Americans seem to love their Chinese food, every small town and big city has a Chinese Take Out restaurant. The idea of Chinese culture is captivating to non-Chinese because they feel like they are participating in a new, exotic, lesser known culture. Chinese food brings people together, as most cuisine does, and just about anyone when asked what their favorite kind of Chinese food is will have an answer in 20 seconds or less. Many families have a tradition of getting Chinese for certain occasions. Chinese food is an example of popular culture because of the way it operates through cultural supermarkets, authenticity debates, mass media saturation, and how it has changed in meaning and use over time.

The theory of cultural supermarkets deals with the idea that since the globalization of culture is so immanent in today’s global world that someone can now choose different aspects of other cultures they want to embrace, even if this culture is not part of the main stream culture in their part of the world. With the globalization of Chinese food, it has also done this. The food that a typical American would think of as Chinese food is not the same as what those in mainland China actually consume. The Chinese cooks that have immigrated to other countries and brought their food along with them were more than not self taught. They all used their own materials “to satisfy the imagination of a Chinese eating culture” (Wu, Improvising Chinese, 56). This illustrates that the Chinese cooks that are leaving China are not all trained the same way or going to use the identical ingredients. The cooks instead just use what they believe will make a dish seem to be the most authentic Chinese food found in the area they are trying to make a living,
while still making it appealing to the locals tastes and preferences. Another example of a cultural supermarket coming into play is that traditional Chinese food consists mainly of pork, but in America the main ingredient in Chinese food is chicken. The cuisine that is found in America is a lot sweeter than that which is found in China. The dishes in America are typically consistent of a fried form of meat, unlike in China (Lee, General Tso, 74). The vast cultural supermarket that now exists in the world creates a large variety of Chinese food around the world.

Another way that you can see that Chinese food is a form of popular culture is through the authenticity debates it operates in. Atkins describes authenticity as being true to its origin, he also says that this then “privileges one voice as more legitimate than another” (Atkins, Can the Japanese, 32). In Taiwan they are obsessed with the authenticity of their Chinese food. They believe that they can only have true Cantonese food if it is prepared by a chef from Hong Kong, thus the chefs that are from Hong Kong are generally paid higher than those of Taiwanese origin even if these Taiwanese chefs went to Hong Kong to receive formal training. Since the Taiwanese wanted authentic cuisine and willing to pay the cooks more for it this type of food was usually reserved for the wealthy people (Wu, Cantonese Cuisine, 90). Taiwan did not always promote outside culture and incorporate it into everyday life. The Taiwanese were proud of their culture, but then began to take the Cantonese cooking and put their own cultural touch onto it. (Wu, Cantonese Cuisine, 91). The Taiwanese embraced the authentic idea of the Chinese cuisines but eventually began to appropriate it into their own daily lives and their own kind of cuisine.

Additional arguments for authentication include those in which customers want not just the food to be authentic, but also the atmosphere. The managers of Chinese restaurants form their
establishments to conform to the stereotype that is equivalent to what their potential customers believe China to be like. The managers would enact this through how the restaurant is set up, the decorations on the walls and statues in the restaurant, the colors within the restaurant, and how the wait staff dresses. (Wu, Improvising Chinese, 61) Jennifer Lee discusses a lot about authenticity debates in her book, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles*. In chapter 1 she discusses P.F. Chang’s, an American Chinese restaurant chain, and how inauthentic the chain truly is. She talks about how the chefs were shocked when an actual Chinese man was hired to work in the kitchen alongside them. She also goes on to point out that there is not a single person of Chinese descent that works for the top management of the company. The entire P.F. Chang’s franchise is run by Americans, nothing about it authentically Chinese expect for the Americanized version of Chinese food that they serve and the way that the restaurant is decorated, with terra-cotta warrior statues that most Chinese would actually see as unlucky. Lee explains, “Were it not for the certain Chinese-ish items, the restaurant could be a nice steakhouse” (Lee, American-Born, 18-19). The fact that this national chain of restaurants is so inauthentic but each store is able to bring in $5 million each year shows that Americans do not sincerely care about whether or not the Chinese food they are consuming is really an authentic Chinese dish or just the Americanization of it (Lee, American-Born, 18). The customers just want to enjoy the food that they have learned to love. The debate of authenticity is made when people coming from China to America and see that the Chinese food they grew up with is just is not exactly what Americans have come to love.

Mass Media saturation is another way that Chinese food operates as a popular culture form. The Chinese culture became popular in the United States in the early 1970s after then President Richard Nixon went to China, thus creating an obsession in America about all things
Chinese. (Lee, General Tso, 79). Then, in 1974, a local New York news station went to a Chinese restaurant and filmed the making of General Tso’s Chicken. Within the next few days more than fifteen hundred people wrote in asking for the recipe of the dish. The dish then became a fundamental part of Chinese food in America. This quick spread of the popularity of Chinese food was due to the reporter reporting that the dish was “a one-time instant love affair” (Lee, General Tso, 81). This public stance of affection towards Chinese food then once again surged the attractiveness of it. The media provided a strong medium to enable Chinese food to achieve even a greater popularity within the United States.

Chinese food also operates as a popular cultural form through how it has transformed in meaning over time. This is evident in the previous paragraphs, but a concrete example of this is the dish of dim sum. This dish was brought to Japan by way of the immigrants from the Southern part of China that settled in Yokohama Chinatown. The food that was brought by these immigrants was then domesticated to better fit the “Japanese diet and eating habits”, but at the same time it shows how the Japanese “adopted and localized” other cultures (Cheung, Invention, 174). The Cantonese dish of dim sum shows this appropriation that the Japanese tended to use on other cultures that had been introduced to the Japanese by way of immigrants. Dim Sum has a unique ingredient combination that requires the cooks to have special training, so the cooks that made this dish were usually “hired from Hong Kong to work in the Yokohama Chinatown” (Cheung, Invention, 175). In Hong Kong and much of southern China this dish was enjoyed at breakfast, but in Yokohama Chinatown the Japanese generally enjoyed it as a snack or appetizer. This kind of food is very different from the usual cuisine that is available in Yokohama Chinatown, making it an exotic form of Cantonese food to the local Japanese. The Japanese thought of this dish as high class and it introduced the Japanese to an “uncommon pleasure
compared to the ordinary diet” (Cheung, Invention, 175). Dim sum is just one example of a dish that has changed its use since it was first created and has adapted from the original dish it was where it was invented.

An additional example of the meaning, production and use of a dish occurring is with General Tso’s Chicken. Jennifer Lee, the author of *The Fortune Cookie Chronical*, went on a quest to find where General Tso’s Chicken, a principal on most Chinese take out menus in America, genuinely came from in China. After countless dead ends she finally found what she believed to be the original General Tso’s Chicken. This chicken that Lee ended up eating was not even close to the same as what would be found at an average Chinese restaurant in America. There was not any broccoli in this dish, like all do in America. In place of the broccoli it had a strange type of herb. The chicken had skin on it but was not breaded or fried. The sauce was composed of mostly soy sauce, some garlic, and chili peppers, a sharp contrast from the sweet and tangy chicken that is found so abundantly in America (Lee, General Tso, 80). The General Tso’s that you find in China is rooted closer to the cuisine generally found throughout China as opposed to the fried, sweet foods you find in America. This dish adapted to the American palate, thus changing the dish in its entirety. When a piece of culture is brought into another culture it is more than likely going to change to fit into the culture’s norm and less from the culture it originated from.

Cultural supermarket, authenticity debates, mass media saturation, and the change in the production of the dishes all are ways that Chinese food operates as a form of popular culture. China has become a lot more open to the World since the death of Mao in the early 1970s, making their culture more accessible to global cultural supermarkets, allowing others to participate and
incorporate their culture into their daily lives. After the opening of China it made Chinese food a staple in many countries diets.