

How much does our food tell us about who we are?

Cheuk Kwan's 'Have You Eaten Yet?' explores the global reach of Chinese food — and the shape of cultural identity

Review by Jenny G. Zhang

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What makes a dish authentically Chinese?

The question has launched a veritable buffet of hot takes, each spicier than the last: Chop suey and General Tso's aren't authentic, but whatever's on the secret menu is, but fine dining isn't, but brusque service is, but fusion food isn't, but anything reminiscent of Mom's cooking is, but the same dishes made by non-Chinese people aren't (or are they)?

This range of responses makes clear that the answer is not so simple, as documentary filmmaker Cheuk Kwan finds in his book "[Have You Eaten Yet?: Stories From Chinese Restaurants Around the World](#)." Across more than a dozen countries, Kwan searches for flavors that remind him of home as he samples the best Chinese food that Havana, Darjeeling, Mombasa and other locales have to offer. Home, too, is not so simple for him, as he claims links to six places: his family's ancestral village in China; Hong Kong, where he was born; Singapore, where he grew up; Tokyo, where he spent his adolescence; Berkeley, Calif., where he learned about identity politics; and his current home, Toronto, where he co-founded the Asianadian, a now-defunct Asian Canadian magazine.

The chapters are episodic by nature, organized less around a single narrative than snatches of time spent learning about the lives of restaurant owners and workers at one or a few Chinese eateries in a city. A typical chapter might include Kwan recounting his and his crew's travel experiences — the festivities of Carnival Tuesday in Trinidad, for example, or getting robbed in Kenya — before he settles down for a meal with his subjects, coaxing out their stories and often tracking down other nearby family members of theirs to interview. Interspersed between those accounts and Kwan's forays into his own background are history lessons to flesh out the sociopolitical context behind each story of global migration. It's an occasionally meandering format that might be better suited for the screen, which is no surprise, considering that much of the book's material was adapted from Kwan's mid-aughts documentary series "[Chinese Restaurants](#)." But it still offers a compelling vantage on the lives of those who fill its pages.

“Can a dish not created in China be considered authentically Chinese?” Kwan ponders on his tour of dishes that have been created or transformed by Chinese immigrants in foreign lands. Chili chicken, for example, is a Hakka dish tailored to the tastes and ingredients of India, spices and all. Similarly, the line between Peruvian food and Chinese food is blurred, as the Latin American country has absorbed stir-fry techniques and ingredients and made them its own. The Chinese dish diced chicken with cashews, which is popular in Brazil and in other countries around the world, uses a nut that is not native to China — Portuguese colonists began exporting cashews from South America in the 1500s — but that doesn’t mean the dish isn’t authentically Chinese.

Kwan establishes a generous benchmark on the impossible question of authenticity: “For me, the test for authenticity is one’s ability to evoke the memory of a childhood meal.” Childhoods and memories all differ — what may be inauthentic to one is authentic to another — and so the gauge of authenticity is, in effect, so subjective as to be meaningless. But that doesn’t stop Kwan from issuing, throughout the book, half a dozen pronouncements about how “authentic” or “real” the Chinese food is or is not in any given place. Authenticity clearly still means something to him, his broad-minded definition notwithstanding.

Kwan’s theory of Chinese identity is marked by a similar tinge of essentialism. “We all share a set of common values: we believe in the importance of family ties, Chinese culture and education, and, most of all, we share an undying love of Chinese food,” he writes. Elsewhere, he rattles off truisms about Chinese people eating rice and wanting to surpass their parents’ expectations. Fellow Chinese — restaurant owners, their family members, the chef and TV presenter Ken Hom — describe their people in the same manner: as hard-working, pragmatic, enduring and resourceful. So, too, do those outside their ethnicity: “The Chinese immigrants want to be here, they want to create something they’re proud of,” says one customer at a Chinese-owned cafe in Saskatchewan, Canada. “Their heart’s in it. It’s just a whole different attitude than a lot of other groups that come in.”

It’s a flattering portrait, albeit one that smacks of the “model minority” myth: the pernicious idea that all Asians, when minoritized in a country, are a monolithic group of quiet strivers and achievers, especially in comparison with other, more “troublesome” minorities. For a collection of stories that seeks to chronicle the breadth of Chinese migration through food and the myriad ways in which a diaspora is formed — and, yes, the commonalities between experiences of survival and entrepreneurship, even across continents — “Have You Eaten Yet?” occasionally paints with a disappointingly broad brush. Kwan’s interest in encapsulating the soul of his (and my) people at times comes across as reductive, rendering the Chinese as primarily a shared set of intrinsic, immutable traits.

Kwan’s words are most compelling when he does what documentarians do best: sitting back to let the subjects speak for themselves, rather than prompting them to reflect on whether they consider themselves Chinese. Many of the subjects’ stories are astonishing, and each is unique, even if the forces that shaped them — hardship, war, familial ties — are not. One man, whose tale inspired Kwan to make his documentary series, fled Xinjiang after the Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan, walking to Pakistan before eventually settling in Turkey. Another left China during the Cultural Revolution as a “freedom swimmer,” paddling for hours from Guangdong to reach the colony of Macao.

But some of the most stirring accounts are not of how Chinese migrants exchanged one land for another but of how they — and the generations that followed them — lived their lives afterward. One Cape Town restaurant owner, at 66, decides to adopt her Chinese name after a lifetime of being “prevented from becoming Chinese by apartheid.” A Hong Kong-born couple in Norway asks one of their mothers to make sacrifices to help them and watch their children, so that they can make sacrifices to provide a better future for those children. A woman who came to Peru as the young bride of a cook looks back on her life, nearly 30 years and a separation later, and sobs: “Other than my kids, I have no one here. If I could, I would sell everything and go back to Hong Kong to take care of my parents. All my friends and relatives are back there.”

It is these stories, more than sweeping musings about authenticity or what it means to be Chinese, that bring “Have You Eaten Yet?” to life. However similar their circumstances may be, Chinese immigrants and restaurant workers are not a monolith, and their individual tales and hopes and pains are worth sharing. “I’m myself. I’m me,” says Jim, the cafe owner in Saskatchewan. “Canadian, Chinese, Japanese, Italian. Don’t matter. I’m me.”

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Have You Eaten Yet?

Stories From Chinese Restaurants Around the World

By Cheuk Kwan

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