Romance of the Chinese Restaurant

In my travels I’ve dined in countless Chinese restaurants, a habit I share with Chinese around the world, though it’s probably true that any diaspora group seeks comfort in its cultural cuisine. But the global ubiquity of Chinese food may be unparalleled. Chances are that in your neighborhood, whether it’s Tuscany or Tuscaloosa, there’s a place that serves General Tso’s chicken.

The most popular Chinese restaurant in my hometown of Duluth was Joe Huie’s Cafe, owned by my father and somewhat notorious because it was open 24 hours a day. I started working there when I was 12, keeping the books, carefully entering in longhand the daily expenses. I graduated to stints in the kitchen, cashiering, and waiting on tables all through high school. During college I cooked for my older brother at his more upscale establishment, the Chinese Lantern, less than a mile from our dad’s place.

So I guess soy sauce runs through my veins, and still, whenever I’m in a new city, I’m on the lookout for an “authentic” Chinese American restaurant like Joe Huie’s. I don’t mean the establishments that serve actual delights imported from China (which I also love), but rather the chop suey joints that specialize in the classic, bastardized, Americanized fare such as egg foo young covered in gravy and gooey, celery-based chicken chow mein, piled on crunchy noodles: my comfort food.

Of all the places I’ve been, the one that may be the gold standard of the genre was the wondrous Nankin in downtown Minneapolis. I was maybe six when I first visited on family trips from Duluth. We always ended up at the Nankin, which was far grander than Joe Huie’s and felt to this provincial child like the closest experience to being in China without actually going there.

Looking back, I wonder how our sense of authentic becomes mutated. Who gets to define what is real Chinese food? Or what is American? I have argued that the egg roll, for instance, is as American as the hot dog or taco. We’re defined by what we eat, as they say.

What to make of all of this? I’m not sure, but it seems that a lot of how we think about Chinese people has to do with faux exotic Chinese food dens with their festive lanterns, oriental fonts, Karate Kid accents, and cheesy fortune cookie wisdom—even to a Chinese American boy born and raised in Duluth.

—Wing Young Huie

Among Wing Young Huie’s several current projects is an exploration of Chinese-ness. What is cultural identity, national identity, personal identity?
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