

A Corpus-based Study of Culinary Vocabulary and Cultural Identity in 21st-Century Chinese American Literature

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Abstract

Based on two self-built corpora, this study systematically examines the distributional features and collocational patterns of culinary vocabulary by comparing four representative works published after 2000 with two canonical texts from the twentieth century. Textual analysis is conducted within the theoretical framework of cultural identity proposed by Stuart Hall. The findings reveal that 21st-century Chinese American literature exhibits a significant discursive shift in culinary narratives from “interpretive translation” to “demonstrative presentation.” Concurrently, the affective structure evolves from “anxiety” toward “confidence,” reflecting a paradigm shift among the new generation of Chinese American writers from “negotiation” to “reconstruction” of cultural identity in the context of the new era. This research further offers a quantifiable analytical pathway for the study of Chinese American literature.

Keywords: corpus linguistics; cultural identity; Chinese American literature

1. Introduction

Chinese American literature is an important component of Asian American literature and American literature as a whole. Situated at the intersection of Chinese and American cultural collisions, Chinese American literature serves as a domain where Chinese American writers express their living experiences and personal insights, reflecting their understanding and negotiation of their own identity (Cheng, 2003). Since the 21st century, under the background of globalization, Chinese American literature has exhibited a new landscape: the writer demographic has expanded from first-generation immigrants to second, third, and multi-generational mixed-race descendants, and narrative spaces have transcended Chinatowns and family restaurants to stretch into transnational workplaces, internet communities, and multi-ethnic intersections. Culinary narrative remains one of the most recognizable cultural codes in Chinese American literature, yet its function has undergone profound transformations. Culinary writing in literary works carries the cultural symbols and narrative functions of the author, serving as a vital medium for expressing emotions, social structures, and historical memories (Wang & Xiao, 2026).

Research on culinary writing in Chinese American literature has accumulated substantial outcomes. Existing studies frequently draw upon cultural identity theory to explore the role of food as an ethnic cultural symbol in identity construction. Yao (2022) focused on Kim Wong Keltner’s *The Dim Sum of All Things*, pointing out that choices and rejections of ethnic food reflect individual acceptance or denial of Chinese identity, where culinary assimilation serves as a subtle instrument for dominant society to implement identity assimilation, while commensality and cooking ethnic food become effective strategies to resist assimilation. On a macro level, Guo and Liu (2024) proposed examining American ethnic literature through the lens of a “harmony in diversity” cultural community, emphasizing intercultural exchange and mutual learning rather than opposition and conflict, thereby providing a theoretical reference point for understanding cultural hybridity in Chinese American food narrative. Wang and Xu (2024) focused on Grace D. Li’s *Portrait of a Thief*, employing Stuart Hall’s cultural identity theory to explain how the new generation of

Chinese Americans constructs hybrid identities within the dual-cultural fissures, laying a foundation for this study. However, most of the above studies are limited to pure literary qualitative criticism, relying on close reading and theoretical interpretation while lacking quantitative investigations based on objective linguistic data, which presents limitations in terms of argumentative universality and verifiability.

This study utilizes corpus as the main tool to introduce corpus linguistics methods into the research of Chinese American literary food narratives, aiming to validate and deepen existing literary theories using quantifiable and verifiable linguistic data, thereby providing an interdisciplinary methodological reference for ethnic literary criticism.

This study revolves around the following three questions:

- ① What are the macro-distributional and classification features of culinary vocabulary in 21st-century Chinese American literature?
- ② How do changes in lexical choices and descriptive depth reflect the paradigm shift in Chinese American writers’ identity recognition (from “interpretive translation” to “demonstrative presentation”)?
- ③ How do emotional collocations of culinary vocabulary reflect the psychological transformations of Chinese American writers (from anxiety to confidence)?

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical core of this study is built upon British scholar Stuart Hall’s cultural identity theory. Hall (1990), in his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, distinguished two paradigms for understanding cultural identity. The first paradigm defines identity as a “shared culture” and a “collective ‘one true self’”, possessing strong stability as an unchanging frame of reference (p. 223). On this basis, the paper further introduces a second, more explanatory paradigm: cultural identity is both “being” and “becoming,” acting as a reflection of past experiences as well as a mirror reflecting the future, rather than being “eternally fixed in some essentialized past”. Identity, under this paradigm, is “not an essence but a positioning” (pp. 225-226). Accordingly, identity

”constantly produces and reproduces itself through transformation and difference,” and is “not outside but inside representation” (pp. 235-235). Literary writing is not a passive reflection of pre-existing identities, but an active process of constituting new subject positions.

This study explores different types of culinary writing practices in 20th and 21st-century Chinese American literature. The frequent “interpretive translation” of the 20th century can be viewed as an effort under the first paradigm to “prove” an essentialized cultural identity to the mainstream society; whereas the shift from “interpretive translation” to “demonstrative presentation” in 21st-century texts, along with the evolution of affective structure from “anxiety” to “confidence,” corroborates the second paradigm of identity as “becoming” and “positioning”. In the new era, food transitions from an exhibited ethnic specimen into a re-constituted daily practice and a vibrant vehicle for cultural hybridity.

3. Research Design & Methodology

3.1 Text Selection

This study selected four representative and internationally influential Chinese American literary works published after 2000 as the observation group, including Curtis Chin’s *Everything I Learned, I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant: A Memoir* (2023), Grace D. Li’s *Portrait of a Thief* (2022), Eddie Huang’s *Fresh off the Boat: A Memoir* (2013), Kim Wong Keltner’s *The Dim Sum of All Things* (2004), and two pre-21st-century works as the control group for diachronic analysis, which are *The Joy Luck Club: A Novel* by Amy Tan (1989) and *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong (1952). The works in the observation group were all published after 2000, covering both memoir and novel genres, including both male and female writers, and all featuring culinary scenes as essential narrative elements. The control group consists of significant 20th-century texts with sufficient diachronic comparative value, forming an effective reference point for observing former Chinese American culinary writing modes.

3.2 Corpora Construction

Step 1: Corpus collection and format conversion. Electronic PDF texts of the six books were collected and initially converted to TXT format via WPS software.

Step 2: Text cleaning. Because files converted via WPS contained paragraph errors, punctuation irregularities, and OCR errors that could affect the accuracy of subsequent contextual analysis (especially collocation and concordance analysis), DeepSeek large model was employed for text cleaning. Cleaning tasks included correcting paragraph breaks, standardizing punctuation, correcting obvious OCR errors, and removing irrelevant content like headers, footers, and publication details.

Step 3: Creating self-built corpora. The cleaned TXT files were split into two groups and loaded into AntConc version 4.4.0 to construct two sub-corpora. The final target corpus (21st-century texts) comprises 383,376 tokens, and the reference corpus (20th-century texts) comprises 182,952 tokens.

3.3 Research Analysis

Step 1: Extract keywords and categorize Chinese culinary terms. Using the Word and KWIC features of AntConc 4.4.0, high-frequency word lists were extracted from both corpora to filter terms related to Chinese cuisine manually, categorizing them into sub-categories and calculating frequencies. Generic food terms (e.g., food, meal, dinner) and non-culinary homonyms were manually excluded; only culturally specific Chinese culinary items (ingredients, dish names, cooking methods, dining spaces) were retained.

Step 2: Collocation and context analysis. Representative culinary keywords from the keyword lists were selected as node words, such as *rice*, *noodle*, *dumpling*, *dim sum*, etc. Specific concordance lines were extracted via the KWIC function in AntConc 4.4.0 for subsequent textual analysis.

Step 3: Comparative analysis. This study adopted a “separate retrieval first, systematic comparison second” strategy: running features separately in observation and control corpora to export data, followed by systematic literary analysis and comparison across multiple dimensions.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Overall Distributional Features of Culinary Vocabulary in 21st-Century Chinese American Literature

Word	Frequency	Text Coverage (out of 4)
dumpling(s)	43	4
bao	19	2
dim sum	15	4
fried rice	13	2
chow mein	12	2
hot pot	9	2
Peking duck	9	2
jook	7	2
mantou	7	1
bok choy	6	3
cha(r)-siu	5	3
wonton	6	2
soy milk	6	1
chop suey	5	2
fried noodles	3	3
congee	3	2
lo mein	2	2
moo goo gai pan	2	1
kung pao chicken	1	1
egg foo yung	1	1

Table 1: Distribution of dish-related vocabulary

Word	Frequency	Text Coverage (out of 4)
garlic	22	4
soy sauce	21	3
ginger	19	3
scallions	11	2
MSG	8	3
green onions	6	3
chili oil	4	1
hoisin sauce	2	1
oyster sauce	2	1
bamboo shoots	2	1
sesame oil	1	1

Table 2: Distribution of seasoning-related vocabulary

Word	Frequency	Text Coverage (out of 4)
night market	8	1
Chinese restaurant	7	3
noodle stand	2	1
dim sum parlor	1	1

Table 3: Distribution of dining-environment-related vocabulary

Word	Frequency	Text Coverage (out of 4)
braise	7	1
stir-fry	2	1
simmer	1	1

Table 4: Distribution of cooking-method-related vocabulary

Feature 1: *dumpling* and *dim sum* are the most stable cross-work culinary symbols. Both appear across 4 works, indicating that dim sum-type foods are the most common subject in 21st-century Chinese American culinary writing. *dumpling* reaches a frequency of 43, the highest among specific dish terms.

Feature 2: Coexistence of traditional Chinese and Americanized Chinese food terms. Authentic food terms like *dim sum* (15) and *bao* (19) coexist alongside Americanized terms like *chow mein* (12), *fried rice* (13), and *chop suey* (5). The former reflects writers’ attachment to authentic Chinese cuisine, while the latter reveals Americanized Chinese food as a normal background element in Chinese American life.

Feature 3: Cooking technique terms center on typical Chinese methods. High-frequency foods mostly feature hand-held or shareable everyday items (*dumplings*, *baozi*, *dim sum*, *fried rice*, *fried noodles*) rather than ceremonial banquet dishes (only *Peking duck* appears 9 times as a banquet dish). This distributional trait indicates a shift in 21st-century food narratives toward everyday accessibility over ritualistic spectacle. Chinese techniques like stir-frying, steaming, and braising closely align with specific dishes, displaying an integrated “technique-dish” writing style.

Feature 4: Generational differences between *bao* and *mantou*. *bao* appears across 2 works (19 times), while *mantou* appears solely in *Fresh off the Boat* as a family memory of Eddie Huang’s grandfather selling mantou. In

Huang’s text, *mantou* serves as a carrier of family history with narrative depth; whereas *bao* appears across texts as street food (*gua bao*), showing how different wheat-based foods carry distinct generational memories and cultural connotations.

Feature 5: High concentration of seasoning vocabulary. Garlic (22), soy sauce (21), and ginger (19) form the tier-one ingredient terms, combining for 62 instances — far exceeding other ingredients. This shows 21st-century literature focuses heavily on constructing “taste”— garlic, soy sauce, and ginger serving as core tools to evoke olfactory and gustatory associations. These seasonings also mark clear gustatory distinctions from Western cuisine, representing core identity markers.

Feature 6: MSG as a cultural symbol. “MSG” appears 8 times across 3 works. As a symbolic marker stigmatized in Western views of Chinese food, MSG holds immense controversy. Yet, 21st-century writers no longer systematically explain or defend Chinese food, opting instead to calmly present MSG as an inherited historical discourse.

Feature 7: Dining places, such as Chinese restaurants and night market, are considered as spatial imagery. “Chinese restaurant” appears 7 times across 3 texts, and Curtis Chin (2023) uses the restaurant as its central narrative space. The Chinese restaurant acts as an indispensable “third space” in Chinese American literature, anchoring ethnic identity, hosting cross-cultural encounters, and displaying Chinese American openness and inclusivity. “Night market” appears 8 times, concentrated in *Fresh off the Boat*. As a spatial carrier of Taiwanese street food culture, its high frequency relates to Huang’s vivid memories of Taiwanese night markets, not only as dining spots, but as hubs for community culture, intergenerational transmission, and identity construction. This concentration reflects an expansion of narrative spaces from traditional “Chinese restaurants” to diverse food venues (night markets, street stalls).

4.2 Lexical Shift: From “Interpretive Translation” to “Demonstrative Presentation”

By examining the context of culinary vocabulary among these source texts of two corpora via the KWIC function in AntConc 4.4.0, the study witnessed a lexical shift on how authors introduce the culinary between pre-21st-century and 21st-century Chinese American literature, where the traditional “interpretive translation” has transformed into “demonstrative presentation.” “Interpretive translation” refers to the strategy in 20th-century Chinese American literature of utilizing extensive explanatory text, which are detailed descriptions of raw ingredients, preparation steps, and cultural symbolism, to translate “heterogeneous” Chinese food into texts understandable to the English-speaking world. “Demonstrative presentation” refers to the 21st-century shift: no longer explaining what food is, but integrating food naturally into narratives through sensory details (color, aroma, taste), emotional experiences, and everyday scenes. Food no longer requires “translation”; it is inherently part of life.

In *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) when Wu Feing-Yuan founds the Joy Luck Club in Guilin, dim sum is described using transliteration accompanied by detailed explanations:

Each week one of us would host a party... The hostess had to serve special dyansyin foods to bring good fortune of all kinds — dumplings shaped like silver money ingots, long rice noodles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons, and of course, many good-luck oranges for a plentiful, sweet life. (p. 8)

Here, besides transliterating “dim sum” (dyansyin), the text elaborates on the shapes and symbolic meanings of each food (ingot-shaped dumplings equals to wealth, long noodles represents longevity, peanuts bears the meaning of having children), “translating” Chinese culinary knowledge for readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture.

She is stuffing wonton, one chopstick jab of gingery meat dabbed onto a thin skin and then a single fluid turn with her hand that seals the skin into the shape of a tiny nurse’s cap. (p. 13)

Detailed explanations of ingredients, cooking techniques, and presentation formats represent classic “interpretive translation” strategies: framing Chinese food as an exotic culture needing to be “understood” by Western readers. The author attempts to erase cultural unfamiliarity by mapping Chinese food preparation onto reference frames familiar to English readers (such as the “nurse’s cap” metaphor), allowing Chinese food to be digested into Western cognitive systems.

Conversely, Eddie Huang (2013) rarely explains food, focusing instead on sensory and emotional presentation. Take a bowl of Dan Dan noodles on a Taiwanese street:

Creamy, smooth, and still soupy. A little *za cai* (pickled radish) on top, chopped scallions, and you’re done. I realized that day, it’s the simple things in life. (p. 51)

There is no explanation of what Dan Dan noodles are, nor any introduction to their history or cultural background. Readers experience the noodles directly through sensory phrases like “creamy, smooth” and textures between soup and sauce. Food needs no translation; it speaks directly through sense and emotion, relying entirely on taste, smell, and personal memory.

Similarly in *The Dim Sum of All Things* (2004), the scene presents food preparation through dialogue and action:

She stared straight ahead and screwed up her courage. “It’s got red beans and rice flour, right?” ...She found herself rambling on about the ingredients and how Pau Pau mixed everything together and boiled it. (p. 327)

Instead of rendering the making of red bean cake into an exotic display needing explanation, the author presents culinary knowledge as a living, intergenerational daily practice through a granddaughter asking her grandmother about recipes. The meaning of food is experienced within intimate, everyday interactions between grandmother and granddaughter.

4.3 Affective Structure: Culinary Anxiety vs. Culinary Confidence

This study examines the affective structure of Chinese American food narratives, tracing a distinct evolution from pre-21st-century culinary anxiety to contemporary culinary confidence. Affective structure, based on the concept of structure of feelings by Raymond Williams (1977), captures a community’s prevailing emotional disposition toward a cultural object. Among the selected text, Chinese food and the culinary spaces demonstrate a vivid shift across generations.

Second-generation daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) often view Chinese food with embarrassment and resistance. At a banquet lovingly prepared by their mother, the daughters express clear disgust toward “authentic” dishes like crab:

Waverly and Rich grimaced at each other, united in disgust. I heard Vincent and Lisa whisper to each other, “Gross,” and then they snickered too. (p. 140)

The reactions of second-generation Chinese Americans reflect emotional alienation from their heritage culture. Chinese food here represents an “embarrassing ethnic burden”. This emotional response stems not from taste itself, but sensitivity to the “Gaze of the Other”: in non-Chinese presence, “authentic” food becomes a dangerous signal exposing ethnic difference, necessitating emotional distance for self-protection.

Apart from the subjective choice of aversion, a different kind of cultural anxiety was demonstrated in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1952), where the author’s childhood experiences mirror food anxiety from social constraints:

Jade Snow was barely eleven in this depression year of 1933...Daddy faced the grim times with Mama...Mama said, “Jade Snow is old enough to take over my housework...It is time for our daughter to learn the meaning of money, the necessity for thrift.”...Every day after school she reported immediately to Mama, who gave her the usual fifty cents to purchase groceries for that evening’s dinner and tomorrow’s breakfast. (pp. 68-69)

Living on 50 cents a day to feed a family of six (three adults, three children) forced meticulous calculations: 20 cents for chicken, 10 for fish, 10 for pork, 10 for vegetables. This penny-exact budgeting embodies survival-based food anxiety. Chinese immigrants faced fears of hunger and scarcity. Food was reduced to a “unit of survival measurement,” where every cent dictated family sustenance. Depictions of food took on anxious hues — a direct projection of material deprivation and marginal economic struggle.

By contrast, Curtis Chin (2023) expresses pride in his family’s Chinese restaurant in the 21st century. The restaurant was a “safe harbor during Detroit’s turbulent years” and a site of racial integration:

Black or white, rich or poor, Christian or Jewish — the restaurant took anyone’s money. (p. 12)

Drawing on personal memory, the author restores it as a concrete community hub standing open amidst racial segregation and urban decline. Culinary confidence manifests here as a natural default. For 21st-century Chinese American youth authors, Chinese restaurants are spaces of love, belonging, and community memory.

5. Discussion: Reconstructing Cultural Identity Through 21st-Century Chinese American Culinary Vocabulary

These findings indicate that food narrative in 21st-century Chinese American literature is no longer a passive object being explained, but a constructive force actively participating in identity building. The process of Chinese American identity recognition has thus shifted from negotiation to reconstruction.

5.1 From Interpretation to Presentation: Paradigm Shift in the Politics of Representation

In the 20th-century control group, “interpretive translation” dominated. Lexically, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1952) contains procedural descriptions of Chinese food preparation, such as washing rice, cutting vegetables, cooking, each accompanied by detailed instructions akin to a manual. In *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), mothers’ explanations appear via direct quotes or narrator paraphrasing, translating cultural symbolism item by item. Lexically, ingredient and cooking terms co-occur with “explanatory frameworks”, which is transliterated words followed immediately by English definitions or cultural interpretations.

In contrast, 21st-century culinary vocabulary completely abandons this binary “explaining-explained” structure. Take *bao*, which appears 19 times across four works without explanatory structures. It sits alongside English terms without italics or quotation marks, existing as “untranslated translation”. Hall’s statement that “diasporic identity is defined by hybridity” (p. 235) is directly verified at the lexical level. Authors no longer display Chinese food as an exotic culture to Western audiences, but present it naturally as part of their lived experience. Readers either already know what *bao* is or infer it from context. This stance of non-explanation is itself a declaration of cultural confidence.

Thus, the usage of culinary vocabulary functions as identity narrative: telling readers that the work is not explaining China to the outside, but writing Chinese America from within. The politics of representation shifts from “self-defense of the watched” to “self-assertion of the writer”.

5.2 From Anxiety to Confidence: Diachronic Evolution of Affective Structures

20th-century texts frequently pair food scenes with negative emotional markers, split into cultural anxiety and survival anxiety. In *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), daughters react to crab banquets with “grimaced,” “disgust,” and “snickered,” reflecting cultural anxiety where food becomes a part of the self needing to be hidden (defensive avoidance). Additionally, in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1952), budgeting constraints depict tight living conditions and survival anxiety. Whether active or passive,

anxious emotions alienate authors from their heritage culture, associating it with discrimination and suffering.

The 21st-century observation group presents a vastly different emotional landscape. In *Everything I Learned, I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant* (2023), the restaurant is a welcoming community space reflecting pride and belonging. In *Fresh off the Boat* (2013), Huang’s descriptions of Taiwanese street food brim with positive words like “favorite,” “love,” and “transcendent,” treating food as an intergenerational bond. At the end of *The Dim Sum of All Things* (2004), Lindsey’s white boyfriend shares Chinese dim sum with her grandmother: cultural barriers that once worried young Chinese American women are gradually digested by two generations’ appetites, revealing a trajectory from anxiety to acceptance.

More notably, 21st-century texts feature abundant emotion-neutral expressions. Food is narrated as a routine part of daily life, requiring neither defense nor bravado. This emotional neutralization marks progress: when a cultural element no longer needs its value proven, it truly completes the transformation from “other” to “self”. Hall’s “living through difference” (1990) finds emotional validation here, as difference becomes a rich resource for self-constitution.

5.3 From Negotiation to Reconstruction: Paradigm Shift in Chinese American Cultural Identity

Hall (1990) distinguished two paradigms of cultural identity: the first as a stable, unchanging frame of reference, and the second as producing and reproducing itself through transformation and difference (pp. 223-235). 20th-century “interpretive translation” fits the first paradigm, attempting to prove an essentialized, recognizable Chinese core to mainstream society to gain acceptance. This negotiation strategy paid the price of systematically explaining one’s culture in exchange for tolerance.

21st-century “demonstrative presentation” shifts to the second paradigm: identity is no longer an essence needing proof, but a dynamic process produced through writing. Lexically, authors directly use terms like *bao* and *dim sum* without annotation, letting them surface naturally in narrative flow as everyday subject experience.

Simultaneously, 21st-century culinary writing transcends ethnic labeling. Food connects the past (grandfather’s mantou, grandmother’s dim sum) and faces the future (street food, fusion dishes, cross-racial dining). Rather than choosing between two cultures, it generates a new, hybrid identity at their intersection. Diachronic lexical shifts ultimately point to a paradigm shift in Chinese American cultural identity from being defined to self-defining.

6. Conclusion

This study built two corpora (observation and control groups) and utilized AntConc 4.4.0 to systematically quantify and qualitatively interpret culinary vocabulary in 21st and 20th-century Chinese American literature. In lexical distribution, 21st-century texts feature high cross-

text coverage of dim sum terms, coexistence of authentic and Americanized Chinese food terms, focus on daily cooking techniques, and spatial expansion from Chinese restaurants to night markets and street stalls, reflecting a shift from ritualistic display to daily presentation. In discursive strategies, “interpretive translation”, the combination of transliteration, definition and symbolism, waned significantly, replaced by “demonstrative presentation”. Authors directly use transliterated terms without italics or explanations, bringing food to life via sensory details without proving themselves to mainstream culture. In affective structure, food scenes shifted from survival and cultural anxiety to confidence and emotional neutralization. Unneeded of defense or pride, food seamlessly forms part of everyday life.

These changes validate Hall’s cultural identity paradigm shift from “being” to “becoming”: 20th-century “interpretive translation” was a defensive negotiation strategy, whereas 21st-century “demonstrative presentation” marks a shift from being defined to self-definition, actively reconstructing hybrid cultural identity through literary practice.

This study provides a quantifiable path for Chinese American literary research, confirming the applicability of corpus methods in ethnic literary criticism. Future research can expand corpus size, enrich novel samples, and introduce automated sentiment analysis tools to further improve breadth and precision.

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