

From Cathay to Canada:



Chinese Cuisine in Transition

The Ontario Historical Society



From Cathay to Canada: Chinese Cuisine in Transition

*A Collection of papers from the symposium exploring
Chinese cuisine in Canada*

Jo Marie Powers, Editor

The Ontario Historical Society

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**Published by:
The Ontario Historical Society
34 Parkview Avenue
Willowdale, Ontario
M2N 3Y2
(416)226-9011
Fax (416)226-2740**

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ISBN 0-919352-27-8**

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In Appreciation

We gratefully acknowledge the donors to the symposium and to this publication:

Jean Burnet

Mr. and Mrs. Yuk Chee (Harvey) Chan

Dorothy Duncan

Jacqueline M. Newman

Jo Marie Powers

Shirley Lum
A Taste of the World, Toronto

Department of Family Studies
University of Guelph

Bill Wong
Hospitality Centre, George Brown College, Toronto

Archie McLean
Maple Leaf Foods, Toronto

Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation
Province of Ontario

Irene Shen Hsu and Frank Hsu
Young Lok Restaurant, North York, Ontario

Foreword

The Ontario Historical Society and the School of Hotel and Food Administration at the University of Guelph co-hosted the symposium "From Cathay to Canada: Chinese Cuisine in Transition" on Saturday, April 12, 1997 at the North York City Hall in Willowdale, Ontario. This symposium brought together a large and enthusiastic audience from across the province to explore the important influences and contributions that Chinese-Canadians and their foodways have made to Canadian cuisine in the last century.

The symposium began with an historical introduction that the speakers expanded into a delightful review of traditional and contemporary ingredients, recipes, dishes, customs and folklore surrounding the Chinese food experience. The co-sponsors were privileged to be able to bring together this group of knowledgeable speakers from many disciplines to share their expertise and scholarship. We were also blessed with the support of generous donors listed on page *iii* whose financial support made both the symposium and the publication of these papers possible.

Finally, a very special word of thanks to Jean Hume, the University of Guelph, and Robert Levery, The Ontario Historical Society, who served on the organizing committee with patience and good humour.

The Ontario Historical Society would like to dedicate this publication to all Chinese-Canadians, for they have made tremendous contributions to our Canadian way of life over the last 150 years. Many of these contributions are invisible, but their perseverance and devotion to the food industry is unique. Wherever we travel in Canada we find Chinese restaurants serving excellent meals at modest prices, a combination that we all respect and admire. Thank you. We are all deeply grateful.

Dorothy Duncan
Executive Director
The Ontario Historical Society

From Cathay to Canada: Chinese Cuisine in Transition

**Saturday, April 12, 1997
Council Chambers, North York City Hall
5100 Yonge Street**

Programme

Chinese Food Traditions	Valerie Mah, Principal, Bruce Public School, Toronto
Manners at the Chinese Table	Karen Fan, Applied Human Nutrition Student, University of Guelph
Guests of the Chinese Government at their Table	Jean Hume, Food Instructor, HAFA, University of Guelph
Vegetarian Buddhist Cuisine	Rana Chow, Applied Human Nutrition Student, University of Guelph
Dim Sum	Bill Wong, Professor and Co-ordinator, Chinese Cuisine Programme, George Brown College, Hospitality Centre, Toronto
Dim Sum at Young Lok Restaurant	4950 Yonge Street, North York
Chinese Food in Contemporary Society	Stephen Wong, cookbook author, consultant and regular contributing food journalist, <i>Vancouver Sun</i>
Chinese Ingredients: Both Usual and Unusual	Dr. Jacqueline M. Newman, Professor and Chairperson, Family Nutrition and Exercise Sciences Department, Queens College, New York and Editor-in-Chief, <i>Flavor and Fortune</i> (focusing on Chinese cuisine)
Cuisine of Northern China	Dr. Huiping Zou, Associate Professor, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, China and Visiting Professor, HAFA, University of Guelph and Brian Zhang, Graduate Student, Master's of Management Studies, HAFA, University of Guelph and B.A.A., Beijing University of Economics and Trade
Chinese Cooking Techniques	Ella Yoa, B.Sc., Food Specialist and Consultant and Judy Seto, Student, Applied Human Nutrition, University of Guelph
The Chinese Wedding Feast	Diana Hsieh, Graduate Student, Master's of Management Studies, HAFA, University of Guelph
Chinese Tea at O Mei Restaurant	5150 Yonge Street, North York, with Shirley Lum, <i>A Taste of the World Tours</i>
Book Signing	Stephen Wong signing his new cookbook <i>New World Noodles</i>

Introduction

Chinese cuisine is a complex subject not only because of the enormous diversity of Chinese dishes and their distinct regionality, but of the interrelation of food and medicine, food and world view and the importance of cultural food rules. The symposium, "From Cathay to Canada: Chinese Cuisine in Transition" brought together food professionals and experts whose combined efforts resulted in an excellent overview of Chinese cuisine in Canada today. The papers submitted from this symposium are included in this publication.

The collection begins with keynote speaker Valerie Mah and her perspective of life as a Chinese-Canadian growing up in Ontario. From a young age she worked in her family's Chinese restaurant, as did many Chinese-Canadians, and her story parallels that of numerous Chinese immigrants in Ontario. She shares with the reader the customs and food traditions of her favourite feasts and festivals, and she notes that some special occasions such as Qing Ming, observed in Canada, are rarely practised today in urban centres in China. "In a sense," she says, "these immigrant colonies became museums of 19th century Cathay."

Stephen Wong's paper next traces the evolution of Chinese-Canadian cuisine from its peasant origins to haute cuisine. Food to Stephen Wong is more than sustenance. It has various meanings: it can be symbolic and when shared, can have specific connotations. He tells us that Chinese people are willing to taste and experiment with nearly anything edible and are constantly borrowing from other cultures they encounter in Canada. Consequently, our Chinese-Canadian cuisine is ever-changing.

Dim sum is a fast-growing restaurant trend in Toronto. Friends and families converge on their favourite Chinese restaurant, especially on Sunday mornings, and hungrily choose from carts laden with steaming hot "heart's delights" or dim sum dishes. This phenomenon is explained by Bill Wong, who for years has taught Chinese chefs how to prepare dim sum specialties. Along with his paper, he contributed recipes for his two favourite dim sum dishes, *Sui My* and *Har Gow*. At the symposium, Bill Wong's presentation was followed by a dim sum luncheon at Young Lok restaurant where the owners, Irene Shen Hsu and Frank Hsu, with their staff, served a feast of these "heart's delights."

As non-Chinese wander through Toronto's Chinatowns, they are often struck by the variety of unusual vegetables, fruits and seafood. Many of these ingredients, grown in Canada or from our coastal waters, arouse their curiosity. The focus of Dr. Jacqueline Newman's paper is not only some of these unusual foods, but also the symbolism and traditional use of ingredients familiar to Westerners. We can expect that many more of these foods will make their way into mainstream Canadian cookery.

A symposium on cuisine cannot exclude cookery techniques! Two papers contribute to a better understanding of Chinese cookery in Ontario. Judy Seto, from a Chinese restaurant family, provides insights into stir-frying and steaming and includes family recipes as examples

of these methods. The second cookery paper by Ella Yoa explores the origins and techniques of "red cooking," new to most Canadians. She includes an up-dated, quick-and-easy version of red cooking for the time-conscious cook.

Manners at the table is the topic covered by Karen Fan. For Westerners, this is an invaluable guide to dining in Chinese restaurants, or for travelling in China. She stresses the importance of the symbolic meanings of festival foods. The rules are complicated, she tells us, but, as in any culture, they are of utmost importance.

New immigrants from China have brought a new cuisine to Canada, that of Northern China. Dr. Huiping Zuo, from the North, details the Muslim and Mongolian influences and the regionality within the North. To provide a better understanding of the differences between the North and South, she also discusses the Northern daily meal pattern and banquets. Of most importance in her paper, however, is the concept of yin and yang and its interaction with the four major culinary components of colour, aroma, flavour and nutrition.

Vegetarianism is a growing choice in Canada, especially among young people. Rana Chow describes vegetarianism as practised by Buddhist monks living in temples in Ontario. Her paper details the rituals surrounding the meals in the daily lives of the monks. As well, she explains the Buddhist rationale for strict vegetarianism.

As an appropriate finale to a day of immersion into Chinese cuisine, there was a tasting of Chinese teas at O Mei restaurant with Shirley Lum, of A Taste of the World. I would like to thank sincerely the presenters at the symposium who volunteered their time to this event, and provided papers for this publication. Their insights into Chinese cuisine and its evolution offer an invaluable contribution to Chinese-Canadian history.

Romanization

Although there are many dialects spoken throughout China, it is possible for anyone who speaks a dialect to read Chinese because there is a universal set of written characters for Chinese words. The differences in the spoken language, however, often result in a variety of spellings for a word when it is translated into English. For consistency with Chinese terms, I have used Pinyin, the official system of romanization in the People's Republic of China. Usually in the Pinyin system English words are pronounced phonetically. Exceptions are *c* pronounced *ts*, *q* pronounced *ch*, *zh* pronounced *j* and *x* pronounced *hs*. In some instances, for clarity, the Cantonese spelling of the Chinese term found on menus in Ontario was used with the Pinyin spelling in parentheses behind the common term. I would like to thank the reference librarians at the East Asian Library, University of Toronto, and Dr. Huiping Zuo for their assistance in converting to the Pinyin system.

Jo Marie Powers, Adjunct Professor
School of Hotel and Food Administration, University of Guelph

Chinese Food Traditions

Valerie Mah

When I first came to Toronto to study to become a teacher, there was little written about the Chinese in Canada. To understand our people and their culture, you must begin with our history. Encouraged by a university professor and with much research, both written and unwritten, I was able to develop a history of our community.

The first mention of Chinese immigrants arriving on our shore was in the second issue of the *Victoria Gazette* in June 1858. *Gum San (Jin Shan)*, Land of Gold or Golden Mountain, was the popular name given for Canada. At that time the fact that the daily wage in China was seven cents and in Canada it was \$1.00, provided the motivation for many to emigrate. Between 1881 and 1885, 15,000 Chinese emigrated to Canada and worked on construction projects and in businesses; 6,500 Chinese were employed by the railway.

In 1878, the first Chinese name appeared in the *Toronto City Directory*. Sam Ching and Company was listed as a Chinese laundry at 9 Adelaide Street East, and, according to the directory, he lived alone. Because they had no other choice, Chinese drifted into laundry work, an undesirable but easily learned manual labour. It was isolated work, but this very isolation permitted them to retain their cultural identity. According to the 1880 Canadian census and that of 1881, the total Chinese population in Toronto was ten persons. Since generally only the strong and able-bodied males emigrated, the Chinese were often referred to as a bachelor society. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, the ratio of Chinese women to men was 35 to 1,000. In 1923, the Chinese Immigration Act, with few exceptions, prohibited entry of Chinese into Canada; only fifteen were admitted in the next eighteen years. Thus, wives were separated from their husbands and children from their fathers; 22,000 married men lived in Canada away from their families during this time. This act was not repealed until May 6, 1947.

The first known Chinese area in Toronto was along York Street, south of Wellington Street. Chinese businesses quickly developed to serve the needs of migrant workers. There were stores in which to buy barrels of starch, soap and bleach for laundry businesses, retailers carrying imported Chinese products, and steamship agents. Even during the depression, dried goods such as the delicacy, bird's nest, were available. These products travelled from China by boat to the West Coast and then by train across the prairies to Toronto. The Chinese community spread further up York Street, along Queen Street, up Elizabeth Street, and moved east and west along Dundas Street. The initial Chinese immigrants did not intend to stay in Canada; they often lived their lives out of touch with their host society. In a sense, these immigrant colonies became museums of 19th century Cathay. Many of the customs celebrated in Canada were long since abandoned in more urban Chinese centres like Hong Kong.

Today five visible Chinatowns exist to serve the estimated 400,000 Chinese in Metro Toronto. Remnants of the old Chinatown remain on Elizabeth Street, but when the new City Hall was constructed, land was expropriated. Expansion northward was prevented because of hospitals, eastward because of the Eaton Centre site and westward because of the offices on University Avenue. The original Chinatown jumped University Avenue and moved along to a second Chinatown on Dundas Street from Beverley Street to Spadina Avenue. This second Chinatown extends north and south on Spadina approximately from College Street to Queen Street. As this land became more expensive, merchants moved to a third Chinatown at Broadview Avenue and Gerrard Street East where rents were not as expensive. New immigrants who are more affluent support a fourth Chinatown including portions of Scarborough, Markham, Richmond Hill and Agincourt, the latter sometimes referred to as "Asiacourt." In this area, entire plazas are Chinese-owned and operated with signage almost entirely in Chinese. Dundas Street West in Mississauga, the fifth Chinese community, includes a beautiful wall of dragons almost identical to the Nine Dragon Screen found in the Forbidden City in Beijing.

Many Chinese entertain in restaurants, and families are seen at all hours eating in these Chinatowns. One of the most popular customs is to *yum cha* (*yin cha*) or drink tea. The main purpose is to meet and make friends, chat and socialize, and have a good time. Restaurants are packed with families eating dim sum, little mouth-sized dumplings. Carts of hot steaming food are pushed through the restaurant and customers choose from the carts. Lunch can last for four hours. After lunch, shopping for fresh products and imported dried goods is done in the shops close by. In the late evening, families are seen enjoying *siu yeh* (*xiao ye*), translated to mean "a little bit of food," usually before bedtime, like our bedtime snacks.

I was born just west of Kingston, Ontario, in a small town of 20,000 called Brockville. My father went there as a boy of 14 to work with his father and uncles in a laundry. We have a picture showing him in rubber boots in front of the washing machine. In the background you can see a ladder leading to sleeping quarters on the second floor. He learned English from his Sunday School teachers and he did, for a brief time, go to school, getting as far as Grade 8. As was the custom in those days, he went back to China to look for a wife. A picture taken while he was away shows his father and relatives proudly lined up for a formal picture outside the laundry in their stiffly starched white shirts and neatly pressed trousers. The sign on the laundry reads "First Class Laundry." A month after my father returned alone to Canada, a daughter was born in China and his wife died. This daughter was raised by his sister-in-law in China and he did not meet her until 35 years later.

My father began to correspond with a young Chinese woman in North Bay, Ontario. Her family owned a restaurant and laundry on the main street. Because he was Christian, my mother thought he must be acceptable and they were married on December 28, 1929. Six months later they opened a restaurant and called it the New York Cafe. Since Brockville is across the river from New York state, it was thought that the name might attract patrons. It was not a typical Chinese restaurant for that time because it had seating for almost 100, linen table cloths and napkins, and seafood from the East Coast. My father and his relatives opened restaurants of the same name in Gananoque and Prescott, Ontario. Not bad for a man who only reached Grade 8!