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(Published in **More than a Menu: Food and its Meaning in Asian Cultures and Across the U.S.**)

Quote: “A lot of Chinese restaurants are already dead,” Steve Chun, owner of Kung Pao Bowl in Norwalk, California.

Chapter 10: Enduring Empty Tables in a Pandemic

Johnny Chen, co-founder and general manager of both locations of XLB Dumpling Bar in Walnut and Brea, California, sits on a brick wall outside his Walnut location on a breezy February evening. Wearing a blue pull-over sweatshirt, jeans and a black disposable face mask, his casual demeanor reflects his restaurant’s. Inside, pop music blares over the speakers and the kitchen is bustling. The ambiance would have been seemingly conventional, except for the fact there are no tables at which to seat people. All the same, during the short time Chen sits outside his restaurant, there is a steady flow of customers entering empty-handed and exiting with plastic “thank you” bags filled with the fusion flavors XLB Dumpling Bar is recognized for. Sitting down inside of a restaurant in 2020 — a luxury that was stripped away.

Growing up in Southern California with immigrant parents, Chen and his two older brothers, who are also his business partners, were familiar with both traditional Chinese flavors and classic Californian foods such as pizza and In-N-Out Burger. Self-described as the kid sitting at a side table at a Chinese fast food restaurant doing his homework while his parents worked, Chen grew up in the restaurant business, explaining why he and his brothers gravitated toward starting their own.

“We took a lot of inspiration from the Chinese food my parents cooked for us, but [also] our experience growing up in America and eating a bunch of different things from cheeseburgers to

taco trucks to al pastor and stuff like that, so our menu is a reflection of our experience,” explained Chen.

Due to their ability to maintain a safe take-out method, Chen’s restaurants never had to close their doors during the pandemic. However, the National Bureau of Economic Research found that Asian American business-owner activity declined by 26% from February to April 2020.(1)¹

Womply, a company that helps businesses with Paycheck Protection Program loans, conducted a study in 2020 that revealed that Chinese restaurants in the United States were particularly struggling when compared to other types of restaurants.(2)²

According to Womply, “By the end of March, over half of Chinese food restaurants, who might otherwise be perfectly suited to thrive in a ‘takeout only’ environment, stopped transacting entirely. No other type of restaurant in this group even comes close.”

Due to the fact that the majority of the restaurants in the nation that fell into the takeout grouping of eateries were operating at a manageable rate during the pandemic, the drastic slowdown of Chinese restaurant businesses was noticeable.

China Wok Express in Whittier, California, fell into the temporary closed-doors category. From March through May 2020, their doors were completely closed to business while the pandemic

¹ Racism targets Asian food, business during COVID-29 pandemic. Retrieved February 22, 2021, from <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-race-and-ethnicity-pandemics-wuhan-animals-4d25738ab49597d0de1517383a9108d2>

² Report: the types of restaurants most impacted by COVID-19. Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.womply.com/blog/the-types-of-restaurants-most-impacted-by-covid-19/>

raged. During that time, employees at the restaurant were unable to apply for unemployment benefits for small businesses, which proved to be difficult.

On March 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was signed into law, which extended states' ability to provide unemployment insurance for workers affected by the pandemic, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.⁽³⁾³ However, according to the Economic Policy Institute, for every ten people in the nation who successfully applied for unemployment, three to four more applied but did not get through, and two more neglected to apply due to the difficulty of the process.⁽⁴⁾⁴

Some restaurants, such as Kung Pao Bowl in Norwalk, California, were more fortunate than restaurants such as China Wok Express because their small business received government relief funds. As a result of these funds, at the beginning of the pandemic, some restaurants were making more money than they would have with dine-in service, exemplifying the perplexing effect that the pandemic was having on the restaurant industry.

Following Rules

On top of trying to make ends meet, there was a whole new wave of rules and regulations to which every restaurant needed to adhere. These included Center of Disease Control and Protection (CDC) guidelines such as mask wearing, social distancing and capacity limits.⁽⁵⁾⁵ The

³ Unemployment Insurance Relief During COVID-19 Outbreak. Retrieved February 22, 2021, from <https://www.dol.gov/coronavirus/unemployment-insurance#CA>

⁴ Employment filing failures. Retrieved February 22, 2021, from <https://www.epi.org/blog/unemployment-filing-failures-new-survey-confirms-that-millions-of-jobless-were-unable-to-file-an-unemployment-insurance-claim/>

⁵ Considerations for restaurants and bars. (n.d.). Retrieved February 23, 2021, from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/business-employers/bars-restaurants.html>

new rules placed restaurants in a tricky situation in trying to get customers to walk through their doors while still keeping every party safe.

“Originally we did [have indoor dining], but since the pandemic started, we decided to completely stop indoor dining, and ever since March, even when they allowed it for a little bit, like 25 percent capacity, we asked how the team felt about serving people, and we understand where like people aren’t comfortable with it, so if our team wasn’t comfortable with it, then we wouldn’t do it,” explained Chen. “We’ve got to protect our friends and family and the people we see when we get home from work.”

Steve Chun, owner of Kung Pao Bowl since 2016, felt similarly, saying that before dine-in is allowed again, he and his workers should be vaccinated in order to feel safe.

Many restaurant owners needed to do what was best for their own establishment. For Chen, it was making his team comfortable. This is something many business owners had to tackle when the pandemic was seemingly permanent.

Chun mentioned that he remembered seeing many Chinese restaurants in his area close their doors, not because of their lack of business, but because they wanted to avoid contracting the elusive virus.

Bumps in the Road

Navigating regulations and rules was just one obstacle for restaurant owners. Another was having to deal with discrimination based on the type of food they served.

Because of the coronavirus's place of origin, Wuhan, China, Chinese people were abruptly thrown into the limelight. Even before California's complete shutdown, it seemed people were deliberately avoiding going to Chinese restaurants out of the fear that the virus spread simply by coming in contact with Chinese people. Chun saw this trend in his own restaurant.

Sitting outside his restaurant on a cold metal chair at a small table he cleaned with a wipe, sporting a black face mask with his restaurant's logo embroidered on the side, Chun said that March 2020 was a difficult time for a lot of restaurants, but his restaurant started seeing fewer people beginning in January simply due to the type of food it served. The weekend in March before California's first lockdown, the restaurant saw its slowest Friday, earning less than \$2,000 in normal sales.

"There was no one here dining in, because, Chinese restaurant, Chinese virus," said Chun.

Once California was placed on lockdown orders on March 19, Kung Pao Bowl was open for takeout only. It only made \$450 in gross sales that day, and now in April 2021, it is still only making 40% to 60% of its usual sales on a successful day.

Bringing Stereotypes to a Head

Some Chinese restaurants, which decided to keep their doors open, such as Kung Pao Bowl, had to handle peoples' rude comments or actions, such as deliberately coughing or uttering explicit or muttered discriminatory remarks about the restaurant solely because it was Chinese.

With the spread of the virus came the spread of new language. Politicians, the public and headlines screamed “Wuhan virus,” “Kung Flu,”⁶ and many more inflammatory terms directed toward those who had no control over the virus.

Chun expressed that, “China has been [made out to be] the enemy. So that doesn't help.”

This was just the beginning. Following the news of the origin of the virus, many hate crimes toward Asian Americans began to spring up. According to a report from Stop AAPI Hate, they had received more than 2,500 reports of anti-Asian [hate] since March 2020 nationwide. This report was from the initial peak of COVID-19 within the States. These hate crimes and attacks not only shocked the general public, but also shook many Asian owned businesses in America.

Clarence Kwan, creator of “Chinese Protest Recipes,” shared with Associated Press, “In a year where Chinese and East Asian communities have essentially been blamed for the pandemic and chastised as ‘dirty,’ this type of narrative is completely unacceptable.”

⁶ Ayala, E. (2021, March 20). *Ayala: Anti-Asian bigotry long predates Trump and COVID*. News. https://www.expressnews.com/news/news_columnists/elaine_ayala/article/Ayala-Donald-Trump-spoke-of-the-China-16039880.php.

According to a study conducted in 2021 by the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, anti-Asian hate crimes in 16 of America's largest cities increased 149% in 2020 with the first spikes occurring in March and April.⁽⁷⁾⁷

According to Chun, Chinese restaurants in general have been given a bad reputation of being dirty, and the pandemic has only brought this stereotype more into the light. He also said that because of the pandemic, Chinese restaurants have started to die off both because of the pandemic and because of lack of community support.

“A lot of Chinese restaurants are already dead. Especially these mom-and-pop, dine-in types of restaurants,” Chun said as he motioned toward his storefront, “There’s the ones that have been here for 30 years, but this one eventually will die. It depends on your surroundings. [COVID is] really affecting Chinese restaurants, and [not] Asian[s] as much, [specifically] Chinese.”

Community Support

Despite many restaurants receiving backlash, Chen has contrastingly received nothing but positive feedback from his customers and community.

“The overall community, it doesn't matter the ethnicity, they always treated us with warm welcomings and we never had to face any serious issues like that,” explained Chen. “Because we’re still just a take-out restaurant, and we aren’t planning to change that, I think it has hurt the business, but I think everyone is going to persevere and we’re going to get through this.”

⁷ FACT SHEET: Anti-Asian Prejudice March 2020 – Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism. Retrieved March 18, 2021 from <https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/FACT%20SHEET-%20Anti-Asian%20Hate%202020%203.2.21.pdf>.

Whether it be in a positive or negative environment, the restaurant industry must be tenacious. When Stan Ng's family was in the Chinese restaurant business in Oxnard, California, his father would give the advice not to fear the criticism one might face while working in a restaurant. Although receiving criticism is part of the expectation in the restaurant realm, so is receiving praise. Now an instructor of Engineering at Biola University, Ng explained that receiving a compliment while working in a restaurant is fuel for another day.

According to Ng, kind, encouraging words such as ““Hey, we really enjoy the food and thank you for what you do,”” can make all the difference in a restaurant's morale.

Pushing Through

The year 2020 was quite unforgettable. Although vaccines are becoming more available and public places are beginning to open with limited capacity, the pandemic still exists. From finances to loss of community, COVID-19 has certainly left its impact on Chinese restaurants. Despite all of the obstacles the Chinese food scene has encountered, business owners like Chun and Chen are persevering through it all. Their food, along with many others', is still warming the hearts and stomachs of the public who are also pushing through adversity.

Although 2020 is forever in the past, 2021 brought its own troubles for the Asian American community. Stop AAPI Hate reported that in the first three months of 2021, there were 503 reported incidents of hate against Asian Americans.⁽⁸⁾ The Asian American community is

⁸ STOP AAPI HATE NATIONAL REPORT. Retrieved March 23, 2021 from <https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>.

experiencing a burden not many Americans will ever understand, but is working to make the United States a place where everyone is welcome without fear of discrimination.

“The racism that Asian Americans have faced during COVID-19 has taken a tremendous toll on our community,” stated Dr. Russell Jeung, professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University and part of leadership of Stop AAPI Hate. “Not only are we grieving with the families of victims who've been shot, pushed and shoved, but we are also assaulted in other ways—with verbal profanities, civil rights violations, and online harassment. Ultimately, we are aiming to make the U.S. a more just and equitable nation, one where we all belong.”