

YANG T'SU

Chinese Altar from Minneapolis

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In 1883, Woo Yee Sing and his younger brother Woo Du Sing opened the Canton Café, thought to be the first Chinese restaurant in Minnesota, on First Avenue South in Minneapolis. Almost 20 years later, the brothers moved their business to the second floor of a new building at 28–30 South Sixth Street and changed its name to Yuen Faung Low (Exotic Fragrance from Afar). More commonly known as “John’s Place,” after a nickname given to Woo Yee Sing, the restaurant was famous not only for its food but also for its exquisite, imported decor, including mother-of-pearl inlaid teakwood tables, embroidered fabrics, and carved panels from China. Its ambiance was further enhanced by the



five-piece altar set that was displayed in the dining area to bring good luck to the Woo brothers and their new business.¹

Crafted specifically for the restaurant and purchased in Guangzhou (Canton) in about 1910, the set consists of two flower vases, two candle holders, and a tiered incense urn. Porcelain panels inset on the molded pewter vessels depict individuals dancing and playing musical instruments. Insects, birds, and bats are delightfully hidden within the colorful floral design ornamenting the smaller panels. The enameled-porcelain-on-copper technique (known as “yang t’su” or foreign porcelain) originated in France and England but was developed in China, at the request of visiting missionaries, as early as the seventeenth century. Circular cabochons or convex medallions of orange, blue, and green glass decorate all five altar pieces.²

Charles H. Woo and Howard F. Woo, sons of Woo Du Sing and Woo Yee Sing respectively, managed the restaurant after the death of their fathers, aided by Lolita Woo (Howard’s wife), Donald Woo (the son of the third Woo brother), and Jack Hong Jue (the son of the original chef). The restaurant was open from 11:00 A.M. until 1:00 in the morning and catered mainly to downtown employees and shoppers. To suit midwestern palates, Yuen Faung Low served mainly chow mein and chop suey. Menu offerings were expanded after World War II, as U.S. soldiers who had been stationed in China



One of Yuen Faung Low’s richly appointed dining rooms, about 1915

had experienced more traditional flavors and ingredients.³

Yuen Faung Low remained in business until 1967 when the Woo family lost its lease and the building was torn down for a parking lot. At that time most of the restaurant’s articles—from its brass banister to its dishes—were sold, many of them to long-time customers.⁴ One of the few things not purchased was the altar, which stayed in the family. In 1997 Howard and Lolita Woo donated it to the Minnesota Historical Society. In the Society’s museum collections, it is reunited with one of the inlaid teak tables and the original sign that hung outside Yuen Faung Low. The Society has the good fortune to document this landmark restaurant and preserve this important piece of Minnesota history for generations to come.

¹ Sarah R. Mason, “The Chinese,” in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 534.

² Stephen W. Bushell, *Chinese Art* (New York: Brentano’s Publishing for Victoria and Albert Museum, 1914), 2:82.

³ Howard and Lolita Woo, interview with Sherri Gebert-Fuller, Minneapolis, August 19, 1997, transcript in museum collections accession file.

⁴ *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 21, 1967, p. 19. For more on the Woo family and its Minneapolis businesses, see Sarah R. Mason, “Liang May Seen and the Early Chinese Community in Minneapolis,” *Minnesota History* 54 (Spring 1995): 223–33.

The picture of the altar is by Peter Latner; the restaurant interior is in MHS collections, courtesy the Woo family.

Sherri Gebert-Fuller, projects supervisor in the Society’s museum collections department, has an East Asian Studies background and is currently completing an article about Moy Hee, a Chinese-American businessman who lived in St. Paul from 1900 to 1921. She thanks Paul Storch, MHS objects conservator, for providing material and construction analysis for the altar.



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