

## NONFICTION

# A Documentarian Travels the World Asking: ‘Have You Eaten Yet?’

From the Arctic to the Amazon, Cheuk Kwan traces a diaspora through Chinese restaurants owned and operated by immigrant families.

By Jiayang Fan

Dec. 27, 2022

**HAVE YOU EATEN YET?: Stories From Chinese Restaurants Around the World**, by Cheuk Kwan

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“Have you eaten yet?” a familiar Chinese greeting, might be the title of this book, but for the author and director Cheuk Kwan — and for almost every restaurateur he interviews in his tour of Chinese restaurants across 15 countries and five continents — food is only the entry point. Because “running a Chinese restaurant is the easiest path for new Chinese immigrants to integrate into the host society,” Kwan writes in his memoir-cum-travelogue, “there’s no better way to tell the story of the Chinese diaspora than through the stories of Chinese restaurant owners.”

Kwan, who was born in Hong Kong, spent his formative years in Singapore and Japan, and now resides in Canada, begins his journey in the vast, flat plains of Saskatchewan. There, we meet Noisy Jim, the retired proprietor of a Chinese café who was born in the same coastal province where Kwan’s grandfather grew up. Noisy Jim arrived in Vancouver at the age of 12 as a “paper son” at the height of Canada’s Chinese Exclusion Act. To gain Jim entry, his father obtained the identity papers of a dead Canadian resident named Chow Jim Kook, whose name Jim would keep for the rest of his life. For years, he toiled in the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant until he was called back to China to marry the woman his family had chosen for his bride. The couple returned to Canada to open their own Chinese café in a remote prairie town, raised seven children and served egg rolls and chop suey: food that was neither Canadian nor, according to Jim, “what Chinese people eat.”

The arc of Jim’s life bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Maurice Soong, a “Chinese Trinidadian entrepreneur” who helped at his father’s general store in San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago, before running a Chinese restaurant there with his new wife, who was dispatched to him from his home village of Lung Kong, near Hong Kong.

From the Arctic to Africa to the Amazon, perseverance, economic pragmatism and resourcefulness bind the lives of Chinese immigrant restaurateurs all over the world and inspire their disparate menus. Forged in the same powerful spirit of adaptive endurance, chop suey is not all that different from the *soupe chinoise* (wonton soup) served in Madagascar or Peru's *lomo saltado* (stir-fried beef) in their marriage of local ingredients with Chinese cooking techniques.

At its best, Kwan's book reveals the ways in which diasporic Chinese restaurants are like test kitchens experimenting in opportunities for a better life, however nebulous that pursuit might be. As in the case of Jim and Maurice, many who embark on the expatriate journey are children with little say in the matter; and often the adults are reduced to children by the uncertainties and unease of displacement. Between economic deprivation and racial discrimination, many of Kwan's subjects recount the ways the lives they sought in migration often materialized as fraught compromises. "We always thought we were sojourning here," a restaurateur in South Africa tells him. "The place actually belonged to the whites; we were just encroaching on their space. It was never meant for us to claim."

Perhaps owing to his experience as a documentary filmmaker, Kwan structures his story into episodes organized by place, although the more compelling drama is in the multigenerational family evolutions through time. Building a Chinese restaurant is hard

work, and it is often only the beginning of the search for a fulfilling life, lived on one's own terms. The first-generation immigrants, like the fathers of Jim and Maurice, plot the path so the second generation might secure the resources for a sturdy if unglamorous engine of livelihood. One of the painful paradoxes of running a family restaurant is the way immigration tears the nuclear unit asunder. "It's part of many Chinese immigrant stories," Kwan writes: "wives left behind, children they never knew and second marriages in faraway lands."

Even when the family remains intact, fragmentation can be felt on the level of individual identity. Kwan describes the nostalgia he experienced during his peripatetic childhood, the sense of loss upon leaving a new home he'd barely gotten to know, and the pieces of himself he sees in his interviewees. Everywhere he goes, Kwan cannot help but ask those he meets the same question: As a member of the Chinese diaspora, are you defined by your nationality or ethnicity? Another way of posing the question might be: Where is your heart most at home? For Kwan, there doesn't seem to be a single answer. "I have six homes," he confesses: his grandfather's ancestral village of Gau Gong, which he has never visited; Hong Kong, where he was born; Singapore and Tokyo, where he spent his adolescence; Berkeley, Calif., where he learned about his Asian American identity; and Toronto, where he found his voice.

Kwan's book is a kind of love letter to his varied homes and a memorial to his journey through them, as refracted through the lives of far-flung strangers. "To me, a home is about finding a community where you feel you belong," Kwan reflects toward the end. The act of writing is also one of self-possession. The desire to take ownership of his identity and assess the nature of belonging is what drives this book, even as it delineates the lives of many who have had to defer their ambition to their progeny.

"It was never my dream to open a restaurant, but my generation had no choice," a Hong Kong-born restaurant owner in Norway says, echoing Noisy Jim's sentiment that he "never wanted his children to end up a 'washy washy cooky cooky' like him." When Kwan remarks to Jim that his sons and daughters must be very proud of him, it's hard not to detect the old man's wistful pride when he responds: "They should be. I brought them up right. I gave them all an education."

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