The origins of the fortune cookie in the U.S.

By 99% Invisible, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.03.21
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Image 1. Many Americans associate fortune cookies with Chinese cuisine. However, fortune cookies actually have their beginning with Japanese immigrants in the United States. Photo: Ksayer1/Wikimedia Commons

What many Americans think of as Chinese food, including fortune cookies, has become a central part of American culture and cuisine. This so-called Chinese dessert, however, has a complex history that dates back to the 19th century.

Starting in the 1850s, Chinese immigrants were seen by American men as competition for mining, farming, and manual labor jobs. A wave of anti-Chinese violence in the 1870s and 1880s followed. As a result, Chinese immigrants found work in laundries and restaurants.

Chinese restaurants began to appear, but Chinese cooks had to adapt dishes to appeal to American tastes. A famous example of one of these Chinese-style recipes is chop suey, whose name translates roughly as "odds and ends." Chop suey became a very popular Chinese dish in the 20th century in the U.S. But it's not a Chinese dish. You could say that chop suey is as American as apple pie, except that apple pie is originally British (but that's another story).

So what about that "Chinese" dessert, the fortune cookie?

Writing Fortunes

This sweet wafer wrapping a snippet of wisdom first appeared in the U.S. in the 1920s, but it was not actually Chinese in origin. That doesn't mean, however, that many Chinese Americans haven't embraced fortune cookies and made them their own. In fact, many of today's fortune cookies and their fortunes are produced and sold by Chinese Americans.

Steven Yang, the founder of Yang's Fortunes Incorporated in San Francisco, prints the little paper slips with fortunes on them and sends them to cookie factories around the United States. A typical 50-pound box at his factory contains 300,000 slips. They come from the company's list of 5,000 unique fortunes.

The text of the fortunes themselves is mostly written by Yang's daughter, Lisa. She collects sayings from books or from quotations, or she simply makes phrases up.

Fortunes, it turns out, are surprisingly difficult to write as they must be upbeat and generally apply to whoever is reading them. Also, the fortunes must not offend anyone who receives them.

Japanese Origins

Still, neither fortunes nor cookies are Chinese in origin. Woodblock art prints from 19th century Japan provide evidence of the cookie's origins, showing fortune cookies being prepared and cooked. More evidence of the cookie's Japanese origins are in memories of Japanese Americans such as Sally Osaki. Osaki recalls snacking on fortune cookies as a child and reading the enclosed Japanese fortunes in California in the 1930s.

Jennifer Lee is a journalist and the author of the book "The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food." Lee interviewed Osaki and others, and even took a trip to Kyoto, Japan, in order to further investigate the Japanese origins of today's fortune cookies.

What she found in Japan was a larger, darker, and less-sweet ancestor to the American fortune cookie. Yet if these treats have such clear Japanese heritage, why do we get fortune cookies at the end of Chinese restaurant meals, and not at Japanese restaurants?

A Transfer Of Cookies During War

Similar to the Chinese immigrants before them, many Japanese immigrants to the U.S. chose to make their living by producing or preparing and selling food. The Japanese also knew that in order to be successful with American customers they would need to cater to American tastes. For many years, Japanese families frequently owned, operated, and worked in American-style Chinese restaurants. They ultimately adapted the fortune cookie into something sweet that Americans would enjoy.

In 1942, during World War II, the United States government ordered 120,000 innocent Japanese Americans and their families into internment camps. This was in response to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, a military port in Hawaii. Most of these Japanese American families lost their homes and businesses. Some historians suggest that it was at this time that Chinese Americans

took over the fortune cookie enterprise. Four years later when the war was over, the camps closed and Japanese Americans returned home to try to rebuild their lives. Now Americans saw fortune cookies as Chinese, not at all Japanese.

The fortune cookie has become a global phenomenon, found in many countries around the world, with one important exception. They still don't eat fortune cookies in China.