

**Rebecca Carriero**

**Topic: The role & influence of media on popular opinion**

Assignment 2/4/15: draw up a timeline showing the evolution of media technologies & their impact

**Fortune Cookies: The Original Tweets**

Ok, ok, I get the 140 character similarity, that's clever....but....how is a fortune cookie a media technology?? And what's the larger impact?



**Q: What is a media technology?**

A: It's just a tool used to communicate on a mass scale.

**Q: So how can a fortune cookie be considered a media technology?**

A: Well, Wonton Food, Inc. the world's largest manufacturer of fortune cookies and messages makes 3 billion per year shipping 5 million cookies per day to restaurants throughout the U.S, Canada, Latin America and Europe. <sup>i</sup> Each of these cookies are filled with a paper message, a string of "lucky" numbers and words in Chinese translated into English.

**Q: OK, so *that is* communicating on a mass scale. But, aren't other media technologies like TV, photography or the internet far more important?**

A: Sure TV and other forms of media might be bigger and brassier but this tasty, mini media technology shows that communications tools - big or small - can pack a punch. The fortune cookie's roots stretch back to the 1700s and have had a profound impact on shaping America's view of Chinese culture. And guess what...

**Q: What?**

A: Fortune cookies **AREN'T EVEN CHINESE!**

**Q: What are you talking about?**

A: Yeah, they don't even serve them in China! Watch this video of Chinese people eating a fortune cookie for the first time, <http://bit.ly/1zLvPBs>.

**Q: That's ridiculous. I've never heard of that.**

A: Their origins have been mysterious and contested for years but an author by the name of Jennifer 8. Lee shed light on a recent discovery. Fortune cookies actually come from Japan. She wrote a book about this and other food origins called, "The Fortune Cookie Chronicles." Jennifer concludes that fortune cookies were introduced by the Japanese, popularized by the Chinese, but ultimately ... consumed by Americans.



**Q: They're from Japan!? I thought Fortune cookies were like, Chinese proverbs?**

A: See [that's their impact right there](#). The cookies' "ancient Chinese proverb" schtick has contributed to a lot of cultural confusion, stereotypes and misinformation. But they also got a lot of Americans to become more comfortable with Chinese food and culture too. And it's tied into American, Japanese and Chinese history.

**Jeremy Lin's head over a Chinese fortune cookie. On MSG's TV.**

By Jennifer 8. Lee | February 16, 2012



Oops, Madison Square's faux-pas is a perfect example of the cookie that has incorrectly been used to signify Chinese culture.

MSG now regrets putting up a graphic of Jeremy Lin's head over the broken fortune cookie. Almost inevitable. But still, I think someone must have thought this was a good idea. And no one thought maybe it wasn't. On television is the strangest part.Â

**Q: That's a lot of history. Tell me about it.**

A: As far back as the 19th century, a cookie very similar in appearance to the modern fortune cookie called the senbei was made in Kyoto, Japan, and there is a Japanese temple tradition of "random" fortunes (finding wisdom in unexpected places). This 1878 Japanese block print depicts a man preparing senbei using the same hand-operated cookie grills still used in the Kyoto bakeries.



See the packman shaped cookies on the grill?

**Q: So how did they come to be known as Chinese?**

A: The cookie's path is relatively easy to trace back to **World War II**. At that time they were a regional specialty, served in California Chinese restaurants. There, American military personnel first encountered these treats. The cookies rapidly spread across the country. By the late **1950s**, an estimated 250 million fortune cookies were being produced each year by dozens of small Chinese bakeries and fortune cookie companies. Chinese-owned manufacturers began to take over fortune cookie production during World War II, when Japanese bakeries all over the West Coast closed as Japanese-Americans were rounded up and sent to internment camps. <sup>iii</sup> Here, watch a quick video on the history, <http://nyti.ms/16i9DBW>.

**Q: Has anyone ever taken the little fortunes inside seriously?**

A: I usually toss the cookie but crack several until I get the fortune I'm looking for. I'm guilty of taping my favorite one to my computer screen at work, "You will have much professional success," even though it was in my dinner companion's cookie and not mine.... People are known to play lotto numbers, or read into them further. And Homer Simpson almost cheated on his wife because of one! Watch here, <http://bit.ly/1LBeyj8>. Imagine all that power!

But these aren't messages from another world. They are written in handful of factories that each churn out upward of 4 million little slips of wisdom a day. Wonton Food contracts freelance writers once every couple years to craft new messages for the company's database of about 15,000 fortunes.<sup>iv</sup>



**Q: So they've been used by religious temples in Japan, Chinese restaurants across the U.S. and in pop culture. Have they been used for political purposes?**

A: Yes, **two U.S. Presidents used them during their** campaigns – JFK <sup>v</sup>and Clinton – and one obscure candidate used them during his campaign for Manhattan Borough president in 2008. The message inside read, “Ken Biberaj is in your future,”<sup>vi</sup>



**Q: Did I just blow your mind?**

A: Nope. Just made me a little hungry.

### **TAKEOUT TAKEAWAY:**

*Next time you use GPS to find your way down to Nom Wah restaurant on obscure Doyers Bend, having heard about it via a Snapchat story, be sure to tweet your fortune cookie message to remind everyone that not all technology is digital.*

<sup>i</sup> Martinez-Carter, Karina. “How do fortune cookie messages get written?” The Week. 5/13/13

<sup>ii</sup> Rhodes, Jesse. “Cracking Open the History of Fortune Cookies” Smithsonian.com 2/2/11

<sup>iii</sup> Lee, Jennifer. “Solving a Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery Inside a Cookie,” New York Times. 1/16/08

<sup>iv</sup> Martinez-Carter, Karina. “How do fortune cookie messages get written?” The Week. 5/13/13

<sup>v</sup> Robert F. Kennedy presidential campaign, 1968: Fortune cookie inserts. JFK Presidential Library and Museum website. <http://bit.ly/1urP3IN>

<sup>vi</sup> Barron, James. “Campaigning via Fortune Cookies.” New York Times. 9/6/13