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As a Chinese American, I wasn't taught my history. In school I'd be lucky to learn bits and pieces—some railroad laborers here, a Red Scare there—mere footnotes to the larger (whiter)

history that textbooks paint for students. That's why when I first started looking into Asian American history, it was a whole new world to me, with so many untold stories, so many unmentioned names that helped build the foundation for the communities that exist today. It's a multifaceted history, but as I continued to learn more, it just felt like that: history. Although it was fulfilling to learn, I felt disconnected.

When I learned of my Writing 101 class, *Asian American Memoirs*, I knew immediately I had to take it. Through that class I learned to be critical of the history that I had become so fond of learning. Therefore, when Dr. Thananopavarn (who I will forever call Dr. T) announced that our final was a personal narrative project, I had a vague notion of what I wanted to explore. I knew my grandfather had immigrated to the United States, started a family, and opened a restaurant in Memphis, but I wanted to learn more and analyze the history that preceded him, the history that set the tone for Chinese restaurants like my grandfather's to exist at all. At the time, I thought it'd be a simple research project, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

While researching the history of Chinese American restaurants for this essay was fairly straightforward, investigating my grandparents' narrative was not. Before this, the things I read about felt detached and far away, yet now I began to realize that so many of the things I had read about were part of my grandparents' lived experiences. I began to see the ways in which my family's history intertwined with the history of Chinese American restaurants, and I realized that this history was my family's history. I no longer felt disconnected; on the contrary, I was more connected to this history than I could ever imagine, with a greater appreciation of my family and all they endured, and eager to learn more.

I would like to thank Dr. T for teaching such an amazing class, guiding her students along as we discovered more about Asian America and about ourselves. I would also like to thank the *Deliberations* editorial board for the thoughtful edits and comments as well as Dr. Sheryl Welte Emch for patiently sticking with me during the editing process. Last but not least, I'd like to thank my family, specifically my dad for sharing his stories, my cousin Jennifer for talking to me for hours on end about our family history, and Ma Ma and Yeh Yeh for living the lives they did.

# Food from the Far (Jade) East: An Exploration of the Intersection between Chinese American Restaurants and Family History

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Writing 101: *Asian American Memoirs*

Instructor: Susan Thananopavarn

In November 2017, a small restaurant appeared in downtown Memphis. This pop-up, called Wok'n in Memphis, seemed like one of the other countless Chinese American restaurants in the area. Some took a similar pun route (Wok and Roll), while others used more familiar names to draw attention (Great Wall, Yums, Asian Palace...you get the point). However, this wasn't Wok'n in Memphis' first time as a restaurant; it had actually debuted in Seattle a few years earlier. According to the restaurant's owner, Wok'n in Memphis opened with the goal to "elevate" Chinese food from the "cheap, feed-the-masses" variety into "American Chinese fine dining" (Ellis).

Back when I first heard of the restaurant's name, I rolled my eyes. When I first learned of the restaurant's purpose, I groaned and felt my stomach drop. What did this white guy from Seattle know about the history of Chinese American restaurants, let alone Chinese American restaurants in Memphis? Did he know the reasons why this "cheap, feed-the-masses" food, this "Chinese American" flavor, existed in the first place? No, of course not, he was just a person with a catchy pun and a yearning to gentrify the food that has supported the livelihoods of millions for decades. When I recently angry-googled "Wok'n in Memphis," I was greeted with a page filled with Orientalist text (think of the faux-calligraphy, State Fair Chinese food truck kind of font) and Chinese food-based puns (wok's cooking, let's roll, chow down!).

At this point, my anger-turned questioning actually made me consider: what did I actually know about Chinese restaurants in Memphis and the United States? Well, I felt like I knew the basics. Starting from the Gold Rush era, these restaurants were a way for immigrants from Southern China to carve a living wherever they found themselves, catering to the white clientele and their tastes. I also knew my paternal grandfather, who I call Yeh Yeh, had run a Chinese restaurant in Memphis, Tennessee; he operated Jade East, the third recorded Chinese restaurant in the city, from 1968 to 1988. I couldn't help but notice the massive span of time from the 1850s to 1968. What developments occurred in the United States that caused Chinese restaurants and Chinese food to take the form they did? What history was I missing that allowed Yeh Yeh to find his niche in Memphis, a place with a historically small population of Chinese Americans? Finally, what specifically about Wok'n in Memphis actually made me so mad? As all of these questions churned in my mind, I realized I was falling into a rabbit hole, not only of Chinese American restaurant history, but of family history as well.

The first Chinese restaurant in North America was opened in November 19, 1849, welcoming 300 Chinese immigrants from Guangdong as the first arrivals in California (Liu). This fact immediately created a paradox with my prior understanding of Chinese restaurants: a restaurant that can house 300 people is no small feat, even by today's standards, yet in my mind the first immigrants were all laborers looking to strike it rich and just happened to open up restaurants instead. Therefore, this plot hole forces the reconsideration of the common narrative peddled in history classes that all Chinese immigrants during the Gold Rush era were "illiterate peasants and greedy 'sojourners'" whose actions were solely defined by the poverty and social upheaval back in China (Liu 8-9). This narrative construes Chinese immigrants as the antithesis to European immigrants; while European immigrants are portrayed as freedom-seeking settlers, Chinese immigrants were "aliens" looking to make a quick buck and return to China—neither interested nor fit to stay in the United States (Liu 9).

I had never questioned this common American immigration narrative, but historian Haiming Liu offers an alternative perspective: the initial wave of immigrants were not laborers but merchants looking to establish business practices, including restaurants, outside of China (Liu). The original Chinese restaurants, while open to white clientele, were not created specifically for this demographic; rather, these restaurants served as safe havens for new immigrants in an unfamiliar country while also maintaining a cheap price point to attract white customers (Liu). These merchant groups capitalized on the growing Gold Rush scene, mirroring their trading experience in Canton by creating an intricate social network of businesses to allow future waves of immigrants to join them (Liu). Liu's contrasting narrative creates a multi-dimensional view of the earliest Chinese immigrants, illustrating their agency in establishing a home for themselves in the United States rather than painting them solely as victims defined by poverty and the need to survive.

My first conceptualization of Chinese immigrants in the mid-1800s as those simultaneously escaping poverty and searching for riches was not completely inaccurate. Although these initial waves of immigrants were often rich businessmen looking to establish business ventures in a budding economic zone, immigration of general workers and laborers from Southern China boomed from the late-1850s to the 1870s. In 1850, there were roughly 800 Chinese people in the United States, and by 1870, that number had grown to 63,000 (Lee). The influx of immigrants also came with an increase in the racialized rhetoric used against Chinese people. Starting as early as 1853, Californian newspapers published articles describing the "Chinese diet," denouncing Chinese immigrants for eating rats, snakes, and other vermin (Liu 37-38). This anti-Chinese rhetoric was a thinly-veiled analogy to the immigrants themselves—dirty, devious, sub-human, fueling the argument for Chinese discrimination and exclusion. This rhetoric also directly impacted the



*Jade East had two locations: the first store ("Old" Jade East), seen in the first picture with Ma Ma, was founded in 1968. It wasn't until 1980 that Yeh Yeh wanted to expand, and they spent a long time deciding where they should move to. Eventually, they found a nice space, and they hired a specialty architect to construct the pagoda-style building seen in the second picture ("New" Jade East). Something that my dad pointed out was the deliberate choice to construct the New Jade East to play into "oriental" stereotypes.*

popularity of Chinese restaurants. Although Chinese restaurants began as havens for new waves of Chinese immigrants, the combination of a white aversion to the “inferior race” in conjunction with new Chinese immigrants finding it easier to cook at home lead to a decrease in demand for Chinese eating establishments (Liu 46). Following the culmination of the anti-Chinese push with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the prejudices that white Americans held against China and Chinese immigrants were projected onto Chinese restaurants, where these establishments became synonymous with the vices and corruption associated with the Chinese (King).

Given this intense anti-Chinese period, how did Chinese restaurants eventually

gain the massive appeal that they saw in the early-1900s, the after-effects of which we still see today? Historian Samuel King points to the United States’ historical enthusiasm for mainland China—more accurately, an enthusiasm for its conceptualization of China—termed Sinophilia. King explains Sinophilia as an outgrowth of Orientalism, where the United States holds its relationship with China and its cultural products in special regard while wanting only to interact with its *idea* of China, not China itself or Chinese people.. This yearning culminated in the “chop suey craze,” the moment at the turn of the twentieth-century when white Americans “suddenly embraced Chinese cuisine”—or at the very least, their perception of it—by eating at Chinese restaurants (King 162). Although these establishments were once shunned as dens of sin, the spiraling popularity of “chop suey,” a general term for stir-fried meat and vegetables in a brown sauce over rice, pushed China’s “national dish” to be equated with “playing Chinese” (King 171). Restaurant owners began to embrace the idea of chop suey—an attempt to cater to white clientele—by advertising chop suey as a key dish served (King). Despite having no origins in traditional Chinese cuisine, chop suey and its newfound popularity caused Chinese American restaurants to develop and refine this “chop suey flavor” (Liu). Even with most Chinese restaurants adopting the style and flavors of chop suey, anti-Chinese stereotypes and prejudice

did not end. Although white Americans had a “safe” way to interact with their conceptualization of China, this was not mutually exclusive with anti-Chinese racism: white America yearned to safely interact with this mysterious, exotic culture while simultaneously rejecting Chinese bodies for being unsafe and unclean.

Chop suey continued to be a synonym for Chinese food well into the 1940s, with some white entrepreneurs even beginning to sell canned chop suey (Liu). Historian



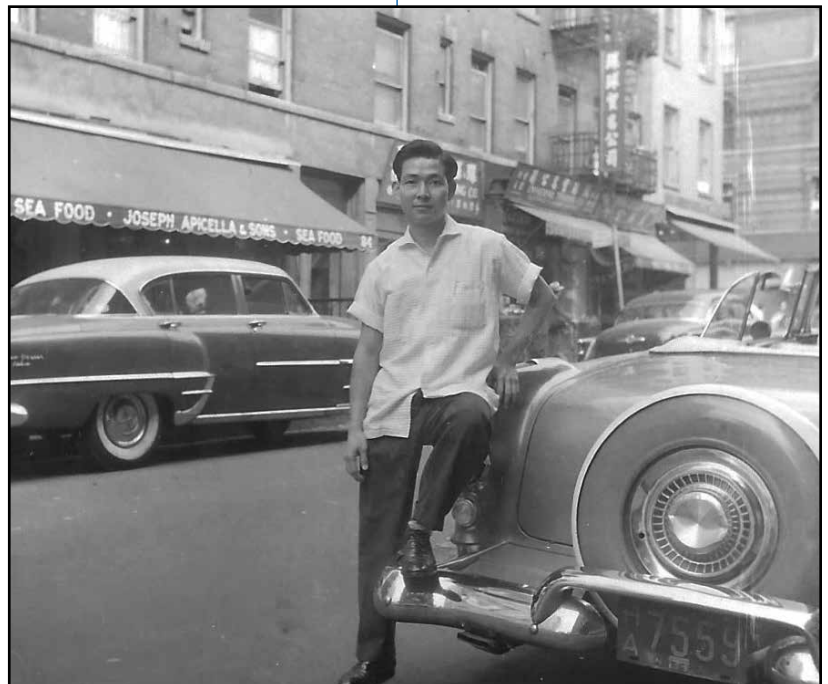
*The next two pictures are the family standing outside the New Jade East circa the 1980s and the interior of New Jade East, set up for a banquet. The first picture shows four out of the five of their children and both of my great-grandmothers. Yeh Yeh and Ma Ma are front and center.*

Liu summarizes the chop suey craze as an embodiment of “cheap exoticism in the eyes of American customers.” By extension, Chinese restaurants did relatively well in this time period despite harsh exclusionary laws, with restaurants accounting for 29.8 percent of Chinese American employment in the 1940s (Mendelson). However, in the 1950s, the arrival of migrants following the Chinese Nationalist Party’s exodus to Taiwan and eventually to the United States altered the way in which “Chinese food” was viewed by the general American public (Mendelson). Suddenly, the consumption of the exotic Chinese culture had to be imbued with an aura of authenticity, as the white majority viewed “fake” Chinese food as cheap, working-class fare (Mendelson). Especially with the influx of skilled workers after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, Chinese restaurants, and by extension Chinese American food, were suddenly expected to fit a level of authenticity that was antithetical to the way of survival that these establishments had adopted for decades (Lee).

It was during this time Yeh Yeh decided to open his restaurant in Memphis. But before we get to Jade East, it is important to know a little about the conditions that Yeh Yeh found himself in while immigrating to and raising a family in the United States. Although the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, the race-based immigration quotas instituted by the 1924 Immigration Act and updated in 1952 were still in full effect (Lee). Needless to say, Yeh Yeh and my family’s immigration story, which unfolded despite continued anti-immigration laws, was no easy feat.

In 1952, Yeh Yeh immigrated to New York City from Canada, joining his father who had already been living there, and they worked together at a laundromat. After about five years, he returned to China, marrying my grandmother, Ma Ma, in Hong Kong. At this point, despite having only been able to communicate with her through letters, he had just about three months to spend with her before he returned to the United States. As he continued to work at the laundromat, Yeh Yeh still wrote to Ma Ma while working to bring the entire family over. Then, in 1959, he wrote to Ma Ma saying that she needed to get herself and their three-month old son to Japan as soon as possible in order to come to the United States: he had managed to secure visas, and they needed to act fast. Despite their baby being sick at the time, Ma Ma managed to reach Japan safely, and the family reunited in New York.

In 1962, Yeh Yeh and his family became naturalized, aiding in allowing his mother and mother-in-law to join them. From there, Yeh Yeh and Ma Ma had four more children, and during that time he found work at Chinese restaurants while she worked at a garment sweatshop. Using his experience from various establishments, Yeh Yeh opened his own restaurant in New York. Fearing for his family’s safety in Chinatown, however, he soon sold the business and decided to move everyone down South, meeting with his father-in-law who owned a grocery store in Memphis. As the family grew accustomed to their new environment, they lived and worked at the store. Although his father-in-law wanted him to take over the business, Yeh Yeh’s true interest was to open his own restaurant again. After only being in Memphis for a few months, in 1968, Yeh Yeh managed to open his own restaurant again, this time named Jade East.



*Yeh Yeh posing next to a car in Chinatown circa 1950s.*



Although Chinese American-style restaurants were generally losing popularity in favor of Szechuan and other more “authentic” regional flavors, Memphis had yet to see a relatively un-Americanized Chinese restaurant. The oldest recorded Chinese American restaurant, aptly named Chop Suey Café, was in operation from around 1922 to 1967 (Spencer). Chop Suey Café operated like most Chinese food establishments near small Chinese populations: they only offered take-out, families making their living by selling outside their homes, not the large-scale establishments typically associated with restaurants. Therefore, Memphis had yet to see more than one or two substantial Chinese American restaurants, a position that Jade East was able to fill.

Although Yeh Yeh listed chop suey in a small section on the back of the menu—a far cry from the focus it had seen in the early-1900s, he employed a similar strategy to appeal to his non-Chinese clientele. Jade East’s menus used Toisonese romanizations—things like Pineapple Gai Woo, Sai-Wu Chicken, Wor Shew Opp. These romanizations were either descriptions of the food itself or the names of cities tacked on to make the dish stand out, chosen to cater to a sense of exoticism and build curiosity around the restaurant’s menu. Additionally, similar to the first Chinese restaurants in the Gold Rush era, Jade East became not only a place to work but also a shelter for dozens of newly arrived Asian immigrants to the South, where my grandfather offered them a meal or a place to rest until they could get themselves situated in Memphis. Yeh Yeh’s efforts in running Jade East mirror much of the history preceding him, representing a microcosm of Chinese American restaurant history for the generations of Chinese Americans in Memphis. He managed to run a successful restaurant in a new environment while also offering support to newcomers, developing his own niche.

This exploration of Chinese American restaurants has redefined my understanding of what these establishments have meant to both the owners and the consumers. For the owners, Chinese American restaurants serve as a way of survival. From the restaurants’ origins as a haven for new immigrants during the Gold Rush to the adoption of chop suey in the 1900s, immigrants have utilized these restaurants to honor the cultural significance of food while creating a

*These last three pictures are Yeh Yeh working at a restaurant in New York, most likely sometime after he brought Ma Ma and my uncle over (~1960s).*

viable livelihood. For the non-Chinese Americans that eat at these establishments, Chinese restaurants have also represented a manifestation of their concept of China, a way to briefly (and safely) engage with their idea of Chinese culture without having to confront or question anti-Chinese stereotypes and prejudice. From its outward racialization in the 1900s as a trendy, cosmopolitan activity to today's more subtle, Sinophilic representation, Chinese restaurants continue to serve as a form of consumption for those wanting an "exotic" experience.

So, where does that leave Wok'n in Memphis? More specifically, how does the history of Chinese American restaurants, Wok'n in Memphis, and my grandfather's experiences with Jade East intersect? Wok'n in Memphis' appropriation of Chinese American food reduces the history of Chinese restaurants into a commodity to safely interact with. The pain, struggle, and hardship that this food represents are being appropriated by a business that cannot possibly empathize with this history. Their endeavor to improve Chinese American flavors disregards the struggles of the communities that have prepared these foods while also insinuating that these communities (who are very much still present in Memphis) have not had the knowledge or capacity to elevate the flavors themselves

Simply put, the Chinese American flavor is not the creation of a single entrepreneur: it has been a collaborative project spanning history and the entirety of the United States over almost two-hundred years. Chop suey stands as the most famous case study; after its boom in the 1900s, restaurants continued to create and refine it because, well, it worked. Once chop suey fell out of America's favor, restaurateurs moved on and continued to innovate, creating new dishes to appeal to America's conceptualization of China. Therefore, this food and the communities that have prepared it are inextricably linked.

Wok'n in Memphis' pretense to improve "American Chinese" food to fine dining for the masses (as if this food was not for the masses in the first place) may be the root of why this restaurant bothers me so much. Wok'n in Memphis' claim to elevate "American Chinese" food is to erase these communities, to discount their experiences as nothing more than chow mein or sweet-and-sour chicken. This elevation-turned-erasure disregards the conditions in which Chinese food was and continues to be constructed, where a white owner can gentrify these flavors without worrying about their clientele's negative perceptions based on the racist, classist, and xenophobic stereotypes associated with Chinese people and cuisine.

When Yeh Yeh first came to Memphis and opened Jade East, the menu that he made was deliberately crafted; the flavors he chose were a mixture of the styles he learned in New York along with his own techniques. These flavors, while not something he'd necessarily prepare for his family at home, were created specifically to be as popular as possible in this new environment he found himself in, flavors that would succeed despite the negative perception that my family garnered as one of the few dozen Chinese families in the area. He expanded and improved the Chinese American flavor that had allowed hundreds of restaurants before him to be successful.

Jade East has been closed for more than 30 years, and with my grandfather's passing a year and a half ago, he leaves behind a legacy through not only my family but also the Chinese community in the area. As Jade East was one of the earliest larger Chinese restaurants in Memphis, Yeh Yeh profoundly altered the way Chinese food, and therefore Chinese people, were perceived in the area. Whether it is through the customers he served, the workers he helped, or the family he raised, Yeh Yeh's contributions to creating community for future immigrants—just like the countless Chinese restaurants and restaurateurs before him—continue to be felt today.

### AMERICAN MENU

2005 1.0000 1.0000  
2005 1.0000 1.0000  
2005 1.0000 1.0000

### SOUPS

Chicken Noodle Soup \$1.00  
Egg Drop Soup \$1.00  
Sweet Bean Soup \$1.00  
Hot Pork Noodle Soup \$1.00  
Chicken Noodle Soup \$1.00  
Chicken Noodle Soup \$1.00  
Chicken Noodle Soup \$1.00  
Chicken Noodle Soup \$1.00  
2005 1.0000 1.0000

### CHOW MEIN or CHOP SUEY

Chicken Chow Mein \$1.00  
Chicken Chow Mein \$1.00  
Chicken Chow Mein \$1.00  
Chicken Chow Mein \$1.00  
Chicken Chow Mein \$1.00  
2005 1.0000 1.0000

### LO MEIN

Chicken Lo Mein \$1.00  
Chicken Lo Mein \$1.00  
Chicken Lo Mein \$1.00  
2005 1.0000 1.0000

### EGG FOO YOUNG

Chicken Egg Foo Young \$1.00  
Chicken Egg Foo Young \$1.00  
Chicken Egg Foo Young \$1.00  
2005 1.0000 1.0000

### FRIED RICE

Chicken Fried Rice \$1.00  
Chicken Fried Rice \$1.00  
Chicken Fried Rice \$1.00  
2005 1.0000 1.0000

# JADE EAST

## CHINESE AND AMERICAN RESTAURANT

THE FINEST IN CHINESE CUISINE

### REBEVERAGES

Beer \$1.00  
Wine \$1.00  
Soft Drink \$1.00  
2005 1.0000 1.0000

### CHEF & C. LEE

In a gourmet chef of over thirty years of development with the most renowned chefs of New York City and Hong Kong. After careful refinement, he acquired their best ideas and added personal touches to give his customers a delight that is unique to the Jade East.

Jade East, constructed under the close supervision of Mr. Lee, is characterized by the Chinese traditional decor and quiet relaxed atmosphere. The consistent service and excellent service give Jade East its a pat with that of the best restaurants in Hong Kong and China.

Please consult with Mr. Lee about his many special events to which he will personally prepare to suit your personal preferences.

### JADE EAST COCKTAILS

2005 1.0000 1.0000  
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2005 1.0000 1.0000

### HOUSE SPECIALTIES

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2005 1.0000 1.0000

The updated menu created for the New Jade East location, with most of the American-style dishes removed.

### WINE LIST

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### APPETIZERS

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### FLAMING PU PU TRAY

FOR TWO OR MORE \$36 PER PERSON  
Served Over Flaming Hibachi  
Consisting of Barbecued Spare Ribs, Egg Rolls, Fried Wontons, Shrimp Chips, Sesame Chicken, Shrimp Cantonese.

### SPECIAL

FOR THOSE WHO DESIRE UNCOMPROMISING DINING PLEASURE, WE ARE PROUD TO OFFER OUR GOURMET FEAST AT A TREMENDOUS SAVING. \$115 PER PERSON IS THE REGULAR MENU PRICE OF THIS EXOTIC DINNER, BUT WITH OUR SPECIAL, THE SAME FEAST IS ONLY \$77.75. FOR TWO OR MORE.

### \$115 PER PERSON INCLUDES

CHICKEN EGG DROP OR ROAST PORK WONTON  
EGG ROLL, FRIED WONTON, SHRIMP CANTONNESE, SHRIMP CHIPS, SESAME CHICKEN, WARM RICE

### GROUP B

2005 1.0000 1.0000  
2005 1.0000 1.0000  
2005 1.0000 1.0000

### PRIVATE BANQUET IS AVAILABLE

#### JADE EAST DINNER \$9.75 PER PERSON INCLUDES

CHICKEN EGG DROP - ROAST PORK WONTON  
EGG ROLL, FRIED WONTON, SHRIMP CANTONNESE, SHRIMP CHIPS, SESAME CHICKEN, WARM RICE

#### FAMILY DINNERS 6.75 PER PERSON INCLUDES

ONE EGG ROLL PER PERSON  
CHICKEN EGG DROP OR ROAST PORK WONTON  
EGG ROLL, FRIED WONTON, SHRIMP CANTONNESE, SHRIMP CHIPS, SESAME CHICKEN, WARM RICE

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