

Fusion in Multicultural Societies: Chifa food as a Means of Spreading Chinese Culture in the Hispanic World

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ABSTRACT— *In this case study, we will analyse the case of “Chifa” food, as a curious example showing the creation of a mixed cuisine: a fusion of Cantonese and Peruvian traditions. Firstly, we will focus on understanding the origin of cultural blending. Secondly, we will investigate further so as to on the one hand recognize the elements of this cultural fusion; on the other, we will pay attention to the creation of a gastronomic tradition that went unnoticed under the generic term “Chinese food”. Finally, we will notice that the success of the spread of chifa food is not only the result of a great adaptation, but it also starts to be recognized as a cuisine by itself, in Peru and abroad.*

Keywords— gastronomy, spread, trans-culture, Lima

1. CONSTRUCTION OF A MIXED SINO-PERUVIAN LEGACY

Throughout history, anything that was different, or especially anything questioned the existing imposed model, was subject to persecution. In this context, the various cases were the exception and were usually pinpointed far from the homogenizing glares of power, in spaces which were often bordered and marginalized where exchanged thrived. This case study allows us not only to shed light on one of these exceptional cases of survival, but also to pay a well-deserved tribute to the silenced sacrifice of a migrant Chinese community in Peru.

1.1 *Culí heritage in Lima*

The history of the Chinese community in Lima dates back to the 19th century and the labour trafficking from China to fill the void left by the abolition of slavery in various American territories, such as California, Mexico, Cuba and, in this case in question, Peru (Rodríguez, 1989). These migrants came to be known commonly as Culí (Coolie), alluding to the original Bengali name meaning casual worker. Most of the migrants were originally from Southern China, of the marginalized Hakka and Punti minorities which, moreover, were enemies. A large part of this trafficking business was carried out from the Portuguese territory of Macau (Trazegnies, 1994). Halfway through the 19th century, the number of culís who survived the terrible journey to Peru reached about a hundred thousand. The appalling trafficking conditions and some diplomatic sandals, such as the case of the María Luz in Japan in 1872, called for a compulsory contractual and voluntary regularization of migration. By the end of the 19th century, two hundred thousand culí migrants had set themselves up mainly in Lima, and from there, they began to spill over into other territories within the country, such as the jungle (Rodríguez, 2000). This migratory flow was eminently male, and they obtained work mainly as servants or cooks (Table 1).

Table 1: Evolution of the population in Lima originally from China (Source: Own work drawn from different sources).

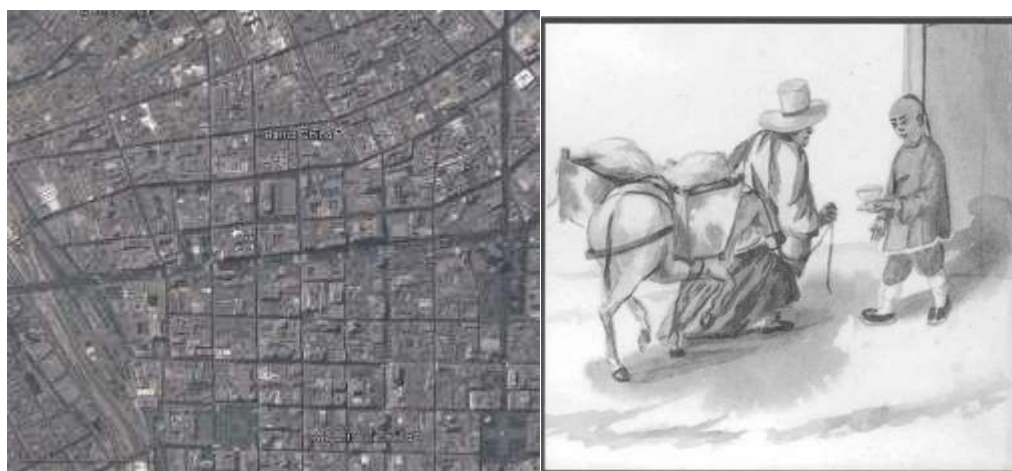
Period	Chinese population in Lima
1849-1874	100.000
1874-1920	200.000
1920-2006	1.300.000

Chinese descendants currently represent an eighth of the population in Lima, with around 1,300,000 descendants; they make up the seventh tusan 唐人 (Han Chinese people from overseas) community from outside China, and the first in South America (Lausent-Herrera, 2009). However, to be exact, we are talking about a shǎoshù mínzú (少数民族
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) community, considered as *Huáqiáo* (華僑); that is to say, they are Chinese citizens from outside of China, although ethnically, they are not of Han, or better yet, Tang origin (Cosamalón, 2012). Marginalization and initial hardship were left behind upon discovering that their culinary knowledge, a male tradition in China, had potential in the restaurant business in Lima. Their great ability for survival allowed them to adapt their typical dishes according to local products and local tastes, which led to them becoming part of Lima's cultural landscape. More recent political events of the 20th century, along with the knowledge and capital built up, ignited an emigration phenomenon in the 60s and 70s; *culís* travelled to the rest of America (the United States of America, Canada, Argentina and Chile), Europe (Spain), Oceania (Australia, New Zealand), and even returned to Asia (Hong Kong, Macau), and brought with them a particular culinary knowledge that they would spread anonymously under the general term "Chinese cooking". The history of *chifa* cuisine is based on one of adaptation, due to both its Cantonese-Peruvian blending and its migrant tradition which would then promote its spread (Rodríguez, 2006).

1.2 Boom of the Chinese neighbourhood and the proliferation of *chifas*

Lima's *culí* community established itself around the traditional neighbourhood where there were eateries and inns, close to the central market for logistical reasons (Fig. 1). The ease in obtaining fresh primary sources from the market, along with the flurry and demand for lunches in the area, meant that an area for the restaurant business was taking shape in the city (Fig. 2).



Figures 1 and 2: Location of the Chinese neighbourhood in Lima, a few blocks from the Main Square (Plaza de Armas). Fruit-seller and his donkey and a Chinese innkeeper. Watercolour on paper by Pancho Fierro (Source: Own work drawn from Google Earth and the Colección Museo Numismático del Banco de crédito de Perú (Chuhue, 2012 a)).

The high demand for cooks in private houses as a domestic service, and in eateries and inns enabled the start of the adaptation process for the *culís* in Lima. Not only was the local population becoming accustomed to what Cantonese cuisine had to offer, but the migrants were also adapting to the products and rich variety in Peruvian cuisine. As time went by, the Chinese neighbourhood (Chuhue, 2012b) established itself firmly around calle Capón (Rodríguez, 2004), leading to a curious symbiosis in the street names of the area at the start of the century, where "Capón" was mistaken for "Japón" (Japan). This could have been an error, or even a reference to the Japanese community, which was also important in the area (Fig. 3). In any case, the Jirón Andahyalas (or Andahyalas strip) area became more and more influenced by the Orient, with restaurants and the inclusion of entities and shops of all kinds, managed by Chinese descendants.

"...In 1971, the Chinese Arch or Gate was inaugurated; it is the gate which leads to calle Capón, covering blocks 7 and 8 of the Jirón Andahuaylas. Little by little the gate, designed by the architect and planner Kuoway Ruiz, and donated by the Taiwanese government, was languishing alone but standing tall, indifferent to the announcements and shouts of travelling salesmen who take to the street to sell their products. On the 20th of July, 1997, the gate's neon lights were lit once again, and the columns looked impeccable. The Chinese Neighbourhood was born again after 20 years of being forgotten. Once again, the lions and dragons went out into the streets, before the stunned gaze of the people of Lima and its mayor, Alberto Andrade, the manager of this renaissance..." <http://www.apch.com.pe/calle-capon.html>

On one hand, Lima's Chinese neighbourhood was set up in the most commercial area of the colonial historic city centre (Fig. 4). Lima's *culí* community was seen as a Chinatown (Lausent-Herrera, 2011), and its descendants began to mix with the local population. On the other hand, the influence of Chinese, and particularly Sino-Peruvian cuisine began to spread all over the city, becoming one of Lima's culinary models. Nowadays, *chifa* restaurants are not only found in one neighborhood, but have spread all over the city. It is difficult to not find a *chifa* 2 or 3 blocks away in any area of the city, as it is one of the identifying features of all the neighbourhoods and of the people of Lima.



Figures 3 and 4: Images of calle Capón, the heart of the Chinese community in Lima (19th and 20th centuries) (Sources: <http://blog.pucp.edu.pe/media/1987/20101019-capon.jpg> and http://www.rpp.com.pe/2012-01-22-actividades-por-llegada-del-ano-del-dragon-en-la-calle-capon-noticia_443314.html).

The origin of the word *chifa* or *chifa* could be a deformed version of the Chinese expression “to go and eat rice” and what the locals hear when their *culí* neighbours went to eat. The expression ultimately defined the food, which is the result of a fusion of Chinese cuisine and Peruvian culinary traditions; it is similar to the generic idea of “going for a Chinese” in other parts of the world.

This current situation of integration should not let us forget the difficulties they faced in the beginning, due to the ban on being buried in cemeteries. Marginalization and exclusion were making way for their gradual adaptation and inclusion, with mixed marriages that would ultimately bring about the origin of a rich cultural exchange and a contribution to the history of Peru (for example, its involvement in the War of the Pacific) (Casalino, 2005). As far as cuisine was concerned, the migrants began to include local products such as guinea pig, beef, or tamarind, and also promoted the growing and import of rice, just as opium was in the 19th century. The commercial relationships which began to grow proved essential to establish close commercial relations between Peru and China, since it gained independence.

2. SPREAD OF CHINESE FOOD IN THE SPANISH-SPEAKING WORLD THROUGH CHIFA FOOD

The spread of Chinese food in the Spanish-speaking world has followed different flows and waves, but the role of *chifa* cuisine is relatively unknown. The Peruvian *culí*’ linguistic ease favoured its spread within the Spanish-speaking world, both in the Americas and Spain.

Before diving into defining *chifa* cuisine and seeing the importance it has had in the spread of Chinese food, we should remember that the *culí* culinary tradition is chiefly linked to Southern China: this is where it originated, and it therefore follows a Cantonese culinary tradition (粵菜). In Chinese cuisine, Cantonese cuisine represents only one of the eight great culinary traditions, although it may well be the most spread in the world, because it was enabled by the great migrant flow from the South. It is defined by its wide variety of products, although it places a special emphasis on seafood, a fair amount of spice, and fundamentally on rice and rice noodles. The spread of this culinary tradition has often erroneously reduced Chinese cuisine to Cantonese cuisine; however, we must contextualize it and understand that it is only one of its traditions. As such, when we speak broadly Chinese food, we often allude to an initially Cantonese tradition which is also often adapted to external tastes.

2.1 *Chifa* cuisine: a culinary fusion

Chifa cuisine alludes to the culinary tradition of a fusion between the *culí* descendants’ Cantonese tradition and the Peruvian culinary traditions. These include creole and indigenous traditions, mainly from the Coya villages, but also to a lesser extent from other sources like the sea and the jungle (Fig. 5).

It is important to remember that Peruvian cuisine is already in itself a fusion of various culinary traditions. As such, strictly speaking, *chifa* food is the fusion of two culinary traditions which are already the result of fusions, as is the case for Chinese and Peruvian traditions. Starting from culinary traditions which were already the result of fusions is important, given that it will also allow for a greater understanding of the great receptiveness and adaptation of both Cantonese and Peruvian cuisines. It would surely have been more difficult to incorporate external elements in more established culinary traditions. As such, we should talk about Chinese and Peruvian cuisines, as well as *chifa* cuisine, as a cuisine of fusion which differs depending on where it adapts. For example, the preparation of guinea pig in Lima would

clearly not be common in Spanish chifa restaurants, which would adapt to the distinctive features of the Iberian Peninsula.

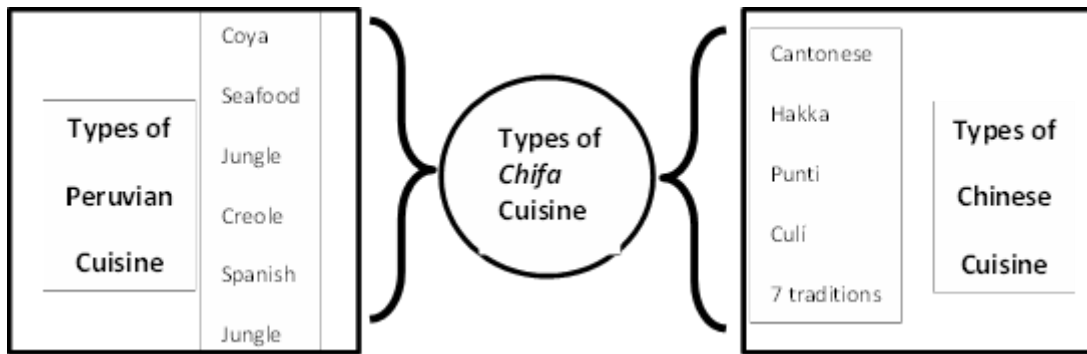


Figure 5: Chifa cuisine, a fusion of two complex traditions (Source: Own work drawn from various sources).

Considering these facts, it goes without saying that despite being self-defined by Peruvians or foreigners as Chinese food, chifa cuisine is far-removed from that idea. In fact, the very same Cantonese tradition defines chifa cuisine as Kuei (of the devil), which indicates somewhat disdainfully a tradition seen as foreign, impure and far-removed from the original tradition (Scarpetta, 1989). Chifa cuisine is presented as a hybrid, with no recognition for either traditional Cantonese tradition or the traditional Peruvian tradition (Canclini, 1995). There is a paradox, in that for Peruvians, this cuisine would come to represent the Chinese tradition, whereas for Chinese people, chifa food would be considered as foreign cuisine. We are faced with a curious case of a culinary trans-culture which is ultimately creating its own cuisine (Cuccioletta, 2002). Its lack of a model and marginalization from both the groups from which it is derived reflects the mixed nature of Lima’s culí descendants. Their food is a reflection of a mixed group which has ultimately created its own collective cultural model from a reciprocal exclusion, quite apart from the orthodoxies that govern the original traditions (Harrington, 1998). This blend is built from chifa food, but also from linguistic and religious themes (Marti, 1980).

The elaboration of this tradition in itself is not intentional; really, it was the result of a long process of multiple adaptations. On the one hand, it is worth mentioning that the culís had to adapt their original culinary tradition to the local needs and tastes. Moreover, on the other hand, they had to look for local products to substitute the original ones that were not available. For example, tamarind would come to replace apricot syrup. Ultimately, we must think not only of a fusion of products and an alteration of tastes, but also that they had to adapt to the Western culinary format; they had to adapt to producing served up, seasoned and individual (not shared) dishes, contrary to the custom in China. The ingenious solutions for adaptation ultimately created new culinary formats. For instance, the option of Chinese restaurants as free buffets was a curious symbiosis. Using modernity as an excuse, the Western tradition of a plate that one fills himself can work alongside the option of free choice from all the dishes of the Oriental tradition. The central trays of the buffets allow for the coexistence of both concepts of the dish.

Chifa cuisine therefore reflects the fusion of diverse culinary traditions’ culinary elements, while basing themselves on the common elements they share. For example, the tradition of grilling and steaming, or even a liking for spicy, sweet and savoury flavours, would be common axes, upon which new recipes would appear as a result of this fusion. Each new dish reflects the ingenious adaptations of two traditions with a view to ultimately merge these two together and even other audiences. As such, chifa food can be understood both as an adaptation of Peruvian traditions to Cantonese food, just as it can conversely be understood as an adaptation of Cantonese traditions in Peruvian cuisine. Chifa cuisine can therefore be a fusion which could be equally included as part of each tradition.

Table 2: Chinese food in the Spanish-speaking world, inheriting many unknown flavours (Source: Own work drawn from various sources).

CHIFA	CANTONESE (粵 菜)	PERUVIAN	INTERNATIONAL
Starters	Yuet Baeng (月餅)	Pickled turnip	Spring roll
Soups	Tong sui (糖水)	Wholesome chicken	Pac now
Rice/Noodles	洪式煎麵	Fried rice	Fried rice with meat
Poultry	Xio Oh (燒鵝)	Chicken with pineapple	Lemon chicken
Pork	Siew Yhok (燒肉)	Pork with tamarind	Pork chop suey
Beef	Shahe fen	Chifa-style steak	Beef chop suey
Fish	Dace (鯪魚球)	Fish in soy-bean sauce	Fish chop suey
Desserts	Yuet Baeng (月餅)	Chifa-style pisco sour	Apple pastry

Specialities	Guilinggao (龜苓膏)	“Aeropuerto” (pork fried rice)	Tay Pa
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The great capacity for adaptation in chifa cuisine gives it a malleability which makes it an excellent basis for experimentation to be spread to any other tradition. We must remember that in some ways, although on a local scale we can say that chifa food is Limeño culinary tradition, we can credit it as *culí* because of migrant Cantonese cuisine; as such, it is naturally adaptable. Therefore, within the variety of dishes in chifa food, we find elements that are more characteristic of Cantonese, Peruvian, or even of an international *culí* influence. In Table 2, we see a distinction between some chifa dishes, depending on their chief influence, although they are all part of the same mixed reality.

The result is a fusion in which everyone finds differences in their own traditions. A Cantonese person would struggle to recognize his own tradition in chifa dishes prepared with guinea pig or in the important role played by beef and the use of freeze-dried potato, just as Peruvian tradition does not recognize sweet and sour sauces, or the predominant presence of rice. Despite the differences, as we will see later on, some dishes have achieved such a perfect union between both traditions that they have ultimately shaped the success and very existence of chifa cuisine; this is the case of *aeropuerto especial* (Peruvian pork fried rice). This name gives the dish an almost visionary feel for travelling peoples such as the *culís*; it is a convincing union based on fried rice, as the star dish, sautéed noodles *kam lu wantan* (pork meat, quail eggs, mushrooms, prawn tails, wonton, peppers and yellow chillies, pineapple, bees' honey, oyster sauce and maize) and a portion of *chijaukay* chicken (crispy chicken in spicy sauce).

2.2 Role of chifa food in the spread of Chinese cuisine in the Spanish-speaking world

The diffusion of Chinese food has been enormously successful due to various circumstances. Firstly, we must remember that Chinese cuisine represents one of the richest culinary cultures. Secondly, it is worth mentioning that the boom in the spreading of Chinese food has a long-established tradition in Asia, but it is relatively new in the West and other parts of the world. This expansion has happened alongside the opening up of China, especially with regards to the role played by the *culí* community. Thirdly, the link between Chinese migration and Chinese food in the world is evident when we observe that both come from the same Southern Chinese region and, moreover, coincide in the areas they spread to. Fourthly, it is worth mentioning the curious reconsideration of Cantonese cuisine within Chinese cuisine, precisely thanks to its boom on an international level, and in some thriving major metropolises in China, such as Hong Kong or Shanghai. The return of the culinary experiences of *culí* food has given a new energy to traditional Cantonese food. The migrant *culí*'s humble cuisine, which conquered half the world, has ultimately been recognised in its own home.

Within the context of the Spanish-speaking world, the expansion of Chinese food happened relatively late compared to other Western countries. A rapid spreading of Chinese food, which is understood as a generically Oriental even though it includes various traditions, such as Cantonese, Vietnamese and Indonesian was ignited by: on the one hand, the colonial exchanges and ensuing post-colonial migratory flows of the United Kingdom in South-East Asia and Hong Kong, France in Indochina, Portugal in Timor and Macau, or even the Netherlands in Indonesia, and on the other, *culí* migratory flows in the world (such as in the USA, Canada, Australia and South Africa). The opening up of communication and migration is contributing to societies' becoming more and more multicultural (Kymplicka, 1995), with other Asian culinary traditions, such as Japanese, Korean or Thai providing an appeal in the East; this is also the case for other areas in the world, such as South Asia, Arab countries, the Caribbean and African countries, which allow room for fusions. In other instances, such as in music or fashion, the same would happen.

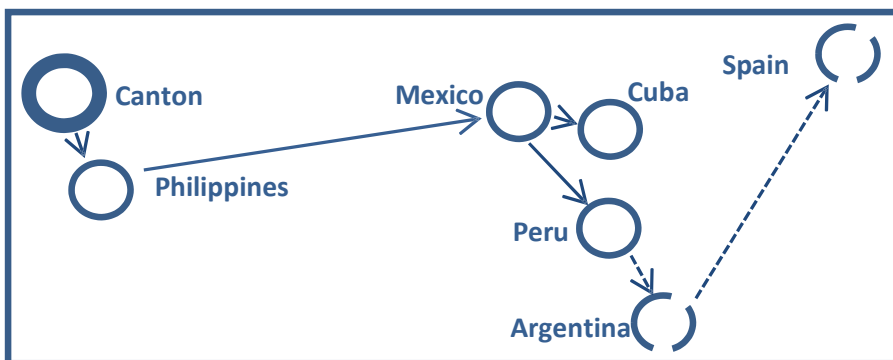


Figure 6: The role of chifa food in the spread of Cantonese food in the Spanish-speaking world. (Source: Own work).

Except for the *culí* communities in some Latin American countries (such as Peru, Mexico, Cuba and Panama), the Spanish-speaking world remained on the sidelines of Chinese cuisine's influence, even well into the 80s and 90s. The arrival of Chinese cuisine came about primarily because of indirect *culí* migration. The arrival of the first Chinese restaurants in Spanish America and Spain follows the influence of the Chinatown model in North America's big cities; it took place in most cases thanks to the arrival of *culí* descendants from North America and Northern Europe, but mainly thanks to *culí* descendants from Peru. Their linguistic ease helped the spread to Argentina and Chile. In the case of Spain,

in a first instance, second generation Peruvian *culí* descendants would open the first restaurants in big cities, sometimes after going via Argentina beforehand. This growing interest would lead to a second instance alongside Spain's booming economy at the end of the 90s, whereby a second wave of direct and indirect migrants would take part in the spreading of Chinese restaurants beyond the big cities.

Part of the success of Chinese restaurants in countries such as Argentina, Chile or Spain is due to the fact that actually, *chifa* food businesses were being set up by Sino-Peruvians under the alias "Chinese food". Their capacity for adaptation was better partly because of an ease with the language, and also because they established a cuisine which has already been re-interpreted for Western countries, and made more adaptable to local tastes. *Chifa* food expanded in the Spanish-speaking world alongside the migration of *culí* descendants, under a veil of general unawareness. The nature of standardized international Chinese food, suitable for even the most reluctant stomachs, clouded the reality of inheritance into a *chifa* reality.

3. CHIFA FOOD AND ITS SUCCESSFUL SYNCRETISM

The success of *chifa* food is based on its great capacity for adaptation and its syncretism. It represents a type of survival from a culinary tradition based on a legacy which adapts to where the migrants are, both in terms of their products and of the locals with who they mix. This feature makes it a rich and creative culinary basis, though it never stops gaining recognition, as it is not identified as a particular social or territorial model. The case of *chifa* food reflects the dilemma of trans-culturalism's place as its own cultural construction (Lewis, 2002). However, more and more cosmopolitan societies tend to incorporate and recognize these cultural fusions as their own models, having lingered in the greatest anonymity or even marginalization for a long time. In the last few years, we see on the one hand a reinterpretation of local native and ethnic flavours as a shelter for these identities; however on the other hand, blendings went from being seen as side-lined hybridizations to creative fusions. Plural experiences are understood as true laboratories for innovation and creation, while also representing an historic revision; in turn, this dignifies and creates boundaries all over again, from new plural logics.

3.1 *Chifa food: an adaptable cuisine*

The adaptation of *chifa* food is defined by its ability to find common elements from diverse culinary traditions in order to ultimately create new dishes, as a result of this fusion. They can therefore be incorporated in both traditions, or can build their own new tradition as *chifa*. Furthermore in this case study, it is worth remembering that we are using Peruvian and Chinese traditions, two of the richest and most complex non-Western culinary traditions, as a starting point. Consequently, the fusion of both traditions produces a broad field of experimentation in which *culí* descendants were able to investigate for years; they left the building blocks of a true *chifa* cuisine, beyond its original style.

Arroz *chaufán* con pollo is one of the best examples of the flavourful symbiosis of Peruvian and Chinese culinary fusions, which ultimately made up one dish (Silva, 2012) (Fig. 7). *Chifa* cuisine is genuine, given that its origins are no longer distinguishable. The dishes now promote themselves as a tradition of their own from which, moreover, there is more room for experimentation, as they were conceived from a broad and plural basis.

From this angle, we could say that *chifa* food provides a positive answer to the question as to whether trans-culturalism can ultimately create its own models. The popularity of arroz *chaufán* con pollo expanded across all *chifa* restaurants in Lima, as well as the rest of Peru and in a considerable number of Chinese restaurants in the Spanish-speaking world without even realizing. Its success is partly due to the choice between wide varieties of ingredients from diverse origins, which come to define a new tradition, even though this happened anonymously. With rice on one hand and chicken on the other, in some way they symbolize the union of both origins. The rest of the ingredients and origins make the dish *chifa*, even depending on whether it is seen as one of the best Cantonese, or even Peruvian dishes.

3.2 *A current trans-cultural recognition*

Chifa cuisine lingered in anonymity under the generic term "Chinese food", both on local Limeño, and international scale. However, in the last few years, it has begun to be recognised as a fusion cuisine, with a long historic legacy (Fig. 8). Nobody would have imagined that years ago, these *culí* cooks behind the Limeño inns would be recognised in international magazines, and that their dishes would represent some of the most trend-setting contemporary ideas. This situation can only be recognised from the point of view of our post-modern societies. In unambiguously-modelled contexts, all heading in the same direction, there was little room for differences, though it stemmed from its marginalization and as a model for a homogenizing heritage. Conversely, in the current stance on multiculturalism, the understanding of societies is seen from its plurality and complexity (Bourque, 1997). Far from falling into a simplistic abyss of chaos or crisis, because of a lack of a model to follow, the referential multiplicity and relativity in action bring about a discussion regarding which criteria to choose.



Figure 7: The spread of chifa food in the Spanish-speaking world: the case of arroz chaufa con pollo (fried rice with chicken) (Source: (Chirre, 2009: 44)).



Figures 8 and 9: International recognition of chifa food (Source: http://huachoblog2012.wordpress.com/2012/01/19/restaurantes-centricos-de-la-localidad-de-huacho/img_1686 and <http://static.betazeta.com/www.sabrosia.com/up/2012/12/restrevel-660x350.jpg>).

Within this new context, chifa food went from being a hybrid that was not even worth mentioning to a rich fusion experience; its main quality was that it could appear to be something else. In this case, it was Chinese food. It has even been acknowledged with rewards: the Sabrosía restaurant in Madrid, for example, has been awarded the title of best affordable restaurant of 2012 in Spain (Fig. 9). Chifa cuisine is now recognised in Lima and beyond. It is currently perceived as part of the country's rich culinary heritage, in the same way as Creole or Coya cuisine. The recognition of chifa cuisine is a tribute to a cuisine of survival and of overcoming obstacles.

Nowadays, chifa food is beginning to find its place, with its own name and because of its inheriting a history of migrants who knew how to adapt and blend in, without losing sight of their origins. Their life experience is reflected in the history of each of their dishes. Mixture and migration became synonymous with chifa. Its reconsideration allows us to pay tribute to the history of others, and tempts us to a flavourful trans-culturalism, far-removed from bland and reductionist dishes (Lewis, 2008). ¡Chaufa!

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