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Hidden Menu

In Chinese restaurants, my mother insists on trying to order in her version of Cantonese. Her items don't appear on the English menu. In this restaurant, the menu is a dark red with a gold embossed dragon. A yellow braid holds the pages together. The English names for dishes line up with their Chinese equivalents both in script and in some Romanized form with odd accents and spellings, like American editions of Neruda poetry.

On the back, there is a special Chinese menu printed in columns of pinkish red ink that she ignores. Having been born in San Francisco, my mother never learned to read Chinese.

"Dow see pai gwot?" she asks.

The waiter doesn't understand her. At first he shakes his head, then twice points at the menu. *"Jing fan."*

Our waiter shuffles his feet, then says something in a faster, more confident Chinese which my mother either doesn't or refuses to understand. It's a custom. When we go to Chinese restaurants, my mother cursorily asks me what I feel like eating then more or less ignores my answer. She'll then excitedly rattle off a series of dishes that I liked as a child.

The waiter taps his pad with his seventy-five-cent Bic pen. He looks around at the mostly empty tables in the restaurant. A red egg baby banquet, once customary for boys who made it to six weeks old but now celebrated for both genders, just ended at three circular tables near us. The waiter points in their direction. At one juncture, he tries to

KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

make it clear that he speaks English well. My mother perseveres in her heavily American accented Chungshan as she orders off a menu that doesn't exist in print form.

When I was a child, almost all Chinese in California came from three peasant districts just beyond what they then called Canton, now Guangzhou. Cantonese was the Chinese of California, but Mao had made Mandarin the language of all of China. In China and in Taiwan, they taught Mandarin in schools, used it on television, in train stations, and airports. It's one of the few things about which the Communists and the Nationalists agreed. Until I grew up and had a college roommate from Hong Kong, I didn't realize that even people who speak Cantonese don't necessarily understand my mother's version of it. Her Cantonese has turned even more eccentric now that she is married to my stepfather, a retired Nisei farmer. For the last fifteen years, my mother has only spoken Cantonese with the dwindling number of living members of her generation of her family.

"Mom, it's fine. We can order off the menu."

The waiter has, at my mother's insistence, moved in the direction of the kitchen to check with the cook. I watch as a Mexican busboy picks up dishes from the baby party.

My mother shakes her head, "No, I know you don't get this at home."

It's true. I know the names for various foods, but can't pronounce them reliably or without embarrassment. My wife's family came from Norway. Lutefisk definitely doesn't go with oyster sauce. Chinese restaurants in the town where we live are now mostly run by northerners or Southeast Asians.

All too quickly, the waiter returns shaking his head. My mother shakes her head back and challenges his eyes with her own to let him know that she believes he didn't really ask the cook. She then throws out names like *hom gnui* (salt fish cooked with ginger), *sil choi*, *lop cheurng* (a sweet, fatty Chinese sausage), *dao foo* (fermented bean cake).

The waiter keeps shaking his head. At this point, he's given up trying to point her to even the Chinese menu on the back of the menu.

He breaks into English. "This way tastes better anyway."

My mother shakes her head and they seem to compromise on something as he shrugs, writes something on his pad, and heads to the kitchen before my mother can change her mind.

“You want duck’s feet?”

My eyes widen and I shake my head. “Mom, it’s not that big a deal.”

“You used to like duck’s feet. What happened?”

“When have you seen me order duck’s feet in the last twenty years?”

She motions for the waiter, who visibly takes a deep breath from across the restaurant.

“*Jing op gek?*”

To my horror, he actually nods at this request and heads back to the kitchen.

“I’m ordering it anyway, you don’t have to eat it if you don’t want any.”

When I was a kid, I always thought of my mother as the most Americanized member of her family. We lived in the suburbs. She took me to Giants games, played in the golf club with other Americanized Chinese moms and dads, and we always spoke English at home. She openly rejected customs like arranged marriages and Confucian deference as too Chinafied.

Our waiter returns with three or four dishes that don’t look remotely close to what my mother was trying to describe. She gives him another look as he serves us. He shrugs.

“Not going to tip him.”

“Mom, maybe they just don’t have those things.”

“They do...of course they do. He just doesn’t want to go to the trouble, so I’m not going to go to the trouble of tipping him.”

Some of the food looks like it was cooked hours ago possibly for the red egg party next to us. Some of it is salty and may even contain hints of MSG, the bane of Chinese restaurants old and new. My mother takes a couple bites and pushes her plate away. “You don’t have to eat it.”

I pick up a duck leg (web side up), dip it in soy sauce, and take a bite.

“See, aren’t you glad I ordered it.”

She doesn’t give me time to answer as I take a second bite.

When my dad was alive, his restaurant used to dispense pork bound with pineapple chunks in an orange sauce, fried wontons, and other substances dipped in a sauce made with red food coloring all through the lunch hour. The customers, mostly employees of the State of California granted just forty five minutes for lunch, liked it well enough—the help despised it. When the cooks made lunch for the crew the colors and aromas of the food came back to life. The waiters who seemed reserved and soft-spoken to their customers became talkative and laughed repeatedly as they would dine on steamed *bok choy*, braised tofu, and fish in black bean sauce.

I once asked when my dad was particularly frustrated with his business: “Dad, why don’t you put this food on the menu?”

“It’s not what my customers think of as Chinese food,” he said reflexively.

“But this is Chinese food and it tastes better,” I would tell him at least once a year.

“Customers don’t know that and they don’t even know when it tastes better.”

“But why are we in the restaurant business?”

“It’s paying for your school, for our car, the trip to New York last year. What’s wrong with that? You want to give those things back?”

“Hell no.”

“Well, it’s just not that simple. It never is.”

Every few years, I still have dreams where my father is still alive and wandering his restaurant. He walks between the tables and chats with customers into eternity as a man who loved and appreciated good food obliged to serve his customers what they thought was Chinese food.

My mother calls the waiter back and asks him to box our leftovers. Before I can object, she also orders two white cartons of chicken chow mein and one order of *gai lan* (like broccoli without the florettes)

KARTIKA 🐦 REVIEW

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

sautéed with garlic to go. She reminds him to make sure both are fresh then turns to me and says, “Take it home, so you guys don’t have to cook for a couple days.”

If you translate it back into Cantonese, she’s saying “I know your wife can’t cook this stuff.”

The waiter, clearly relieved, nods his head this time and doesn’t argue back or make her feel the limits of her Chinese. When he returns, my mother, over my objections, insists on paying the bill including an overly generous tip.

Our southeastern region was the last to become part of China when the Ch’in Emperor Shi’ih Huang Ti defeated the six other kingdoms, standardized the writing system, the weights and measures, and built the Great Wall to keep out barbarians from the north. Ever since that time twenty four hundred years ago, the believers in one China have sought to eliminate Cantonese. In 1911, it was southeastern China that first broke with the Manchus and established a western style republic that failed.

Almost all primary speakers of Cantonese live either in Hong Kong or outside China. In a few generations, it is likely to be an archaic dialect. Today, it survives as a hidden menu in a Sacramento restaurant. An old woman who barely speaks Chinese insists that the dishes on her menu must still exist while each new waiter she runs into shakes his head.

“Who is this strange woman and what is this broken dialect with all the English words?” they must ask when they get back to the kitchen.

Someday one of two things will happen. One, there will be no more waiters who can make sense of my mother’s ordering and no more cooks who can make the dishes. Second, my mother and her language generation will simply stop asking because they’ve died or have lost the will to eat the food they savor from childhood, which to anyone Cantonese is the same thing as dying.

When that happens, the emperor Sh’ih Huang Ti, the uniter of modern China, will have finally won. Until then the hidden menu drives the old woman with the Gucci purse, my mother—the last Cantonese warrior.

