

Culture | Gained in translation

A Canadian writer visits Chinese restaurants around the world

Cheuk Kwan tells a diaspora's story, one meal at a time



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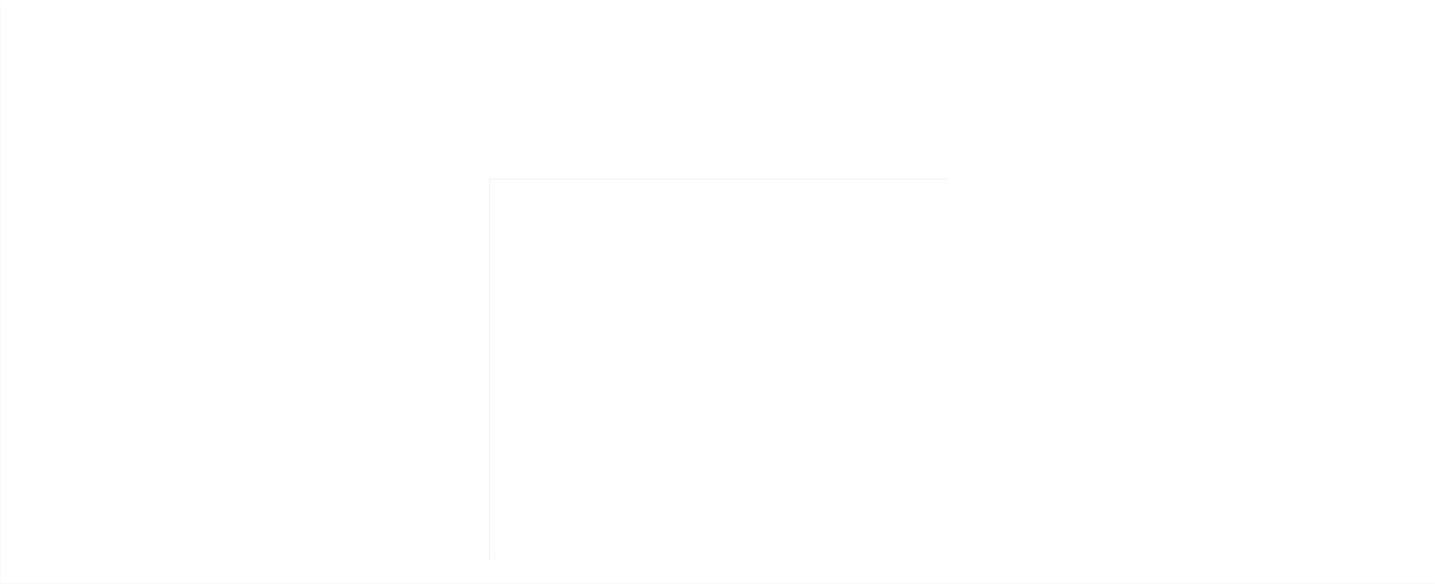
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Have You Eaten Yet? Stories from Chinese Restaurants Around the World. By Cheuk Kwan. *Pegasus Books*; 288 pages; \$27.95. To be published in Britain in March; 272 pages; £20

MANY PEOPLE in Outlook, a tiny prairie town in Saskatchewan, hoped Noisy Jim (pictured, right) would run for mayor, but Jim didn't want the bother. In Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, Maurice wanders through an empty school, reminiscing about his childhood love of learning. And late one morning in Istanbul, Fatima and Dawood, now getting on in years, sit across from each other at a table—she is peeling beans, he is “methodically numbering and stamping a receipt book, page by page”.

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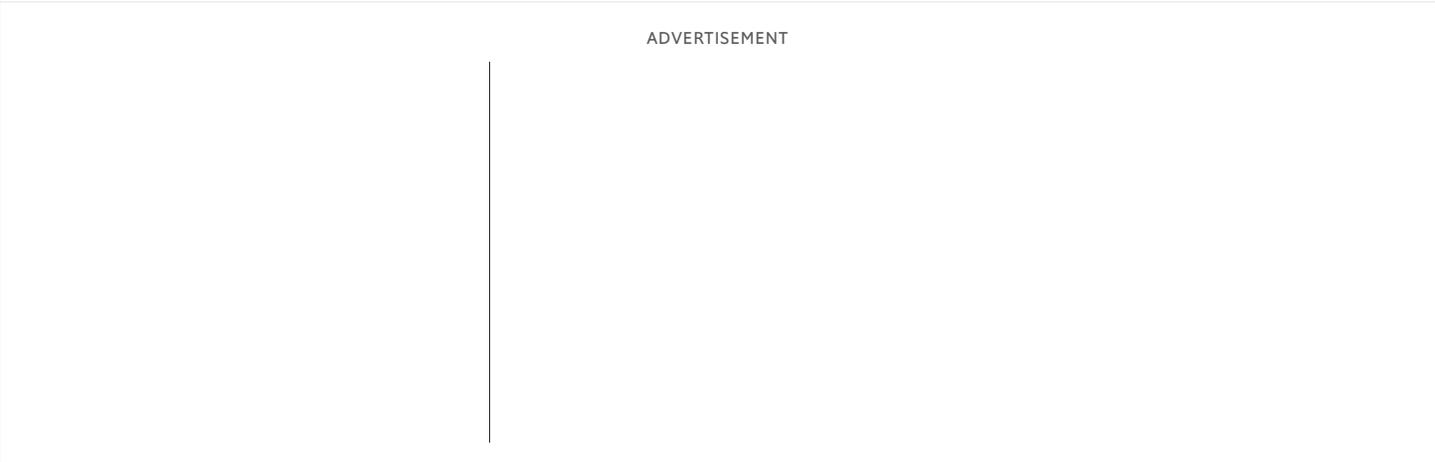


What links Jim, Maurice and Fatima is that they all ran Chinese restaurants. In his new book, “Have You Eaten Yet?”, Cheuk Kwan tells their stories, along with those of Chinese restaurateurs from 13 other cities outside China, from Tromsø, north of the Arctic Circle in Norway, to Toamasina, on the east coast of Madagascar. The result is a charming (if sometimes also meandering) book that weaves its profiles together into an extended meditation on identity, belonging and a sense of home.

Like the restaurateurs he meets, Mr Kwan is a multilingual wanderer: born in Hong Kong, brought up there and in Singapore and Japan, he worked in America and Saudi Arabia before settling in Toronto. He has a fluid, plural identity: “My speech and mannerisms change with the environment: Singaporean-accented English, Hong Kong-Cantonese loudness, Japanese quiet deference and straight-talking American mojo.”

His diasporic life gives him an instant connection with his subjects, which he exploits to his readers’ benefit. Food, he explains, “is just an entry point”; although he is a discerning and enthusiastic eater, his real interest is in the people behind the stoves. “As I travelled the world meeting with far-flung members of the Chinese diaspora, one question always came to mind: Are we defined by our nationality or by our ethnicity?”

The answer, of course, is both. Some of the people he speaks with talk wistfully about wanting to be buried in China; others are more circumspect. Mr Kwan asks Johnny Chi, the head waiter at Ling’s Pavilion in Mumbai, whether “he is ambivalent about his identity”. Mr Chi says no: “Wherever you are born, that’s your land.” He thinks of himself as Indian, “except when I look at myself in the mirror. I say, ‘Oh no, I’m not.’”



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Mr Chi expresses a sense of not-belonging. But most of Mr Kwan’s subjects, like many diasporic people, instead have a sense of multiple belonging. At a *braai* (a barbecue, and a staple of South African culinary

identity) in Cape Town, Francis Liang, raised in the Eastern Cape, describes himself as “Chinese...a Chinese South African, definitely I am a South African”. Mai and Dao Wong, whose father ran a restaurant in Haifa, both served in the Israeli army, and Mai, says her friend, “has an Israeli temper”.

How places and choices have shaped people is the book’s main theme and the stories share similar undercurrents—dislocation, family separation, uncertainty, ambition, backbreaking labour. But “Have You Eaten Yet?” also explores how Chinese immigrants have shaped their adopted countries. Places like Noisy Jim’s New Outlook Cafe are “an institution in towns across the Canadian prairies: a community centre, a place where families grow up together”. *Soupe chinoise* is “an adopted national dish” in Madagascar. Across the Caribbean, “in every village and town, there’s always a ‘Chinese shop’”—a small general store. Enrichment is a two-way street. ■

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