

Beyond palatable: White privilege and Western immigrant
restaurateurs in postcolonial Taiwan

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Abstract:

Unlike immigrants who must struggle with discrimination, some middle class Westerners who move to Taiwan use their white privilege to open mid- to high-end restaurants, competing with existing Western-style restaurants whose Taiwanese owners generally use chefs trained locally or in Japan. The author reviews this situation based on evidence drawn from the current literature and in-depth interviews. After more than two centuries of Western imperialism in Asia, whites and Western cuisine continue to be perceived by Taiwanese as symbols of modernity deserving respect. White privilege, a form of racial capital, grants Westerners the freedom to enter Taiwan and quickly achieve a relatively high status. Compared to restaurateurs in their home countries, white westerners who open restaurants in Taiwan benefit from lower startup and operating costs, fewer regulations, free local media coverage, and in some cases a more vibrant national economy. However, they encounter limitations to white privilege in terms of entrenched Taiwanese taste preferences and dining practices. For some white Western migrant restaurateurs, catering to those preferences conflicts with their desire to use authenticity as a personal goal and business strategy.

Keywords: white privilege, immigrant restaurants, independent migrants, racial capital, postcolonial society

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Introduction

The Western restaurant scene in Asian cities is dominated by a mix of multinational chains such as McDonald's and KFC and small numbers of haute cuisine restaurants whose chefs are considered celebrities. Farrer (2010a) argues that the recent boom in fashionable Western restaurants in Tokyo and Shanghai is the result of those cities' efforts to enhance their "urban soft power" by establishing international culinary cultures that may attract foreign investment, both financial and skill-based. Due to distinct historical factors, foreign haute cuisine in Tokyo is dominated by Western-trained Japanese chefs plus a small number of renowned foreign chefs associated with Japanese food and beverage conglomerates. In contrast, Shanghai is more likely to attract star chef migrants from Europe and North America to work at or establish high-end Western restaurants (Farrer, 2010a, 2015; Sawaguchi, 2015). In this paper I will describe a different model found in the Western restaurant scene in Taipei, a "regional global city" (Wang, 2003) in which many middle class Western migrants—mostly white¹ males, with or without professional cooking experience—have opened mid- to high-end Western restaurants that compete with existing Taiwanese-owned restaurants whose chefs mostly learned Western

cooking in Taiwan or Japan. Since Taipei is not considered part of the top tier of global cities, it is difficult to attract the best talent. However, a significant number of middle class Westerners prefer Taipei to Tokyo and Shanghai due to its lower living costs and more open political and societal values (Tzeng, 2010a).

For purposes of theoretical analysis, Western cuisine in Taipei might be considered “ethnic food,” with Western immigrant restaurants belonging to an ethnic economy. However, many scholars do not perceive “ethnic” as a neutral term. When arguing that ethnicity entails dominant relationships, Ray (2016) asserts that ethnic food and ethnic restaurants are frequently viewed as occupying positions outside the normative mainstream because they connote subordination and/or inferiority. Thus, the North American ethnic economy concept is unsuitable for an analysis of Western immigrant restaurants in Taiwan. I will instead apply the concept of *white privilege* when describing Western immigrant advantages in starting restaurant businesses, and when discussing interactions between Western immigrant restaurateurs and their customers in light of entrenched Taiwanese tastes and dining preferences.

The white privilege concept has been one of the focuses in the increasing number of “skin studies” in the social sciences, in which skin color is analyzed in terms of individual status, self, and culture, and not only as an external part of the human body (Dixon and Telles, 2017; LaFrance, 2018). In line with Hunter’s (2002, 2011) discussion of how white skin and western

facial features are examples of social and economic “racial capital” in many parts of the world, the present study will contribute to the literature on how skin color influences the lives of migrants who move from more advanced countries to less developed ones. Specifically, this paper will present a detailed analysis of visible white privilege in one Asian country, Taiwan, in contrast to recent studies of invisible ethnic privilege and discrimination involving white workers from Central and Eastern Europe living in the United Kingdom (Fox, 2013; Samaluk, 2014) and Norway (Van Riemsdijk, 2010).

Note that in the rest of this paper, the term “Westerner” will specifically refer to white Westerners. Further, I have two reasons for using the terms “migrants” and “immigrants” interchangeably when referring to Westerners in Taiwan. The first is the strict legal requirement to renounce one’s original nationality when applying for Taiwanese citizenship—a requirement perceived as a major challenge for foreigners interested in becoming naturalized citizens. Second, despite legal provisions for permanent resident status, many Westerners do not apply because they are married to Taiwanese or are certain that they can find or retain jobs that will allow them to stay without it.

White privilege in post-colonial Asia

The term “expatriate” is conventionally reserved for whites living abroad, especially in developing countries (Cohen, 1977). While at one time the word was limited to serving the

interests of colonial powers, for many recent decades it has primarily been associated with multinational corporations. In contrast to most migrant groups, corporate expatriates tend to gain rather than lose status when they move abroad, receiving certain privileges in return for what some consider hardship postings. Historically they have been given financial rewards and perks such as housing allowances, chauffeurs, and club memberships, thus taking on aristocratic appearances several notches above their social positions in their home countries. Recently the expatriate concept has been extended to include independent migrants who move to other countries on their own volition. These individuals are sometimes referred to as “self-initiated expatriates” in the business and management literature (Doherty, 2013).

The latter decades of the twentieth century witnessed dramatic economic, political and technological changes that provided middle class citizens living in more developed countries with broadly distributed opportunities for migrating across international borders (Favell et al., 2006). In pursuit of overseas experience, many young Western professionals and new college graduates started making their own arrangements to take advantage of relaxed international borders, short-term contractual employment, and temporary work visas in foreign countries (Amit, 2002; Scott, 2006). For these and other Western workers or graduates, overseas experience (often referred to by the initials OE) represents a more attractive avenue for knowledge acquisition, individual enrichment, and human resource development compared to

corporate overseas assignments (Inkson et al., 1997). As globalization's new cosmopolitans, for several years Westerners (especially white males) were generally unconstrained (or only partly constrained) by the immigration rules of many nation-states (Leonard, 2010a). Thus, international migration grew to become a normal activity for white middle class workers in addition to upper-level managers and executives (Amit, 2002; Conradson and Latham, 2005; Scott, 2006), with Western migrants increasingly found in non-managerial service positions in businesses such as fitness gyms, hotels, restaurants, and retail outlets (Favell, 2008; Fechter and Walsh, 2010). The occupational diversity of Western migrants is characteristic of a new class hierarchy in which fewer are working in the same upper-class positions that corporate expatriates have been accustomed to holding. However, some researchers assert that independent Western migrants residing in postcolonial countries are still inheriting elite statuses and automatically receiving benefits associated with whiteness, as evidenced by their use of the term "expatriate" to define their status (Fechter and Walsh, 2010).

As Leonard (2010b) observes, since Western migrants in less developed countries enjoy certain privileges and status, the connotation of the word "expatriate" has evolved so that it now implies white privilege. For example, European immigrants still enjoy what they perceive to be favorable conditions in postcolonial Namibia, with many Namibians expressing gratitude for "the benefits of colonialism" such as the introduction of various technologies and infrastructure

construction (Armbruster, 2010). In Thailand, elites in major cities are increasingly likely to make disparaging remarks about Western migrants, but working and agricultural class Thais residing in rural areas still tend to grant special status to white Westerners based on modernity and wealth considerations (Maher and Lafferty, 2014). During a period of reform in the household registration system in Shanghai, Western residents were accepted as part of the *New Shanghainese* population because they were considered “talent,” while more than three million rural Chinese migrant workers were barred from permanent residency (Farrer, 2010b).

Lan (2011) has described how Westerners exchange their privileged positions for economic benefits and entry into social networks. She has commented on the Taiwanese tendency to warmly welcome Western migrants as “superior others” or “global talent,” while using terms such as “poverty-struck” and “culturally backward” to describe Southeast Asian guest workers and marriage migrants, regardless of their educations or English fluency. According to Chen and Yi (2013), North Americans and Europeans comprise the second most easily accepted class of foreigners in Taiwan as co-workers, neighbors, and relatives via marriage²—behind Japanese, but ahead of Chinese, Koreans, and Southeast Asians. Many large Taiwanese corporations hire white males to work in their international marketing and sales departments to enhance their global images by presenting white faces to their foreign customers. Many companies of all sizes hire white employees for their native language skills (not just English, but also European

languages) and cultural knowledge to facilitate communication with foreign customers (Tzeng, 2010a). Unlike their Taiwanese coworkers, many of these employees are equipped with “mobile capital” in the form of a willingness to accept overseas assignments in countries other than Taiwan. Also unlike their Taiwanese coworkers, Western employees frequently receive higher pay and have less direct supervision (Tzeng, 2010b). However, Westerners in Asia do come up against certain limitations. According to Lan (2011), in Taiwan they are often placed in segregated job niches such as English teaching even when they have advanced degrees or professional experience in their home countries. Farrer (2010b) has written on the barriers that many Western English teachers in China face when trying to enter other job positions.

Based on this background, I will examine how white privilege has helped Westerners living in Taiwan to gain sufficiently high status for opening restaurants, and discuss the limitations of white privilege in terms of crossing cultural boundaries associated with taste and dining etiquette.

Data and method

No attempts have been made to gather hard statistical data on immigrant-initiated businesses in Taiwan, let alone the narrow topic of restaurants owned and operated by Western migrants. I have established a database of Western immigrant entrepreneurs from media reports, company websites, customer blogs, and Internet search results in addition to referrals made by

informants. When I conducted my first search for Western immigrant restaurateurs between September and December of 2010, I had only 30 leads—all male—for potential informants in the Taipei area. After sending interview request letters to all of them and pursuing other leads, I ended up meeting with 20 owners—all white—of 18 Western restaurants in the Taipei area, all of them in operation for an average of 6 years each (range of 1-30, with the oldest opening its doors in 1980) (Table 1). The majority started their businesses after 2000. The restaurants varied from simple operations with less than 10 tables to local franchises or groups of legally independent restaurants.

Most of our 1-3 hour interviews were conducted in the participants' restaurants and recorded for later transcription. Topics included their experiences prior to starting restaurants in Taiwan, their motivations, daily management issues, the role of cultural differences in their businesses, the advantages and disadvantages of being foreign restaurateurs, their business development histories, and future plans. I reached a data saturation point toward the end of my initial 20 interviews. I concluded that I had exceeded the objective requirements for minimum number of cases as suggested by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006)—that is, data saturation occurred within the first twelve interviews, and basic elements for identifying metathemes were present as early as the first six. I continued collecting data while working on other topics so that by December of 2013 I had identified 88 Western restaurateurs—all white and predominantly

male, with the majority (61) running their businesses in Taipei. Owner nationalities included American, Canadian, British, Irish, Belgian, French, German, Austrian, Swedish, Italian, Spanish, New Zealander, Australian and South African of British descent. A large amount of new data collected via mass media sources confirmed my finding of white privilege in attracting free media coverage, as I will discuss in a later section. The spreading out of Western immigrant restaurants to many other parts of Taiwan allowed me to confirm my assumption that white privilege is not limited to the Taipei area. For these reasons I felt confident that I had sufficient data from my previous interviews, and therefore did not pursue new informants. This decision also finds support from Marshall et al. (2013), who argue that interview quality is more important than interview number, as well as from Patton (2002), who asserts that selecting information-rich cases is more important than concerns about small sample size.

Most of my informants were willing to patiently provide me with details about their businesses, perhaps in part due to their prior experiences with local newspaper and television reporters. However, I found it much more difficult to meet with some of the most successful entrepreneurs, who apparently were motivated to maintain low profiles. As a Taiwanese, I could verify my interviewees' experiences with their local customers, even though I may have suffered from less access to the foreign community in Taipei due to my local status. It is doubtful that my research results would have differed even if I did have that access due to the above-mentioned

data saturation. Further, a white researcher may have avoided using white privilege as an analytical scheme due to the potential of the concept sounding like criticism of the interviewees' skills and capabilities, which was by no means my intention. Moreover, I did not have a guiding hypothesis when I first started searching for informants and collecting data—the concept of white privilege emerged as I conducted interviews and analyzed the results. Thus, I did not inject the idea of white privilege into my interview questions.

Three limitations need to be noted based on a comparison of data collected in 2010 and 2013 (Table 2). First, this research does not address specific features of white privilege outside the Taipei metropolitan area. Second, due to the early dates of my initial interviews, my data do not reflect the current popularity of American casual restaurants serving hamburgers, sandwiches and steaks, or bar/pub style restaurants³. Last, even though the current collection of Western immigrant restaurateurs is dominated by Canadians, Americans, and Brits, during the period when I conducted the majority of my interviews, the list mostly consisted of owners from non-English speaking EU countries.

Western cuisine in Taiwan

Often described as having been “discovered” by Portuguese who named it *Isle Formosa* (“beautiful island”), Taiwan was originally inhabited by Austronesian-speaking peoples before being absorbed into China as a frontier region in the seventeenth century. At various times it has

been a Dutch colony (1624-61), a region associated with the Ming-loyalist *Koxinga* regime (1662-83), a Qing dynasty prefecture and province (1684-1894), and a Japanese colony (1895-1945). In 1949 the Kuomintang (KMT) government, facing certain defeat by Chinese Communist Party forces, fled to Taiwan. The island has experienced political and cultural influences from western imperial powers ever since the first Dutch colonization period—especially during the late Qing, when China bore the brunt of western expansion into Asia.

As an officially sanctioned treaty port starting in 1858, Taiwan was home to a small number of Westerners interested in setting up trading companies plus a handful of Christian missionaries. Following China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese war, Taiwan was ceded to Meiji Japan in 1895. Since the Meiji period was marked by modernization and westernization, Japan played a unique role as a western surrogate, introducing many forms of modernization to Taiwan over five decades (Rubinstein, 2007). Western influences continued at the end of World War II and during the Cold War. In the interest of creating an anti-communist bastion, the US government provided aid to Taiwan in the 1950s and 60s, and guided the KMT's industrialization efforts. As a result, Taiwan eventually gained status as a newly industrialized country (NIC) in the 1970s and 80s, and has mostly experienced sustained economic growth ever since (Wang, 2007).

All of these occupations and regimes have dictated Taiwan's culinary history. Food

preparation was strongly influenced by the Japanese colonizers between 1895 and 1945, but more pure Chinese preferences emerged following the return of the KMT government. The large number of US troops stationed in Taiwan during the Cold War period introduced American eating habits, and increasing globalization since the late twentieth century has produced a diverse range of restaurants and food products throughout the island. However, Western-style restaurants were introduced to Taiwan by the Japanese. The first Western restaurant in Taipei, named Bolero, opened its doors in 1934. The owner was a Taiwanese who had learned Western cooking in Japan, and who consequently created a fusion Taiwanese-Japanese-Western menu. Similar to the Meiji period—when Western dining practices were considered symbols of “civilization and enlightenment” (Cwiertka, 2006)—Bolero gained a reputation as a salon for artists and intellectuals influenced by Western ideas. For several years it was considered *the* gathering place for wealthy residents and visiting celebrities interested in sipping imported coffee and listening to Western classical music. It was very expensive—according to an article in the *Liberty Times*, a Taiwanese newspaper, a modest meal at Bolero in the 1950s cost one-half of a typical worker’s monthly salary (Ho, 2011). Another Taipei restaurant, the Café Astoria Confectionary, was originally established and owned by Russians living in Shanghai, but moved to Taiwan with the KMT government in 1949. As the first Western restaurant jointly owned and managed by foreigners and Taiwanese, it quickly became a popular gathering place for locals who craved an

alternative to Bolero. Both restaurants catered to late Qing preferences among wealthy Chinese diners for “extravagant décor,” “elegance,” and “cleanliness,” regardless of what they thought about the food (Swislocki, 2009). Even today, cleanliness, brightness and cozy atmospheres are some of the major reasons why Taiwanese frequent Western restaurants (Xu, 2012).

American popular culture in the form of music, food and fashion exerted a strong influence on Taiwanese youth as the American military expanded its bases on the island during the Korean and Vietnam Wars (Wu, 1997). During the latter part of the twentieth century, educated members of the middle class were also eager to imitate Western lifestyles by dining out and trying “exotic foods” (Rubinstein, 1994). Since the Taiwanese government prohibited foreign corporations or individuals from operating food businesses prior to the 1980s, Western restaurants were limited to a small number of expensive settings in international five-star hotels. Most of these were owned and managed by Taiwanese, with a few hiring Western chefs and cooks to work in their kitchens. Two 1970s exceptions were Zum Fuss and Chalet Swiss, started by Western expatriates and their Taiwanese partners. Zum Fuss was a German restaurant established by three Swiss expatriate employees of a multinational company who converted a private social gathering space when their company left Taiwan, hiring a Swiss chef to manage the kitchen. The other was opened by a Swiss resident and his Taiwanese wife, whom he met while working as a chef and manager in a Western-style restaurant owned by another Taiwanese.

In 1984, McDonald's became the first foreign food company allowed to operate in Taiwan. Wu (1997) claims that the company was given permission in part because of its hygienic and standardized production practices. Taiwanese, especially youth, immediately embraced McDonald's as a symbol of a new lifestyle (Watson, 1997), and in 1992 a Taiwanese McDonald's franchise was acknowledged as one of the most profitable in the world. In 1994 the country's McDonald's restaurants had the company's highest international growth rate (Wu, 1997).

The market for Western restaurants in Taiwan is currently very competitive, and franchises of all the best-known multinational fast food companies and restaurants such as Outback and T.G.I. Friday can be found throughout the country. As Taiwan's population has become increasingly affluent, luxury Western restaurants such as Ruth's Chris Steak House (from the US) and L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon (a Michelin-rated restaurant from Paris) have opened. The menu of the Woobar restaurant in the local branch of W Hotels Worldwide contains a Million Dollar Burger consisting of *wagyu* (Kobe-style beef), seared foie gras, brioche, frites, and truffle mayonnaise. It costs \$2,200 New Taiwan (NT) dollars (USD71.9),⁴ compared to \$40NT (USD1.3) for a basic McDonald's hamburger. Woobar also offers a Million Dollar Pizza.

The non-Western dining foodscape in Taiwan is also diversified. In addition to long-running Japanese restaurants managed by Taiwanese, Korean restaurants run by second-generation

Chinese-Koreans who immigrated to Taiwan with the KMT government started to appear in the 1980s (Cheng, 2004), as did Southeast Asian restaurants opened by overseas Chinese or their children who had completed their educations in Taiwan. The number of Southeast Asian restaurants has grown dramatically in the past decade, with most of them operated by women who have married into Taiwanese families. Growing culinary diversity is supported by the increasing number of Taiwanese who regularly eat in restaurants. Many of today's Taiwanese are willing—in many cases, eager—to try foreign foods, at least in larger cities. Approximately 40% of all vendors selling food at a night market in New Taipei City sell dishes considered non-Taiwanese or non-Chinese (Lin, 2013). Many of them claim that it is much easier to attract customers when they market their products as Japanese, Italian, or some other style, even though they are only slightly altering a local dish. Successful efforts by some indigenous Austronesian and Chinese/Taiwanese restaurants to adapt Western cooking methods and decorative approaches to broaden their appeal to Taiwanese customers (Chen, 2011) may be viewed as indicators of the high status of Western cooking among cuisines served in Taiwan.

Findings

A full range of western immigrant restaurants

From 1950 through much of the 1980s, the foreign community in Taiwan consisted of large numbers of missionaries and corporate expatriates (mostly managers and engineers), with almost

none participating in restaurant operations in any capacity other than as investors. In 1992 a law was passed that revised a large number of rules concerning foreigner employment, and the number of independent foreign white-collar workers (primarily from Western countries) increased dramatically. English teaching attracted a large number of primarily white Westerners, regardless of whether or not they had credentials; teachers with college degrees from English-speaking countries such as India and the Philippines were not eligible for the same positions. According to Taiwan government data, teaching has been the number one occupation among foreign residents since 2001 (Taiwan Ministry of the Interior, 2014), with English teaching supporting many Westerners interested in overseas living experiences. A significant number of these individuals started their own businesses after teaching for several years, along with a smaller number of expatriate employees of multinational corporations who decided to stay in Taiwan when their original companies closed, or when they refused to relocate to other countries.

Restaurants now represent the largest sector for Western immigrants interested in starting their own businesses in Taiwan. According to a French Canadian informant who runs a French-Italian restaurant in New Taipei City, the large number of white foreigners who own restaurants has resulted in a joke about their encounters with Taiwanese: “Before they used to say, ‘You’re an English teacher?’ Now they say, ‘Are you an English teacher or do you own a

restaurant?”” They are primarily involved in Western-style eateries, with much smaller numbers owning street food stands, manufacturing and selling ice cream, acting as product wholesalers, marketing western dishes and desserts online, producing and selling organic fruits and vegetables, or promoting Western cuisines and wines.

The majority of these entrepreneurs have undergraduate degrees, occasionally in restaurant-related majors such as hospitality management or tourism; a few have graduate degrees or certificates from vocational schools that offer cooking and restaurant management classes. Regarding prior work experience, in addition to English teaching and working for Taiwanese or multinational corporations with offices in Taiwan, a small number of interviewees told me that they had previously owned and operated restaurants in their home countries, had family backgrounds in bakeries or restaurants before moving to Taiwan, or had experience working abroad as chefs, cooks, or managers in prestigious restaurants, including some with Michelin ratings. Reasons cited by my informants for starting food-related businesses include continuing their profession, presenting authentic Western food, accepting invitations from Taiwanese business partners, working independently, and gaining the status associated with becoming business owners. A large percentage of the Western immigrant restaurateurs I interviewed were the spouses of Taiwanese women, some of whom they met overseas before moving to the island.

I found only a few cases in which Western immigrants had acquired existing restaurants from either Taiwanese or foreigners, or purchased franchises from multinational chains such as Subway. The majority established their own restaurants by themselves, some with their Taiwanese wives, a few with Taiwanese or other foreign partners. They frequently worked as chefs when starting out, later hiring other chefs and kitchen helpers in order to focus on management, yet still retaining control over menu items and product development. Some reported that their Taiwanese wives gave logistical support, with a small number doing kitchen work using skills they learned in the Western countries where they met their husbands.

According to the few interviewees willing to release such information, initial capital outlays ranged from \$100,000NT to \$300,000NT (USD3,267 to USD9,801). One informant did not provide a specific amount, but did mention that he was invited by a former customer, a Taiwanese banker, to start his current restaurant in Taipei's most affluent business district, with a team of 13 cooks. According to stories appearing in the local media, an estimated 50 million NT (USD1,633,500) was spent on decorations alone. Most of the immigrant restaurateurs I spoke with used their own savings to finance their operations, with some receiving parental support and one using bank loans in his Taiwanese wife's name. Most of my informants initially found low-rent spaces, purchased the most basic kitchen equipment, and decorated dining areas on their own. Those opening more expensive operations imported professional kitchen equipment, wine

coolers, furniture, and utensils from their home countries to create a Western sense of fine dining. In most cases these restaurant owners have adhered to Western cultural values in terms of décor, art, and music.

Regarding staff size, most of the immigrant restaurant owners I interviewed had 10 or fewer full-time employees plus some part-timers; a small number hired as many as 100 workers. Their employees are mostly Taiwanese; exceptions I observed included an Argentinean chef working in a Spanish restaurant, German and Italian chefs in German and Italian restaurants, and a Malaysian-Singaporean sommelier who previously worked in overseas hotels before meeting his Taiwanese wife. One German restaurant owner hires American students from the Taipei-American school to work as part-time waitresses and waiters due to their ability to converse with foreign customers in English. Some Western immigrant restaurateurs hire overseas Chinese from countries such as India or the Philippines to work as chefs/cooks or managers, mostly due to their bilingual skills and experience working in large restaurants or hotels that emphasize service quality.

Among the restaurants operated by my interviewees, the average cost per meal was \$1,052.5NT (USD34.4), with a range of \$275NT to \$8,000NT (USD9 to USD261.4). One proclaimed “no upper limit.” Some of these restaurants are still prohibitively expensive for middle-class Taiwanese. One interviewee stated that his luxury restaurant is primarily aimed at

private parties, with a minimum price of \$25,000NT (USD816.7) per event, and with pre-dinner cocktails served on a private balcony.

Some restaurants in Taiwan owned by Western immigrants have grown from small to medium or large businesses, including a few with sister restaurants in China. Among the four Western-style eateries in Taiwan on *The Daily Meal* list of the 101 best restaurants in Asia in 2014, three (one French, one Italian, one Spanish) were owned and operated by Western migrants; the other was owned by a Taiwanese who graduated from a culinary school in France.

White face advantage

Several informants commented on the ways that Western migrants automatically receive certain privileges and status upon their arrival in Taiwan. According to one Spanish restaurateur, “Taiwanese have a stereotype of a [white] foreigner—that is, anyone who left his country and came here has to be rich or have high standards.” An Italian interviewee added, “They like foreigners, or at least white foreigners ... They give me precedence ... If you need help, they help you.” He used this benefit to his marketing advantage in 1998 when he first started selling Italian wines in a Taipei department store with his Taiwanese girlfriend. The marketing strategy of presenting a white face at the point of sale paved the way for their move into the restaurant business:

At the time I couldn't speak Chinese, I was just there smiling, and people were

impressed. We also had a lot of attention from newspapers. After that, another department store came to us and asked whether we wanted to open a small coffee shop with a little food in their store. We didn't think in the beginning [that] we would move toward restaurants. It just happened.

Despite his lack of professional training or experience, he managed the cooking for the new shop until the couple was offered a larger space by another department store. They immediately hired a Taiwanese chef who had worked in five-star hotels. He acknowledged that their success was likely less due to their menu than to their emphasis on décor and an intimate environment. One of their customers was the wife of a wealthy businessman who built a department store near the Taipei 101 Tower, and who invited them to open an Italian restaurant in that store in 2009. For the project—all paid for with a bank loan given to his Taiwanese girlfriend—they hired an Italian chef and a Malaysian-Singaporean sommelier. It is doubtful that such an opportunity would have been available to a non-white foreigner. In his opinion, “Why foreigners can sell is because Taiwanese feel that foreigners have higher standards in taste.”

In all countries, eating out at fine restaurants is perceived as a mark of status (Gabaccia, 1998; Warde and Martens, 2000). For Taiwanese this status is further enhanced by interacting with the white owners of restaurants in front of their guests, especially when such interactions involve a foreign language. Not knowing Taiwanese culture, many restaurateurs at first do not

appreciate such interactions. One French interviewee complained:

We have to chat with them and treat them like extra super VIPs. For my foreign customers, including the big bosses of big companies, if I don't go to see them, they will understand it's because I'm busy in the kitchen ... The Taiwanese customers don't really care what they eat. But they care about seeing the French chef and showing off to their guests ... In France, even in the big restaurants, normally it's quite rare to see a chef outside [the kitchen]. Only when he makes a big mistake, and the customers are not happy and ask to see the chef, will the chef go out.

Such behavior is not limited to expensive restaurants. The Spanish owner of a mid-range operation told me, "They come to talk to me to practice their Spanish. They don't care about my food, they're more interested in what I do or what I'm going to say. Or they introduce their friends to me and want me to talk to them." A South African informant (a former English teacher who owns a small pie shop in a traditional market area) concurred: "You can hardly ever get away. A lot of the time people come here not because of the pies or the drink, they come here because you [the white owner] are here."

The same restaurant owners enjoy a significant advantage over their Taiwanese counterparts: media coverage. The pie maker told me,

We have never advertised, but it's very easy for us to get into the media ... They love

to report about foreigners doing some business. They call us. So we've been on TV twice, and two or three magazines have done articles about us ... it's good for my business.

The favorable status of restaurants owned by white immigrants is especially noticeable in comparison to that given to restaurants run by Southeast Asian brides, who usually come from working class backgrounds and who generally have less education. Their operations are simple in terms of decoration, and their menus are primarily aimed at immigrant workers from their countries of origin. Taiwanese often express negative attitudes toward these restaurants, unfairly describing them as dirty, smelly, loud, or dangerous due to rumors of drinking and fighting (Chiou, 2007; Wang, 2006). In contrast, Taiwanese rarely express negative attitudes toward male Japanese and Korean immigrant restaurateurs, but they also rarely if ever go out of their way to meet or converse with these non-white foreign business owners, even though Japan has historical ties with Taiwan, and even though many Taiwanese have good command of the Japanese language. Also according to my observations, Southeast Asian, Japanese, and Korean restaurants are less likely to receive media attention.⁵

Advantages of crossing borders

Having arrived from more developed countries, Westerners in Taiwan not only benefit from the status associated with being white, they also benefit from the low costs and loose regulations

that do not apply to immigrants from non-Western countries. Taiwan has a weakly controlled labor market associated with a laissez faire regulatory approach (Yu and Su, 2004). The state is reluctant to force Taiwan's predominantly small firms to provide employment benefits and job security for fear of inducing bankruptcies, and Taiwanese labor unions have been unsuccessful in providing protection for private sector employees. Many of my interviewees described Taiwan as a good country for establishing a business, and asserted that they could not start similar restaurants in their home countries due to high tax rates, living and labor costs, and tight regulations. One French interviewee told me that employees in his home country were easily twice as expensive as their Taiwanese equivalents when social security and tax payments are considered. Developed Western countries also have tighter health and safety regulations that some describe as discouraging to new restaurant businesses. A French Canadian informant commented, "People realized how easy it was to set up a restaurant here as a foreigner ... [they thought] 'I will do this until I find what I can do' ... and the economy in Canada and the United States is so difficult" (referring to the period of our interview). The situation is slowly changing in Taiwan, with the national government enforcing increasingly strict regulations. Still, all of my interviewees said that compared to those in their home countries, they consider current Taiwanese rules to be very loose, especially in terms of standards and inspections. According to a British informant,

I'm not saying we're not hygienic, but sanitation standards for kitchens are much higher in the UK. I know one Briton who's here at the moment just opening a restaurant. He had a restaurant in the UK, but closed it because the regulations were too strict and the costs too high to maintain.

Despite the more relaxed regulatory environment, some Western immigrant restaurateurs contend that they maintain higher standards of food safety due to their previous experiences in their home countries. A French restaurant owner told me, "I'm very careful about the food, much more than Taiwanese are. And my kitchen is cleaner compared to Taiwanese kitchens." Such an emphasis on food safety has high appeal for Taiwanese customers.

Coming from more advanced societies, Westerners feel that they can bring different ideas and experiences to Taiwan. A New Zealander told me: "We've seen successful restaurant ideas in other countries, and so it's much easier to go ahead with a successful idea than to think about new ideas that you don't know if they would be successful or not." Travel experience also provides Western restaurateurs with ideas about creating new dishes. One French interviewee described his products as 90 percent French and 10 percent Italian after spending time in Italy, and boasted that if customers wanted to try something special based on that mix, he was willing to do it. After visiting South Asian countries, the above-mentioned New Zealander added a "satay burger" to the menu of his self-described gourmet burger restaurant.

Limits to authenticity

Presenting genuine Western-style food and decor is a common business strategy among white male immigrant restaurateurs in Taiwan, who believe they can fill a market niche created by Taiwanese-owned Western-style restaurants that lack authenticity. A French immigrant restaurateur who had graduated from a cooking school in his home country, and who had experience working in a Michelin-rated restaurant in Paris and four-star hotels in Corsica and Switzerland, moved to Taiwan because of his Taiwanese wife. He told me that he had eaten at every French restaurant in Taipei and concluded that they were mostly copies of Japanese French restaurants with fusion dishes. A Swede with twelve years' experience in the hospitality industry fell in love with Taiwan when visiting his parents-in-law, and decided to open a Swedish restaurant in his adopted country. In his view, "Ninety-nine percent of all Taiwanese Western restaurants do not taste Western." A British corporate expatriate and his Taiwanese wife decided to open a bar that served food when his company closed its Taiwan office in 2005. His motivation is: "There was no decent British pub in Taipei." A French Canadian informant added, "We have this pride of being foreigners and knowing about food."

All interviewees mentioned that when they opened their restaurants, they were confident that their native Western culinary-cultural skills would be appreciated by Taiwanese. Several said that they make authentic Western dishes from scratch, and claimed that Taiwanese restaurant

owners use pre-packaged or heavily modified products. One French immigrant, who met his Taiwanese wife when they were both students at a culinary school in Leon, worked as a cook in several restaurants in Paris and Italy before moving to Taiwan. He told me that he spent four months working in a Taiwanese-owned French restaurant as a chef, but that he left over disagreements about kitchen processes and methods: “It wasn’t the right way of French cooking. The taste wasn’t really bad, but it wasn’t really French food.” He contemplated returning to France, but decided to stay and open his own bistro, combining his cooking skills with his wife’s pastry-making talents and her parents’ coffee and tea business. “I now have many guests who have been to Provence, Marseilles ... they know what French food looks like. I cannot pretend and cheat them.”

Immigrant restaurant owners all over the world face challenges in terms of presenting authentic dishes that contain the same ingredients and that follow the same preparation processes as in their ethnic, regional, or national homelands (Lu and Fine 1995). When asked whether they would consider making changes to adapt to local tastes, the majority of interviewees strongly rejected the idea, claiming a desire to preserve authenticity and quality as part of their business strategy to distinguish themselves from Western restaurants owned by Taiwanese, and to avoid mistakes that they felt were made by Chinese immigrant restaurateurs in Western countries. Many said that they did not want to lose their foreign customers in Taiwan, and that they wanted

to provide “a sense of nostalgia” for those Taiwanese customers who had lived overseas. The Western immigrant restaurateurs I spoke with described various strategies for luring repeat customers, including presenting themselves as sources of cultural exchanges or as educators sharing their knowledge of Western cuisines. One French restaurant owner gave this typical example of explaining a dish to a Taiwanese customer:

When they eat red wine sauce, some ask me why it is not sweet, while every [Taiwanese-owned French] restaurant does it sweet. So I explain to them ... because they [other restaurants] use powder. The powder is quite sour, and it becomes much more sour with the red wine. So they add sugar to balance.

Some informants said that at a certain point they felt a need to simply accept that the majority of their Taiwanese customers would never fully comprehend authenticity, and therefore their best strategy was to target those who are more likely to appreciate foreign cultural practices.

An Italian restaurateur observed,

Sometimes it’s very difficult to sell an Italian product ... if our customers do not know what Italian is like. They might say, I don’t like this way, I want more sauce ... We do need a kind of more sophisticated customer who knows about getting pasta with a little bread and a nice glass of wine. So we picked out Da-An Lu [a Taipei street known for its trendy boutiques and restaurants] because ... the people around here are rich and

sophisticated, or at least they travel a lot and understand foreign culture.

Insisting on authenticity increases the risk of disappointing and losing Taiwanese customers whose only experiences are with Taiwanese-owned Western restaurants. I heard several strategies for addressing this risk, one being to create menus that purposefully exclude dishes that Taiwanese customers tend to dislike. One owner said, “I stopped selling the most famous dish from Spain, paella, because people complained about the rice being too hard, too dry, and burned on the bottom.” Another way is to provide separate menus for different types of customers. An Italian interviewee explained,

Taiwanese mostly don’t like to use menu a la carte. They like to have set menus ... We do not give the set menu to foreigners, and in the set menu we do not put in ravioli, but we put in dishes with lobster, a Taiwanese favorite ... in Sicily we also have seafood like lobster. Foreigners don’t eat soup too much, but Taiwanese adore soup, so we have a very good selection of soups.

Others admitted to giving in to the perceived need to change their recipes “a little bit” based on their knowledge of Taiwanese preferences. One of the Italian restaurateurs said, “I make the tomato sauce a little less sour and some of the dishes not so salty. Also, instead of using heavy cream, I changed to 20 percent cream, which is not as fat and not as rich.” A New Zealander talked about walking the fine line between authenticity and flexibility: “Taiwanese really like

their food and they're also quite adventurous. They want to try something different, but you've got to make it so they're willing to try it. As soon as we start changing it, we change it a little. If we change it too much, then we've lost our strength." In addition to making slight modifications in flavor, Western immigrant restaurateurs acknowledge that many Taiwanese need to be taught about practices such as having different wines accompany each course, or how to endure the 3- or 4-hour dining experiences associated with French, Spanish and Italian cuisines. They also note that Taiwanese prefer tastefully decorated interior spaces to outdoor dining areas.

While Western immigrants may view authenticity as a competitive advantage, their "white skin status" frequently fails to provide any advantage for selling authentic Western foods, since many Taiwanese are accustomed to eating in restaurants that feature Taiwanese-Japanese-Western fusion dishes. To compete, Western immigrant restaurateurs must either adapt to the tastes of their majority customers, or limit themselves to niche markets consisting of those who appreciate Western authenticity. Introducing new Western dishes that cannot be found elsewhere in Taiwan is another possible strategy for attracting customers, but one that is accompanied by the above-described risks. Further, maintaining authenticity frequently means higher prices if special ingredients and spices need to be imported—an important factor for immigrant restaurateurs competing with local businesses and high-end multinational restaurant companies for a small customer base. Accordingly, Westerners exploring

the possibilities of opening their own restaurants may lean more toward casual American or pub style food operations with lower capital requirements and fewer demands in terms of food preparation.

Conclusion

Taiwan is experiencing an influx of middle class Westerners interested in establishing restaurants serving dishes from their home countries. Their primary competition consists of Taiwanese-owned and operated restaurants with chefs trained locally or in Japan or Western countries. Born and raised in wealthier countries, these almost exclusively white westerners are endowed with mobile capital that allows them to reside in a country with more relaxed regulations. The lower costs of living in Taiwan make it possible for them to use personal savings or inheritances to start simple restaurants. Some use their personal travel experiences to experiment with unique business models and to introduce new foods to an increasingly accepting customer base. A small number are using their successful experiences in Taiwan to expand their businesses into China.

The long history of Western imperialism in Asia and lingering Western dominance in world affairs has created globally biased hierarchies regarding taste, culture, race and nationality. Instead of encountering the discrimination that most immigrants face, many white Westerners in Taiwan are automatically perceived as wealthy and talented, thereby positioning them to take

advantage of their status and the local deference generally given to all things Western, including cuisine. White Westerners are much more likely than other migrants to attract Taiwanese customers, despite having little or no relevant experience. In contrast, the curiosity about foreign foods that a growing number of middle class Taiwanese are cultivating is not extended to marriage migrants from Southeast Asia.

Many of the Western immigrant restaurateurs interviewed for this study described authenticity as a primary strategic factor for distinguishing their restaurants from those owned and operated by Taiwanese. However, they also acknowledged the ongoing need for adaptation—one of several indicators that white privilege has limitations in light of Taiwanese tastes and dining preferences. A significant number of middle class Taiwanese visit restaurants run by westerners to get a taste of western lifestyles and to “gain face” by interacting with white owners, introducing them to their fellow guests, and speaking with them in the foreigners’ native languages. In many instances the food is a secondary factor, with the customers reacting conservatively to non-Taiwanese dishes. Western immigrant restaurants serving middle-class customers will likely continue to alter their menus and recipes to match local preferences and to retain repeat visitors.

Notes

1. Race is a socially constructed category. For some Westerners, “white people” may not

include Latinos or individuals from Mediterranean countries. Skin complexion is an easy and convenient characteristic, therefore what might not fit a Westerners' strict definition of "white" is sufficient for Taiwanese (and perhaps other Asians).

2. This is a possible explanation for why white male spouses in Taiwan do not perceive a decline in their masculine status. According to patrilocal marriage practices long considered the norm in Chinese societies, following one's wife to reside in her home village or township suggests such a decline.
3. In Table 2, restaurant styles were mostly coded according to restaurant names. For those restaurants whose styles were not obvious from their names, coding was performed according to descriptions on restaurant websites or from customer blogs. Four styles were categorized as "other": American-Mexican or Canadian-Mexican, South African BBQ, French-Cambodian vegetarian, and Western vegetarian. Of the identified styles, the four most common were French, Italian, American and bar/pub food and drink. I did not interview any owners of American style casual restaurants, and only one owner of a bar/pub restaurant.
4. At the time this article was being prepared, the exchange rate was 1 USD = 30.6 New Taiwan Dollars.
5. There are many other ethnic food restaurants run by immigrants in Taiwan, especially Taipei—for example, Indian restaurants owned and/or operated by East Indians. Since their

numbers are very small compared to Western, East Asian, and Southeast Asian restaurants, and since they encounter similar problems as other non-Western restaurants, I will not discuss them in this paper.

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Table 1. List of Western immigrant restaurateurs interviewed in Taiwan in 2010.

Restaurant				Owner					
Case Number	Style	Years of Operation (in 2010)	Total Employees	Nationality	Age (in 2010)	Education Major	Marital Status (In 2010)	Spouse Nationality	Location
1.	French	4	5	France	28	Cooking	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
2.	French	1	6	France	26	Hospitality & Cooking	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
3.	French	6	3	France	40	Cooking	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
4.	French	3	0	France	33	Cooking	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
5.	Italian (pizza)	6	10	UK	46	High School	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
6.	Italian	14	14	Italy	42	Local Development	Cohabiting	Taiwanese	Taipei City
7.	Bar	5	4	UK	53	Mechanical Engineering	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
8.	German	11	100	Germany	39	Bakery	Single		Taipei City
9.	German	9	1	Canada (German ancestry)	46	Cooking & Metallurgy	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
10.	German	4	4	Germany	51	Cooking	Divorced or separated	Taiwanese	New Taipei City
11.	Spanish	1	30	Spain	33	Hospitality & Cooking	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
12.	Spanish	4	1	Spain	37	Metallurgy and Industry	Divorced or separated	Taiwanese	Taipei City
				Spain	32	Children's Music Education	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
13.	British (pies)	2	3	South Africa	42	Tourism	Cohabiting	Taiwanese	New Taipei City
14.	Italian-French	3	4	Canada (French ancestry)	35	Social Science	Single		New Taipei City
15.	New Zealand (burgers)	2	15	New Zealand	32	Education & Psychology	Single		Taipei City
				New Zealand	41	Teaching Education	Single		Taipei City
16.	Swedish	5	7	Sweden	36	Hospitality Management	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
17.	Western vegetarian	30	6	US	58	Fine Arts	Married	Taiwanese	Taipei City
18.	South African BBQ	1	0	South Africa	34	English	Married	South African	New Taipei City

Table 2. 2010 interview and 2013 collected data

	From 2013 Data		From 2010 Interviews
Restaurant Style	French	13	4
	Italian	12	2
	American	11	0
	Bar	11	1
	German	8	3
	Spanish	6	2
	British	4	1
	European/Western	3	0
	Ireland	3	0
	Greece	2	0
	Austrian	1	0
	Bulgarian	1	0
	Italian-French	1	1
	New Zealand	1	1
	Poland	1	0
	Swedish	1	1
	Other	9	2
	Total	88	18
Location	Taipei City	52	14
	New Taipei City	9	4
	Other	27	0
	Total	88	18
Years of Operation	2 years or fewer	29	5
	3-5 years	25	7
	6-10 years	17	3
	11-15 years	11	2
	16 years or more	6	1
Total	88	18	
Owner Nationality	Canada	20	2
	US	17	1
	UK	12	2
	France	11	4
	Germany	8	2
	Australia	5	0
	Italy	5	1
	Spain	5	3
	New Zealand	3	2
	Austria	2	0
	Ireland	2	0
	South Africa	2	2
	Sweden	2	1
	Bulgaria*	1	0
	Netherlands	1	0
	Poland	1	0
	Unknown	8	0
	Total	105	20

* EU member.

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