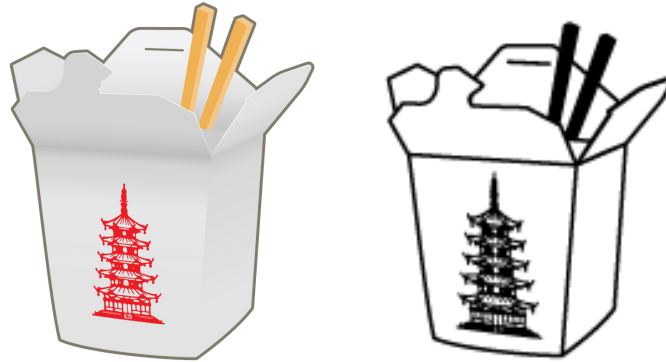


Chinese Takeout Box Emoji Proposal

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Abstract

We propose the inclusion of the trapezoidal Chinese takeout box emoji, a highly recognized icon that carries both literal and figurative meanings.

While the box itself is predominantly found in the United States and not used in greater China, it has become understood in Western cultures as a symbol of Chinese food, in addition to conveying the general concepts of takeout and delivery (Lee, 2008; Greenbaum and Rubinstein, 2012). In some cases, it has even been used to evoke the nation-state of “China” in American corporate advertising, despite the fact that the boxes themselves are not commonly found in Asia.

The emoji is expected to be used frequently because it is a visual shorthand for one of one of the most popular ethnic cuisines in the world, in addition to having secondary connotations of food preparation and lifestyle.

Official name: TAKEOUT BOX. Aliases: CHINESE TAKEOUT BOX, CHINESE FOOD TAKEOUT BOX, TAKEOUT CONTAINER, CHINESE TAKEOUT CONTAINER, CHINESE FOOD TAKEOUT CONTAINER, OYSTER PAIL, TAKE-OUT BOX, TAKE OUT BOX.

Introduction

Historical Context

The Chinese takeout box has a long and interesting history in the United States. The object that is now recognized as the Chinese takeout box was originally created to serve as an oyster pail around the turn of the 20th century. The first related patent was issued to the inventor Frederick Weeks Wilcox of Chicago in 1894 for a “paper pail.” A related patent was issued to 1908 to J.G. Reber for “oyster pail.” Wilcox’s original design was for “a single piece of foldable material and consisting of a body or chamber adapted to hold fluid or partly-fluid contents.”

Shortly after World War II, American Chinese restaurateurs adopted the paper pail for takeout and delivery because the design of the box made it semi-insulated and able to hold liquid (Greenbaum and Rubinstein, 2012). Since then, it has become increasingly popular as a symbol of Chinese food as well as a symbol of food delivery.

Factors for Inclusion

A. Compatibility

The Chinese takeout box is not used in any of the major platforms, so there is no need to adopt it for compatibility issues.

B. Expected Usage Level

The expected usage level of the trapezoidal Chinese takeout box is extremely high, in part because of the popularity of Chinese cuisine in Western countries, and also because of the general symbolism of the box for delivery and takeout.

The “slice of pizza” emoji is ranked by Emojitracker.com as being among the top 130 emoji in use on Twitter, and the “hamburger” emoji is ranked in the top 280. It is expected that the white trapezoidal takeout box would be similar in usage to those two emoji in the United States over time.

It could also be popular in other Western nations that share popular culture with the United States (Canada, Great Britain, Australia). There are 50,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States—more than the total number of McDonalds, Burger King, and Wendy’s restaurants combined. Within the United States, the number of Chinese

restaurants is comparable to the number of pizza restaurants, and around the world, Chinese restaurants are even more pervasive.

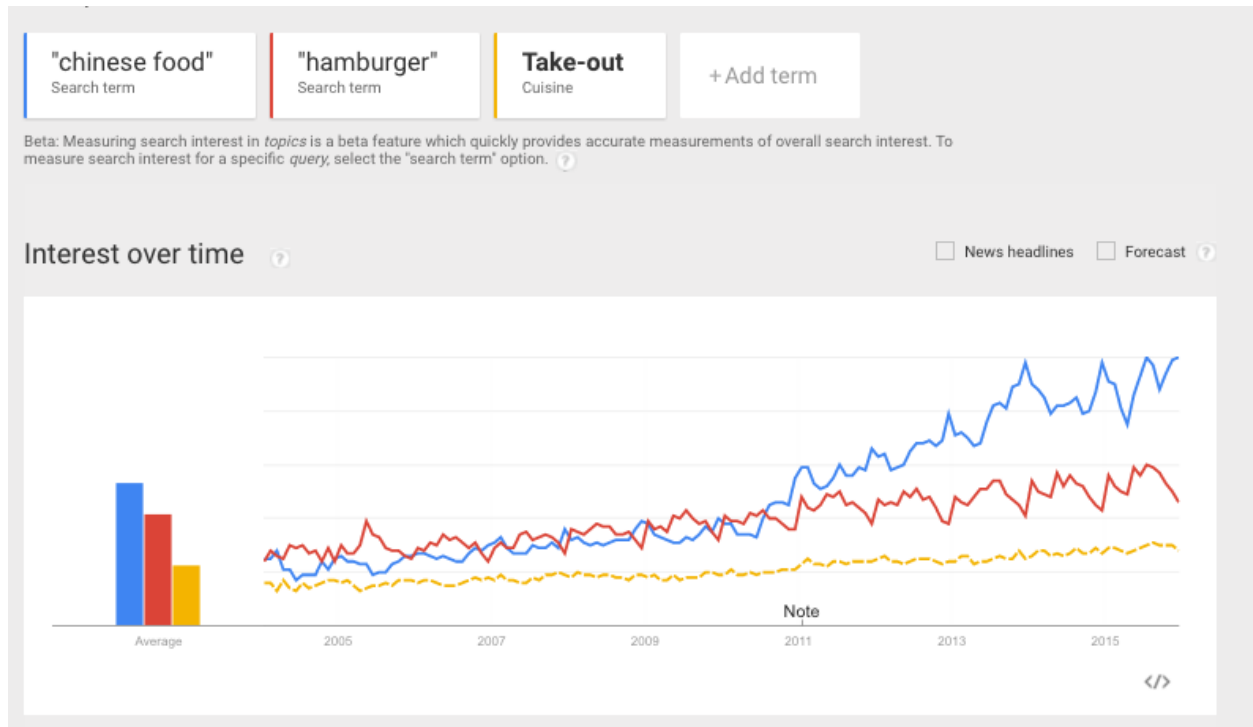
Chinese food is one of the most popular foods on the planet, served on all seven continents, including Antarctica—which serves it at McMurdo Station, the continent’s main scientific station. Chinese food has even been served in space: sweet and sour pork has been offered by NASA on its shuttle menus (Lee, 2008).

As the designer Scott Chapps said in a 2012 New York Times Times article, “The [Chinese takeout box] has come to represent the idea of Eastern cuisine in Western society even though this packaging is not used for food containment in Chinese culture.”

Indeed, the white trapezoidal box is so inextricably associated with Chinese food that Fold-Pak, the Pennsylvania company that makes two-thirds of America’s Chinese takeout boxes, had to introduce a separate line of flatter, brown takeout containers called Bio-Pak for use in other restaurant verticals (Lee, 2008).

1. Frequency

Below is a Google trends comparison (limited to the United States) of the relative popularity of the terms “Chinese food,” “take-out,” and “hamburger.” “Chinese food” exceeds hamburger, while “take-out” is about half the magnitude. In combination, “Chinese food” and “take-out,” both concepts represented by the white trapezoidal box, show very strong usage.



2. Multiple Usages

One of the unique advantages of the white trapezoidal takeout container is that it can be used as an umbrella icon to mean “Chinese food” in Western cultures, regardless of the specific underlying dish it refers to, whether General Tso’s chicken, beef with broccoli, roast pork fried rice, or chicken lo mein.

In contrast, no popular iconographic shorthand exists for other ethnic cuisines in emoji. Japanese food has a variety of emoji including “sushi,” “fried shrimp,” “curry and rice,” and “rice ball.” Tex-Mex/Mexican food now has “taco” and “burrito”; Italian derivatives have “slice of pizza” and “spaghetti.” But none of these have as powerful a visual shorthand to convey an entire ethnic cuisine.

Over the decades, the white trapezoidal takeout box has also acquired a number of secondary connotations not directly associated with the literal culinary meaning. The box is often used as a visual shorthand in Hollywood movies and television to convey long hours at work, urban lifestyle (despite the fact that Chinese food is widely available in suburbs), comfort food, and even intimacy among lovers and friends (Stack Exchange: Movies and Television, 2014; Reston, 2011).

Finally, the Chinese takeout box has been used to evoke the nation-state of China in commercial advertising, despite the fact the box is not actually used in China. Both FedEx and Continental Airlines (now United) used branded takeout boxes in their advertising campaigns when beginning service to China and Beijing respectively (Lee, 2008).

3. Emotional Content

Without context, the white trapezoidal takeout box does not evoke particular positive or negative sentiments. However, in context it can be used to convey a wide range of emotional meanings. These could be both negative (such as stress, through the idea of “long hours”) and positive (comfort and familiarity through the notion of Chinese takeout as “comfort food”).

4. Persistence

The white trapezoidal Chinese takeout container has been in popular use in the United States since after World War II—more than half a century. Since then, the boxes have also been used for Chinese food in Italy, South Korea, Brazil, Australia, and the United Kingdom. This international growth is notable because the boxes are not an accessible, inexpensive commodity product like they are in the United States. Notably, even though Chinese restaurants now often use flatter plastic or styrofoam flat containers, the white trapezoidal box still maintains its symbolism.

C. Image Distinctiveness

The trapezoidal Chinese takeout box is one of the most recognizable icons in the United States. “In America, if you just drew an icon of a box, people would understand exactly what it is,” said designer Michael Prince in a 2012 New York Times article. He added, “That’s a lot of power.”

As a result of global dominance of American pop culture, the icon is recognizable around the world. Even in Shanghai, locals will go into an American-Chinese restaurant and ask for their food to be served in the white containers, which they’ve seen on American television (Hatton, 2015).

It has also become a shape adapted to consumer retail. An examination of the popular crafts site Etsy (under the tag https://www.etsy.com/market/take_out_box) shows a wide selection of goods shaped like takeout boxes, including necklaces, bracelets, stuffed

toys, purses, and ceramics. The takeout box is also a notable Halloween costume, available on sites like fantasytoyland.com and costumes4less.com.

D. Completeness

Despite being one of the most popular ethnic cuisines globally, Chinese food does not have a distinct representation in the current emoji set. The white trapezoidal takeout containers would help complete that, at least in Western cultures. The box augments the food emoji that are already represented by “slice of pizza,” “hamburger,” “sushi,” and “taco.”

E. Frequently Requested

The Chinese takeout box was listed as “TAKEOUT FOOD” in the “Emoji Additions: Runner-ups” memo from the Emoji Ad-Hoc Committee dated January 3, 2015. (Doc. L2/15-061, available at <http://www.unicode.org/L2/L2015/15061-runners-up.pdf>). Also, a good proxy is the frequency of the Chinese takeout box in other icon repositories, since supply is a function of demand. Almost all clipart sites have images of takeout boxes for sale or download. The Noun Project alone has at least 12 versions of Chinese takeout boxes, both open and closed. Iconfinder has at least seven.

Factors for Exclusion

F. Overly Specific

By precedent set by the current food emoji set, the Chinese takeout box is not overly specific. In fact, it goes the opposite direction. It is general in that it conveys an entire vertical of cuisine in a visual shorthand without dealing with underlying dishes.

G. Open-Ended

The proposed emoji falls in the category of food-related emoji, of which over 70 are already incorporated into the Unicode emoji set. Although the takeout box is a container, rather than an edible, the icon closes a “food gap” in the existing emoji set for one of the most popular cuisines in the world. Arguably, the takeout box is more useful and less obscure than many existing food-related emoji. And unlike many of those, it carries with it many secondary connotations.

H. Already Representable

Chinese food can partially be evoked with “bowl of rice” and “steaming bowl” (which is commonly represented as a bowl with chopsticks, despite the fact that the official description does not refer to chopsticks). Chinese cuisine could also be represented indirectly by combining the Chinese flag with “knife and fork,” or the “bowl of rice” emojis. The flag approach has the disadvantage that not all Chinese food is from the nation-state of China (take, for example, Taiwan cuisine, American Chinese, Indian Chinese, and Peruvian Chinese, which are distinct cuisines unto themselves).

The white trapezoidal box *also* has the ability to represent “takeout,” “delivery,” or more generally, “a meal commercially prepared elsewhere but consumed either at home or office.” This concept is not neatly represented in emoji, though it could be cobbled together with “runner” and “knife and fork.”

I. Logos, brands, UI icons, signage, specific people, deities

The Chinese takeout box is a general use icon, and not specifically associated with logos, brands, people, or deities. It is not used in UI or government signage.

Other Character Properties

The other character properties are suggested to be defined as follows.

General Category: So

Canonical Combining Class: 0

Bidirectional Class: ON

Decomposition Type:

Decomposition Mapping:

Numeric Type:

Numeric Value:

Bidirectional Mirrored: N

Unicode 1 Name:

ISO Comment:

Simple Uppercase Mapping:

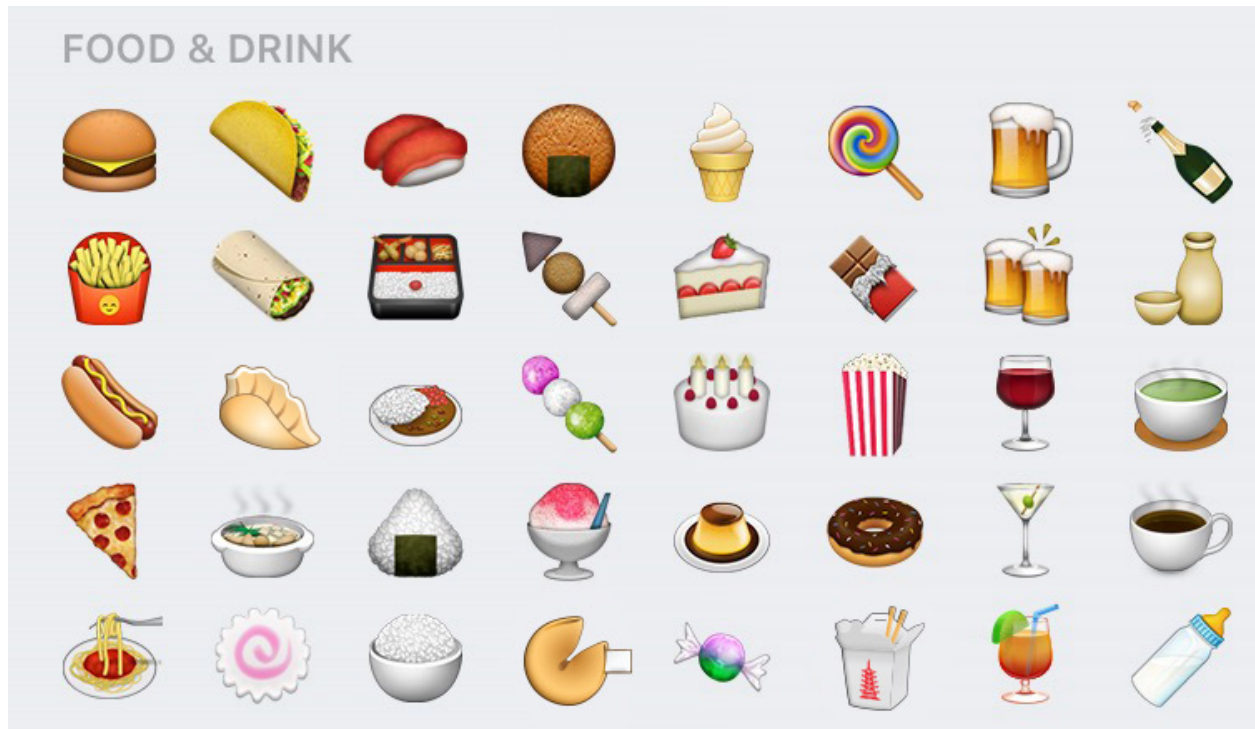
Simple Lowercase Mapping:

Simple Titlecase Mapping:

Art

The Chinese takeout box emoji was created by Yiyang Lu and is available for Unicode use and distribution.

The Chinese takeout box *in situ* in the Apple emoji keyboard



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