

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

Chinatown

(P2)

From “Shop Suey” to the Vanish of Cook’s, the King of the Catering Industry

No matter what types of jobs they have ever taken domestically (in China or) overseas, those immigrants who came to the U.S. before 1960s inevitably encountered a narrow selection of occupation. In order to make a living at that time, 50% of them had no choice but go into catering industry in the cities as well as in the suburbs, making “Chow Main” and “Chop Suey” as trademark of the restaurants. From Seattle through Bellaire, the distribution center firstly for several hundreds of the Chinese gradually evolved into Chinatown.

Since majority of the immigrants were from Guangdong, Choa Main from Chinese restaurants usually consisted of bean sprouts, cabbages, onion and eggs quickly cooked with vegetables over stir-fried noodles. It’d be “Chop Suey” if served without stir-fried noodles. Also there were some more Chinese dishes popular in America, such as Beef with Pepper, Egg Foo Young, Sweet and Sour Pork, Egg Fried Rice, Spring Roll, Char Sui, Spareribs, and Chicken with Mushroom. Though different from the traditional ones, the American Chinese cuisines were favored by Americans, particularly the Jewish people. That hence quite helped the immigrants to build up their own business early this century. With the tiny incomes to suffice a basic lifestyle here, they also saved as much money as possible to send back home to support their families. While assuming those Chinese made a fortune in America, a lot of their families and relatives seldom understood how difficult for them to come alone and all the way to the U.S. to seek for a better life.

Speaking of Chinatown in the early 60’s, although with a history of over 100 years, it hasn’t encompassed a huge territory. Located on crossroads in the south of Canal Street, Mott Street is the typical trade center of all Chinese goods and service. Groceries had been especially vigorous until supermarkets came into the world in 70’s, and then even the most famous Wan Phong Ho, Quong Yuen Shing & Co. were also forced to close down their business.

Before then, Clement Restaurant, Nian Yuan, Port Arthur Chinese Restaurant, and Pacific Café were well known in Chinatown. There were also several traditional gift shops and stationeries to purchase Chinese books, newspapers together with “Four Treasures of Study” inclusive of brush, ink, paper, and ink stone. To-fu stores and bakeries made their own products and sold. The old fashioned bars were oftentimes crowded with customers from both West and East cultures. Also the playground in Chinatown was the dreamland for kids. At that time, the population wasn’t that much as even 10% of nowadays, but it’s so packed day and night there; the nighttime crowd was even far more than now. In terms of lack of Chinese groceries and restaurants in the suburb areas, Chinese people all gathered into Chinatown for shopping, and that somehow attributed to its prosperity. During the early 1960s, there were some notable

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

Chinese restaurants in Uptown Manhattan as well, mainly serving the locals and the immigrants from Chinese Civil War. Unfortunately among them, a few very hot spots like Ming Yue, House of Fortune now no longer exist.

TRADER VIC'S located inside many American and European 5-star hotels was a high-end restaurant running by Americans targeted at fusion Chinese and American foods with cocktails of South America as a selling point. And the whole interior design was based on Hawaii cottage houses. Except for the senior managers, all employees in the restaurant from waiters, chefs, to dish washers were Chinese. It well said the owners not only trusted but also supported the Chinese community. TRADER VIC'S opened in the 50's and got its peak in the 60's; it had a number of chain stores too. When in the era of full business, the Chinese people employed by TRADER VIC'S were even up to 1000. Moreover, salary above the minimum wage, punch in/out, working schedule of 8 hours a day and 40 hours a week, and overtime pay were all comprised in their nice employee benefit package. The employees would be able to participate Catering Industrial Union of America and enjoyed health insurance, too.

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

(P3)

Job allocation was clear at “TRADER VIC’s”. The waiters were not required to take care of cleaning errands and some extra work like making won ton. Apart from working pleasantly there, they were tipped very well. “TRADER VIC’s” were one of the restaurants that treated their employees nice and formulated a great working ambience. Unfortunately it’s closed in the 80s due to bad business.

In the 60s, traditional American coffee shops were prevailing in the New York City, especially in Manhattan. The shops in which there was a counter set up to fit customers and also to separate the working space from the front desk. Some shops are even more spacious to include a seating area to let people stay longer. Overall Speaking, some coffee shops did well, and some ended up being sold out at a cheaper price than before. A lot of Chinese people then purchased those former unprofitable coffee shops and renovated them into a different space characteristic by “OPEN KITCHEN”, making its debut in the 70s. In regard to the smart design of no wall to break down the whole shop into 2 areas, kitchen and the seating area, while waiting for the orders, the customers also got to enjoy the culinary process before they’re served or ready to pick up. It’s actually exciting to most American customers. Since then there are a large number of OPEN KITCHEN or restaurants with a similar device.

Basically, Manhattan was divided into east and west sides by the 5th Avenue. From 1960s to 1970s, the east side was more packed by high-end restaurants than the west. Among several Chinese restaurants on the 2nd Ave around the United Nations, “FLOWER DRUM RESTAURANT” was famous for the great service as well as interesting Chinese folk performances on holiday though the quality of food there was merely fine. “CHIN YUAN” lead by the tough Chef Wang was marked by the New York Times restaurant critics as a 4-star restaurant, and it’s the only Chinese restaurant that has ever won that premier glory as far as its excellent everything was concerned.

Some new generation immigrants at that time even risked themselves to open takeaways in those neighborhoods of the African community. The business went well though sometimes accidents such as rubbery or arguments might happen. The takeaways only had waiting area by a roughly size of 20*20 feet. Without indoor seating, there was a thick plastic window oftentimes as seen in some American banks to block the customers from the cashiers for security reasons.

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

(P4)

Most of the owners behind those takeout places were immigrants from Fujian and Wenzhou. They usually ran the business with their family, and after making a better living upon that, they moved to other nicer neighborhoods for a long-term business aspiration.

The restaurants in Lower Manhattan in the 60s only opened for about 2 hours for lunchtime during the week so as to meet needs of office workers and tourists. A lunch place, “PEARL RESTAURANT” located on 2nd floor was the hit, which smoothly profited for 20 years until it went out of business in the late 80s. However from the 1980s, many residential buildings at middle to high price zones were widely built up in both downtown Manhattan and Midtown. That brought about a new era of mixed residential commercial district to stimulate the economy that time as well.

As for “CAFETERIA”, that’s a type of restaurants that instantly served you some cooked sandwiches and pastas with coffee or all kinds of beverages while you made the payment at the counter. And based on the same idea, the so-called “CHINESE CAFETERIA” also pre-made many homely dishes for selection. For instance, Chao Mien, Spring Roll, Beef with Broccoli, Sweet and Sour Pork, Kung Pao Chicken, Shrimp with Shanghai Greens were no stranger to the menu in “ CHINESE CAFETERIA”. In the early 70s, there were a few making some quick cash when just opened. After several months, the business went down. Nowadays the more popular CHINESE CAFETERIA” are inside FOOT FOURT in “SHOPPING MALL” ran by either the Chinese or Americans.

After the 50s, the immigrants from Jian Zhe areas in China managed “SHANGHAI VILLAGE RESTUARANT”, that was so large as to fit up to 200 customers. Holding some special events inclusive of regular gatherings, birthday parties and weddings were covered in its business. Also on weekend afternoons, “SHANGHAI VILLAGE RESTUARANT” offered a refined selection of Dim Sums, such as Soup Dumpling, Veggie Rice, Soybean Milk, Fried Radish Cake, Shanghai Fried Rice Cakes, etc. A block away “JINGHU RESTAURANT” only could sit 50 people. It’s however favored by quite a few American customers through news reports.

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

(P5)

“HOJI” specialized in Cantonese homemade foods where customers always waited in a long line to get in. It’s also kind of recognized as Day & Night Restaurant since its business hours starting as early as 9am through the next day 5am. “HOJI” is the only restaurant among those famous ones that currently still opens in Chinatown and has been there for over 40 years.

Then came the Chinese immigration rush to U.S.A. in the 80s. Among that batch, some worked to live as employees; the others had the guts to start their own business. Traditional Chinese restaurants were hugely changed and developed accordingly. The delivery service at that time was invented in time to suite consumers’ needs. Firstly restaurants sent someone to deliver on foot, then by bicycle, and finally even by cars for certain areas outside Manhattan. New jobs as flier senders and couriers were also created as required then.

Generally the business scale of each Chinese restaurant was small(er). They usually run by the family or through partnership. Working in Chinese restaurants was not only tough, but also required to work long hours up to 6 or 7 days a week. Different from almost all Chinese immigrants arriving before 1970s, the new generation was not willing to take jobs of lower level in Chinese restaurants like washing dishes or running errands since they used to be the middle class in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The Chinese owners finally found the immigrants from South America were good employees, hard working, obedient, and without such “superior vs. inferior” drama between the Chinese people when they’d work together at same workplace. Those South Americans even nicknamed as “AMIGOS” by the Chinese in terms of their harmonious capital-labor relations. Beyond those, in order to keep a great leadership and also avoid conflicts that pre-employees might become competitors in the same industry someday, “AMIGOS” were welcomed by all walks of life over the last 20 years. Many were even good tenants to Chinese landlords.

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

(P6)

Moreover, “COOK’S” mainly dealt in cookware, dining utensils, and food processors accounted for 70% of the business of what’s required in kitchens of the Chinese restaurants since 40 years old. Managers at “COOK’S” were professional to give the quote resulted from a thorough evaluation within 20 minutes. They also accepted installments for customers to pay at a flexible frequency. “COOK’S” had gone really big beyond comparison before it eventually shut down.

“SIDEWALK CAFE” with Window Seats Periodically Showcased a “COOKING CLASS” to Customers

The butcher’s in the past sold all types of raw meats, comprising chicken, duck, beef, pork, and lamb while supermarkets had seafood, vegetables, dried vegetables, beverages, frozen foods, gourmet meats in stock. For the past 10 years, the changing butcher’s started to serve fast piqued lunch boxes coming in a combo of 3 or 4 dishes with 1 soup at cheaper price points than most restaurants. They also included some cooked meats (roasted pork, char siu, sparerib, soy sauce chicken and so on) and ingredients for hot pots to sell. Supermarkets unbelievably had a way wider business scope than ever containing fresh bakery, lunch boxes, jewelry accessories, tourist service, real estate agent, immigration consultation and matchmaker service. Some giant ones even covered banking service, retailers for clothing, cosmetics, lightening, and furniture, and pharmacies to take care prescriptions, patent medicines, and Chinese herbs, too.

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

(P7)

By means of strength in low cost and low retailing price, those supermarkets then replaced lots of small Chinese restaurants good at selling homely dishes.

The key for all hotels or all kinds of restaurant is to run the business well and to attract consumers. Purchasing commercials in the printed media and radio stations is one way to reach it out. Some charge a low price but don't really work; others are costing but can be worth of it. New York Times restaurant critics has the authority in testing restaurants and introducing decent ones to the readers. And once every month, they'd have a star rating review on some hotels and restaurants by comprehensively taking foods, service, interior design, cleanness of restrooms, bars, and pricing into consideration. Over the last 40 years, only one Chinese restaurant was ever regarded as 4-star one by NEW York Times critics.

Since the late 1960s, lots of traditional Chinese groceries used to exit in Chinatown all worked hard to sort it out for making more money. No.1 on Mott Street close to Fu Foo Street was one of them. Firstly it's transformed into a small restaurant, "WAN JAO RESTAURANT". Not lasting for long, it's changed into "OLD SHANGHAI DELUX", and then due to not making its ends meet, it's switched again to making fusion American and Hunan dishes as "HUNAN YUAN RESTAURANT".

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

(P8)

In the middle 70s, a brilliant idea of teaching “COOKING CLASS” in “SIDEWALK CAFE” came out, and that appealed to New York Times restaurant critics to produce an outstanding report on that. It had such a huge PR impact to move “HUNAN YUAN RESTAURANT” forward.

While visiting Shanghai in 1971, I envisioned people in China significantly suffering from poverty through the Cultural Revolution. Sympathetic to them, that also inspired me to come back to the U.S. and promised myself to fight for a better life here. Since then all year round, I did nonstop working hard for 14 hours every day in a restaurant as a management senior no matter rain or shine. 8 years passed, I finally kept my words to build up my own business. Via similar manipulation of “SIDEWALK CAFE” and “COOKING CLASS”, my business started to go well and profitable. In 1979, I went to visit Shanghai again when China experienced Open Economy. Although yet no positive improvement for trading, finance or technology, more people as a matter of fact could at least support themselves.

From my experiences, all jobs at a restaurant can be categorized into 2 types. Some are service staffs, cashiers and waiters/waitresses, who are with basic English and usually trained within a short time to really take jobs. Managers should master English and be able to be the leaders. The rest of staffs work in the kitchen. Culinary skills are gradually acquired by long-term observation and practice; it's more like by apprenticeship and hardly by schooling. Through years in the society, the perseverance of the new Chinese immigration was proven everywhere by their great achievements through learning on their own.

So business of the catering industry is actually tricky. We saw some restaurants spending millions of dollars for interior design and the spectacular lunching events but ended up being unprofitable, because the income couldn't afford the rent, the central conditioning, ingredients and materials for dishes, payrolls for employees, etc. to form a business.

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

(P9)

Still depending on various reasons, restaurants have their own certain measures to be popular among (target) customers. For instance, fresh and tasty dishes, good service, reasonable pricing, clean restrooms, cozy and inviting environment, special entries, enticing PR strategies or advertisement, and fun events on the holidays all can be indispensable to a successful restaurant.

Chinese cuisines are globally famous and in particular Cantonese dishes are highly welcomed and considered to more suite the light diet nowadays for their fresh taste from utilizing lots of vegetables and seafood. We Chinese people have ever participated the catering industry and made a huge contribution to it as well. If we could be able to invent some fast foods in Chinese styles, that are very tasty, sold cheap and most importantly easy to be adapted everywhere like pizza and hot dogs, the Chinese culinary is for sure to move forward to a next level, more well-known and more widely accepted.

Who Ever Well Benefited from Doing the Restaurant Business, Please Say Hi And Do Pass That Learning to Mr. Wang

To make it or break it in the catering industry requires lots of thorough thoughts on all that is essential to running a business. It's not wise some people attributed failures to bad luck or the wrong timing, but there's just no shortcut to success.

A Chinese Kaleidoscope; An American Mosaic

(P10)

With good foods, good service, good ambience, and good sanitation, and good pricing, a restaurant would be possible to earn a lot of money and then make a profit. However easier said than done, it also needs to pay attention to some necessities.

Making a lot of money sometimes doesn't directly translate to make a huge profit. If a restaurant has a monthly expense totaling at 80,000, and it has to at least reach the sale of 80,000 every month to support or continue its business. So reducing the fixed costs, the more incomes made, the more profits brought. The leadership of owners or management seniors is crucial. Regularly checking out overall what's going on in the restaurant on a daily frequency is a good way to get familiar with customers and meanwhile also to supervise the employees, making sure they're doing their jobs and presentable, friendly to customers as well.

Furthermore, food quality control and new dish invention also cannot be excluded. Once a customer had a one-time experience of spoiled foods, he or she will probably no longer come back again. On the other hand, food tasting had better take place on a condition when no one in the restaurant is aware of that. In this way, the expert or critic invited over could objectively judge from dishes through the service and to the whole environment of restaurant. And try recruiting as much excellence as possible is helpful to an effective and efficient management. Of course there is no better way than a nice employee benefit package to keep professionals and great people.

In some specific case in the 70s, a manager working in one of the Chinese restaurants on Matt Street was easy-going and eloquent in many ways. So what he did was being a friend with all customers by chatting with them, doing some interesting performance as magician, teasing or making fun with kids, and even inviting "FORTUNE TELLER" over to help read customers' gorgeous future for free, that's exactly the same as Chinese fortune cookie did to make people blessed and happy. Occasionally the manager would hire the clown to play some tricks, sing and also make artistic balloons.