex meanings concerning the advertised product (Featherstone 1991; Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1990; McCracken 1986). Diamonds are likened to eternal love, creating a meaning where the diamond is no longer a piece of compressed carbon but something that signified eternal love. We do so by linking and associating it with

important social events such as spending time with our friends and family through social settings such as restaurants which leverage on the notion of people coming together to foster stronger kinship through food to develop a more satisfying and healthy relationship.

Type and graphics that exist concurrently on a same plane can render a visually and verbally possible opportunity for a signage to become a piece of “canvas” that can be designed numerously. According to Evans and Thomas (2013), high contrasts or unusual shapes serve to attract our attention. A few restaurants explore shapes that evoke the essence of “Chineseness” by placing shapes that look like curveous roof structures reminiscent of Chinese temples. These are clearly the case for New Asia and Chinatown Restaurant (refer to images 9 and 10). Similarly, the Great Eastern Restaurant exploits the height of its exterior wall to architecturally include Chinese roofs as part of its exterior decor. Although its awning signage is bland, combined together, they form a culturally iconic statement can command a strong presence.



Image 9: New Asia with a side sign board and its distinguishable temple-like structure with upturned eaves.



Image 10: Chinatown Restaurant uses curveous roof structures reminiscent of Chinese temples on their side sign board.

In tracking the colors used on both the Chinese scripts and English alphabets, a chart is presented (refer to table 5) by listing the popular colors used on all the signages. It is alphabetically listed by the following colors: beige, black, blue, dark green, pink, red, white, and yellow. Between the eight colors that are consistently used on both Chinese scripts and

English characters and the backgrounds they appear on, red and white stood out as the most used colors on both the Chinese and English letters. The high percentage of white is mostly due to it being used to outline the Chinese and English letters as a visual treatment for distinguishing the letters from their backgrounds. White as a neutral color is the unfailing color, yielding a 31% followed by red at 22%.

| Typestyle colors on signage | Number of times on Chinese and English | Percentile | Background colors on signage | Number of times on backgrounds | Percentile |
|-----------------------------|--|------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------|
| Beige                       | 1                                      | 0.6%       | Beige                        | 7                              | 7%         |
| Black                       | 7                                      | 4%         | Black                        | 7                              | 7%         |
| Blue                        | 14                                     | 9%         | Blue                         | 1                              | 1%         |
| Dark green                  | 21                                     | 13%        | Dark Green                   | 8                              | 9%         |
| Pink                        | 1                                      | 0.6%       | Pink                         | 2                              | 2%         |
| Red                         | 54                                     | 34%        | Red                          | 21                             | 22%        |
| White                       | 41                                     | 26%        | White                        | 29                             | 31%        |
| Yellow                      | 19                                     | 12%        | Yellow                       | 15                             | 16%        |
| Gold                        | 2                                      | 1%         | Purple                       | 1                              | 1%         |
| TOTAL                       | 160                                    |            | Orange                       | 3                              | 3%         |
|                             |  |            | TOTAL                        | 94                             |            |

← These colors appear on both the typestyles and backgrounds of signage

Table 5: Colors used on signage on both Chinese and English signages

### Position of design elements

Chinese characters can be read both from right to left and vice versa but in following the Western convention of reading from left to right, they are placed on the left before any English alphabets on the signage. By prioritizing the Chinese characters, it has become a marker of linguistic and cultural differentiations in a predominantly English-speaking environment. On side signboards, due to their vertical and oblong shapes, English letters are either reduced in size to accommodate the characters horizontally or be stacked vertically.

Elements found on the signage such as fonts with varying styles and color interact in a given space, be it on an awning, signboard or a standalone die cut letter. This is also inclusive of the placement of the elements within a grid structure which limits the size of the awning or signboards. Equally important is the eventual location of where the signage is finally mounted. Hence, the placement and characteristic of type styles can influence how reading takes place. Besides, legibility of words and letters are also influenced by the choice of type



styles and background color. The use of upper case and lower case letters also affect where the viewer would look first (Bernhardt, 1986). This is an important rule in visual communication and typestyles should be viewed as more than a stylistic preference especially in the English alphabet. From the survey, the most applied form of mixing the upper and lower cases occur mainly as a way to distinguish a restaurant's name from its description. Some examples include: "PENINSULA SEAFOOD RESTAURANT" followed by "Hong Kong Style Dim Sum," "Chung King RESTAURANT," and "NEW LUN TING Cafe." Any stylization or customization, especially the thickness of lines wrapped around the English fonts or Chinese scripts can also affect their appearance on the signage. It was observed that a number of eateries choose to do so such as Yummy Yummy and Hunan House's Chinese scripts (refer to images 11 and 12).



Image 11: An outlined Yummy Yummy font.



Image 12: An outlined Hunan House in its Chinese characters.

The classic case of applying what works for one does not necessarily translate into what could possibly work for another. Because Chinese characters can be stacked vertically, which is an advantageous convenience and a functional way to take advantage of limited oblong spaces, it is not necessarily a good practice for English alphabets, especially if it requires many letters to spell out a restaurant's name. (refer to Brandy Ho's Hunan Food, images 14). The vertically stacked English letterforms pose a legibility issue, partly due to the size and the style of chosen font, but is also a grammatical mistake as the signage has also misplaced the apostrophe in its original name.

There is always an exception to the rule and that is when initials are used such as ABC Cafe Restaurant (refer to image 4). Taking advantage of the flexibility of Chinese characters that can be stacked vertically, Meriwa Restaurant (refer to image 13) becomes one of the few prime examples of maximizing their building's structural height by stacking six Chinese characters on top of each other while its English alphabets are balanced at the bottom, creating a sense of hierarchical order.





Image 13: Meriwa Restaurant’s treatment of Chinese characters.

Image 14: Brandy Ho’s stacked characters pose a legibility issue.

### Type of signage

Understanding the relationships between the different attributes of design elements on signages besides its attractiveness also lies another important consideration—functionality. Although design is important visually, for pragmatic reasons, the purposive attributes seem to have taken on precedence. Throughout the survey, a combined 55% of the eateries use awnings only, making awning a popular choice that provides a platform for signage. Awnings provide shades during the day and they also extend the facade of the store forward, creating an extra “advertisement” space, particularly helpful for restaurants that are located below street level such as “Chef Hung’s Restaurant” (refer to image 15) and “Kan’s Restaurant” (image 16) which is above street level. Instead of a narrower but oblong awning shape that covers the entire length of the storefront, these restaurants use forward-extending awnings that stretch to the edge of the curb. “Enjoy Vegetarian” (refer to image 17) integrates the benefits of a shade-providing awning and side signboards into one by eliminating the need for a side signboard altogether. Besides acting as canopy for passerbys, the unusual shapes and size of these awnings also doubles as an “invitation” as they are hard to miss.



Image 15: Chef Hung’s Restaurant is located below the street.



Image 16: Kan’s Restaurant is located above the street.

| Type of signboard                    |              | Percentile |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|------------|
| Awning only                          | 13 out of 63 | 21%        |
| Frontal sign board only              | 10 out of 63 | 16%        |
| Side sign board only                 | 1 out of 63  | 2%         |
| Frontal and side sign boards only    | 16 out of 63 | 25%        |
| Awning and front sign board only     | 1 out of 63  | 2%         |
| Awning and side sign board only      | 19 out of 63 | 30%        |
| Awning, frontal and side sign boards | 1 out of 63  | 2%         |
| Custom die-cut letters               | 2 out of 63  | 3%         |

Table 6: Type of signboard used for restaurant signage

It is worth mentioning that the shape of the awning or the signboard could also influence the way information is laid out in which the name of the signage conforms to the contour of the awning. Particularly, the frontal signboard features an arrow-like direction sign which points downwards to direct customers to “Kam Lok Restaurant” which is located below the street (refer to image 18).



Image 17: Enjoy Vegetarian’s awning is both an awning structure and a side signboard, all in one.



Image 18: Kam Lok Restaurant’s signboard directs customers to its below the street restaurant.

### Limitations

In this day and age, signage alone does not and will not be the sole platform to reach out to

customers. In addition, the different design elements must be effectively combined to have an impact on the intended target audience. In contextual applications, many variables and factors come into play in influencing people's choices when it comes to dining. However, there are several limitations that must be taken into consideration to improve upon the validity of this survey. How we choose and in what restaurant to dine in is based on many factors which is not the focus of this research as the objective is to ascertain common visual elements found on signages in a major Chinatown in the U.S. The research is preliminary and is by no means exhaustive as it requires further explorations. Therefore, other Chinatowns in major American cities such as Chicago, Seattle, and New York City can be explored subsequently for a comparative and more comprehensive study.

Another possible research direction is to invite restaurants to participate where their customers can be interviewed for their choices of dining at that particular eatery. A focus group can also be set up to find out other information that could have been overlooked in this study. The placement of signage, described as above ground level can be further investigated in terms of its height as well as the size of signage which can also influence a restaurant's exposure. Another avenue of possibility is investigate the same restaurants during the evening when lighting becomes necessary. Analyzing design has always been a challenging feat as it is subjective.

### Conclusion

Chinese food is often equated with affordability but consumer food choice is not just about economic choices but also about quality expectations among many other factors. A majority of Chinese restaurant signages in San Francisco rely on awnings as a mode of communicating the nature of their business. As a powerful abbreviation of image and idea, signages are physical entities that form the first impression of a customer's interaction in a physical space. Sadly, in what appears to be a lackadaisical attempt, some restaurants surveyed, with the exceptions of a few, make no attempt to be consistent with their naming conventions.

As part of a signage system, Chinese characters offer a unique system of writing that distinguishes itself as a marker of identity for ethnic Chinese. Combined with English letters, they form a unique bilingual synergistic combination that reaches out to a larger audience.

Geographically, culturally, linguistically and economically, food has always been an important factor and signage is merely as an extension of our visual language. Understandably, while there are many factors that must be considered for an effective signage, an eatery is first a business which is about profit. Signage, as a system of communication, is first about reaching out to an audience who is being presented with a message packaged into a visual entity to entice and direct them towards a location. Considering the enormous linguistic differences between Chinese and English languages, numerous scripts, styles, colors and images are freely combined, creating a mish-mashed miscengenation of visual communication. Perhaps, due to its unique position in diverse American gastronomic cultures that their incoherent and varied presentation style is what adds to its unique "Chineseness," much like the food they offer.

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