“A Real Chilean from Taiwan”:
Ethnic Chinese Making Trans-Atlantic Identities in Santiago, Chile

Carol Chan
Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh; Observatario Regional Paz y Seguridad, Universidad Bernardo O Higgins

Abstract

This paper examines some ways that the ethnic Chinese in Santiago, Chile negotiate multi-layered ways of belonging and difference: on the one hand, being Chinese in Chile, and on the other hand, being “from Chile” in their country of origin. Through presenting ethnographic vignettes, I examine their material and food consumption practices, focusing on the meanings and identities they attach to these objects and practices. In one case, I discuss how a Taiwanese association in Chile organize a Chilean asado (barbeque) to celebrate the Chinese mid-autumn festival. In another, I examine Chinese restaurant owners’ attitudes towards cooking and offering “Chilean-Chinese” food, while performing daily intimate rituals to publically displayed shrines to gods and idols that have also travelled from China. In describing and analysing these hybrid forms of material/food production and consumption, I show how diverse trans-Atlantic or ethno-national identities among the ethnic Chinese are (re)made. These identity negotiations create lines of fissure among persons who may share the same language, ethnicity, or nationality. They can also create new ways of socializing and being with other Chileans or Chinese, which may attempt to but can never fully transcend questions of race, heritage, and citizenship. Instead, the relationships between and meanings associated with these categories are problematized and shifted in the process.