

Gratuitous Gratuity

by Korosh Lasiang

I stare at the large empty plate left on the table, contemplating whether it was the right choice coming to a Szechuan restaurant. It was my first week both in college and in the US and—while I did not mind unexpectedly running into a few familiar faces from back home during middle school—would have far preferred to avoid doing things that felt like lamenting home, especially since I did not even like the spicy taste of Szechuan food.

But hey, my old classmates—all of whom have lived in the States prior—had invited me to dinner. Who was I to refuse? However, as these familiar faces across the table were finishing up their meals, the bigger question burning at the back of my mind was how we'd be paying the bill. What I was worried about wasn't the bill itself though—that'll surely be evenly split. What *did* worry me was how the tip was going to factor into this.

Of the many ups and downs I had perceived about the United States before coming upon her shores myself, one of the least changed perspectives I have held was regarding its more or less unique variation of the cultural practice of tipping. For as long as I could remember being aware of this custom, I have disliked it. For those not-Americans who may not be familiar with this custom as it currently exists in North America—in brief, tipping is the practice of paying an extra amount to a service worker to show gratuity for excellence in the service they have provided. It is most commonly seen in sit-down restaurants and often done by leaving cash at the table shortly before departure. The practice likely originated in medieval Europe, having made its

way to America in the 1850s via wealthy American travelers in Europe who felt the practice to be aristocratic and a way to publicly display their wealth (Ferdman).

Back at the restaurant, that day's heavy rain knocked out the power, and the cashier was unable to split our order electronically as the register wouldn't budge. Most of us didn't bring cash, and the one classmate who did opted to pay upfront so the rest of us could pay it back later. I was absolved of paying the bill directly, but what I did pay was my attention to the transaction. As my former classmate handed over the bill, to my slight surprise he asked the cashier if what he was planning to tip would be satisfactory. Given that both parties in this instance had been living in America for a considerable amount of time, I'd expected them to have comfortably grasped the intricacies of how much to tip. They went back and forth for a bit on the amount, sometimes jumping between straight up zero dollars to a few dozen bucks. Though this was all done in a somewhat lighthearted and joking manner, it still made me mildly uncomfortable. It was baffling to me that something as trivial as paying for a good and service with a marked price needed to entail any communication other than what concerned the transaction itself and general politeness. Fortunately, my classmate chose not to add his final tip to our original bill split, meaning I didn't have to pay extra for his decision. However, the ordeal did significantly deter me from dining out again. I already rarely dined out outside of social activities, so the uncertainty and inconsistency of the tip was something I'd rather not deal with over having a slightly fancier meal.

One of the first major trips I made leaving my university campus was to go to the bank. Calling an Uber was the most convenient option given where it was located, so I went ahead and called one. I knew that cab drivers in America tend to be chatty, and to be fair the driver who picked me up was indeed very hospitable and did not at any point make me feel uncomfortable.

However, what did slightly bamboozle me was towards the end of the ride when the app prompted me to tip, offering three options ranging from one to several dollars on top of my twelve-dollar fare. The driver was nice, and even though I'd have preferred to keep chatter to a minimum I reluctantly opted for the one-dollar tip, not wanting to be seen as disrespectful.

When I reflect upon that trip, what always makes me the most uncomfortable was the fact that the app had shown me three large buttons with predetermined quantities on top of a small, undoubtedly more difficult-to-see option. Furthermore, there was no button for “no tip”. Of course, this design choice may as well be marketing 101, but the fact that the tip screen was no doubt purposefully designed to make me fight every psychological barrier—the last of which was still named “custom amount” to nudge you toward a non-zero quantity—and then enter zero dollars with my own hands to avoid tipping made it feel completely unlike a gratuity and more like an obligation in the guise of a choice. Mind games, if you will.

And the more I think about it, the more I am led to doubt the sincerity of the hospitality from the drivers. If the social pressure to tip was so strong that the largest cab-calling app was using psychological marketing tricks to get you to tip, how could I not suspect that the chitter-chatter drivers always try to strike up with you are at least partially motivated by superficially making the customer feel that they were given a service, even when they did not request nor enjoy it?

Despite the negative things I have to say about the contemporary state of tipping culture and my utter distaste for its origins and spread, I do partially understand why those used to it might find it difficult to part with. While access to Individual Freedom, Self-Reliance, and Equality of Opportunity are supposedly some of the basic values that American society is built upon (Datesman et al.), it is unfortunately a fact of modern American labor laws that restaurants

are allowed to use tips to subsidize payment to their service workers, essentially allowing themselves to pay their employees below minimum wage as long as the threshold is covered by the tips (Wilder). As tipping permeated deeper into mainstream society, restaurant workers have become significantly dependent upon tips to put food on the table for themselves. In the short term, a widespread opposition or halt to the tipping practice will inevitably hurt their livelihoods. However, it is also from this very reason that a large majority of tip-accepting restaurants are able to consistently sustain the unethical but completely unsurprising practice of shifting the responsibility and blame onto customers instead of properly paying their own employees.

I still try my best to minimize restaurant visits and completely avoid the oh-so user interface—pressured tips for barebones services for which under no common circumstance would an extraneous fee of gratuity be reasonably expected. But at the end of the day, as much as I despise the culture and history of tipping as it exists in contemporary American society—chock full of discrimination and unchecked corporate greed—as a mere guest in a foreign country I cannot and should not do more than just civilly voice my opinion. After all, the future of the tip lies in no one’s hands but those of the young Americans themselves.

Works Cited

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