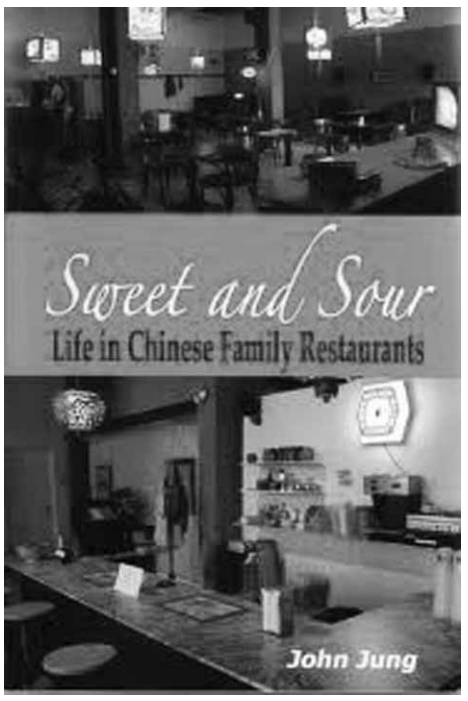
# Book Review

## John Jung, *Sweet and Sour: Life in Chinese Family Restaurants* (Cypress, CA: Yin and Yang Press, 2010), 297 pp. ISBN 9780615345451

***Reviewed by Raymond Lum***




The "Chop Suey Craze" that engulfed large American and Canadian cities in the early decades of the 20th century (see http://www.asian-studies.org/eaa/Hayford_16-3.pdf) might be viewed as a positive reaction to the American and Canadian Chinese Exclusion laws that began in the U.S. in 1882 and continued until 1943 when the U.S. needed Chinese support in the war with Japan. The demonization of Chinese immigrants by American labor activists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries gradually gave way to an admiration of some, but by no means all, aspects of the immigrant Chinese and their culture.

Chinese family-run restaurants responded to the growing interest in Chinese food in various but conflicting ways. Elaborate Chinese restaurants opened in Chicago, San Francisco, New York, and cities in Canada. To entice patrons, the restaurants featured organs, live orchestras, dancing, and, in the case of the Forbidden City restaurant in San Francisco's Chinatown, live shows that highlighted Chinese- and Japanese-American performers. The high cost of opening and maintaining such elegant venues usually required numerous backers and partners, all with deep pockets. Alas, the Depression did in those places when people had little money to spend on eating out, Chinese or not.

On the other side were the mom-and-pop (and the kids) takeout-and-delivery restaurants, the "chop suey joints," often located in marginal neighborhoods and serving up the pseudo-Chinese cuisine favored by the untutored: chop suey, chow mein, egg foo young, egg rolls, super-dried "chow mein noodles," and fortune cookies (reportedly invented in the United States).

What life was like on the other side of the counter and in the kitchen has not been largely documented, but John Jung's book bridges that gap. His history of life in Chinese restaurants in the small Southern (he was born in Macon, Georgia), Midwestern and Western towns where Chinese located to make a living is an important historical survey that contributes significantly to the recorded realities of Chinese life in the United States. Many are the Chinese restaurants that no longer exist and that are known today only through old telephone books and business directories. No doubt families still have memories and hold documents on those businesses, but if no John Jung looks for them they will not be found.

Chinese men did not cook in China unless they operated eating establishments as restaurants or street stalls, so why did they do so in America? The answer is to be found in the anti-Chinese activities and laws of the United States. The Chinese came here originally to find their fortunes in California's gold mines in the mid 19th century, but when the gold was gone and Chinese labor helped complete the Trans-Continental Railroad, the Chinese had to find other means of livelihood. Thus, they provided services for White Americans, such as laundry and cooking, thereby becoming identified in the non-Chinese imagination as low-skilled laborers who were particularly adept at washing and cooking. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy: this is what you can do so this is what you will do. With severe limitations on their employment opportunities, the Chinese made the most of the few opportunities afforded them, and yet prospered through hard work. And that's how they wound up in restaurants.

A case in point is my own family's history: my literate great-grandfather emigrated from China to Honolulu in 1862; my grandfather, born and schooled in Honolulu, eventually made his way to Decatur, Ill., where he and his father and some of his five brothers operated their Oriental Inn. My grandfather relocated to Springfield, Ill., where he and several cousins owned and operated the Oriental Café, managed for 18 years by my father. The Oriental had a dance hall (but by the time I knew it only a juke box remained, sans dancers). The place was large and elegant, with cut-glass decanters, silver utensils, linen tablecloths and napkins. And in the cigar case underneath the cash register was a small sign that read "We reserve the right to seat our patrons," which years later was interpreted to me to mean "No Negroes allowed in the dining rooms," although they were allowed to sit on the green leather settee as they waited for their take-out orders. My father's restaurant, Chop Suey House, traded well on Americans' limited knowledge of Chinese food. Fortunately, times change and societies progress.

Early Chinese restaurants in large cities used names that meant something in Chinese but were only odd sounds to the American ear, such as King Yen Low, Won Kow, Ho Sai Gai, Hung Far Low, but those restaurants were elegant in décor without being overtly "Oriental." Later Chinese restaurants were operated on a more economical scale and some were nondescript and truly dreadful in décor, with a number of them made even garish in misguided attempts to present "Oriental" surroundings to complement the equally non-authentic food served there. Restaurants that catered primarily to Chinese often had Chinese names but others branched off into names like "Red Pagoda," a take-out joint on Chicago's North Side that was neither a pagoda nor red, and "Chiam," its name an amalgamation of "Chinese" and "American."

Airlines travel and American involvement in Asia (diplomats, missionaries, Peace Corps Volunteers, military personnel, travelers), combined with large-scale immigration from China following the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act that allowed for the reunification of Chinese families separated by previous harsh anti-Chinese immigration laws, the Chinese civil war, and Japan's invasion in China, to make Americans personally knowledgeable about China. The end of the Vietnam War and the resulting huge immigration of Vietnamese, many of whom were ethnically Chinese, contributed significantly to changes in what was acceptable as "real" Asian food. Immigration from Chinese provinces other than Guangdong, the starting point of the majority of the Chinese in America, also permanently altered the landscape of Chinese cuisine in America. Chop suey and chow mein were falling off menus. But much of those developments were not experienced in the places that John Jung writes about. Life in Chinese family restaurants was personal and local, as detailed in this study.

Most of the published histories of the Chinese in America are impersonal sociological studies, novels, and historical surveys. Here, John Jung gives us a history that is much more personal, even though it is not all his own story. People walk past us on the street and we do not know who they are or what their life stories are. Some of those whose lives centered on Chinese restaurants are memorialized in Jung's book. In writing this book, John Jung has rendered a great service to the faceless people behind the counter who deserve to be recognized.

The numerous evocative photographs of people, restaurants, and menus included in the book provide valuable visual documentation. No doubt, many of the people and places depicted exist otherwise only in memories. Vignettes of individuals bring to life the personal blocks that build the larger story. The author takes a geographical approach to documentation of Chinese family restaurants and in so doing provides in-depth revelations about individuals and families. Who even knew there was a Chinese restaurant in Greenville, Mississippi, and in Savannah?

There are some aspects of Chinese family restaurants that Jung does not cover, such as the hiring of non-Chinese workers to staff the dining rooms; how supplies were procured in out-of-the-way locales such as Muncie, Indiana; how menus were produced (our printed menu was supplemented with a daily one that my father typed with two fingers and then reproduced in multiple copies using cold gelatin stored in the refrigerator), and "short off," the time between the lunch trade and the dinner crowds when the restaurants closed in preparation for the evening onslaught, and naps. Jung also does not note, in his short feature on Chicago's King Yen Lo restaurant, that the Chinese reformers Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei backed the restaurant as a front to raise funds for their efforts to create a constitutional monarchy in China, as opposed Sun Yat-sen's eventual successful revolution that toppled the monarchy (see Adam McKeown's book Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, and Hawaii 1900-1936).

This book could have benefited from tighter editing of both text and punctuation. The long quotations could have better been summarized, but they do not detract from the story that Jung tells. The book's bibliography will lead interested readers to additional resources. The index is incomplete: one can read the sections on Chinese restaurants in Mississippi and Georgia, for example, but cannot go back to them by using the index. An introduction covering, even cursorily, the history of Chinese immigration and anti-Chinese laws would go a great distance in explaining why Chinese opened restaurants and what hurdles they had to overcome in doing so. Similarly, some information on the economics of restaurant ownership, including the sending of money to China to provide for family there, would have provided a financial picture of Chinese restaurant development that is almost entirely unknown to historians and sociologists.

Jung's other books document life in Chinese laundries and in grocery stores in the Deep South beginning in the 1870s. What he documents are aspects of Chinese-American life that otherwise would be lost to history, and in recording these histories Jung has preserved slices of life that are rarely, if ever, treated in academic writing. In so doing, John Jung has rescued from obscurity the personal struggles and successes of immigrants who had little going for them except determination and hard work. Jung himself is an example of where it all led: he earned his PhD from Northwestern University and was a professor of psychology at the University of California, Long Beach, for four decades before shifting gears and embarking on a new career researching, speaking, and publishing on largely-unknown facets of Chinese-American life.

We are all beneficiaries of his dedication and his scholarship. ■

Raymond Lum

Raymond Lum (林希文) is Librarian for Western Languages in the Harvard-Yenching Library, where he is also curator of historic photographs. A native of Chicago's Chinatown, he studied Chinese there and in Taiwan. He holds a master's in library science from the University of Michigan, and an MA and PhD in East Asian Languages & Civilizations from Harvard University. From 1968 through 1970, he was a US Peace Corps Volunteer in Sarawak, Malaysia. Formerly, he also was Harvard's librarian for South and Southeast Asia and Instructor in Chinese in the Harvard University Extension School. He is the book review editor for a new (debuting 2010) online scholarly journal, TransAsia Photography Review, and contributes the column "Asia Resources on the World Wide Web" to the Asian Studies Newsletter of the Association for Asian Studies. He has directed several Harvard projects that digitized photographs and other visual images of Asia.