

## Romance of the Chinese Restaurant



IN MY TRAVELS I've dined in countless Chinese restaurants, a habit I share with Chinese around the world, though it's probably true that any diaspora group seeks comfort in its cultural cuisine. But the global ubiquity of Chinese food may be unparalleled. Chances are that in your neighborhood, whether it's Tuscany or Tuscaloosa, there's a place that serves General Tso's chicken.

The most popular Chinese restaurant in my hometown of Duluth was Joe Huie's Cafe, owned by my father and somewhat notorious because it was open 24 hours a day. I started working there when I was 12, keeping the books, carefully entering in longhand the daily expenses. I graduated to stints in the kitchen, cashiering, and waiting on tables all through high school. During college I cooked for my older brother at his more upscale establishment, the Chinese Lantern, less than a mile from our dad's place.

So I guess soy sauce runs through my veins, and still, whenever I'm in a new city, I'm on the lookout for an "authentic" Chinese American restaurant like Joe Huie's. I don't mean the establishments that serve actual delights imported from China (which I also love), but rather the chop suey joints that specialize in the classic, bastardized, Americanized fare such as egg foo young covered in gravy and gooeey, celery-based



*Nankin Cafe, 15-17 Seventh Street South, Minneapolis, 1958 (MHS COLLECTIONS)*

chicken chow mein, piled on crunchy noodles: my comfort food.

Of all the places I've been, the one that may be the gold standard of the genre was the wondrous Nankin in downtown Minneapolis. I was maybe six when I first visited on family trips from Duluth. We always ended up at the Nankin, which was far grander than Joe Huie's and felt to this provincial child like the closest experience to being in China without actually going there.

Looking back, I wonder how our sense of authentic becomes transmuted. Who gets to define what is real Chinese food? Or what is American? I have argued that the egg roll,

for instance, is as American as the hot dog or taco. We're defined by what we eat, as they say.

What to make of all of this? I'm not sure, but it seems that a lot of how we think about Chinese people has to do with faux exotic Chinese food dens with their festive lanterns, oriental fonts, Karate Kid accents, and cheesy fortune cookie wisdom—even to a Chinese American boy born and raised in Duluth.

—Wing Young Huie

*Among Wing Young Huie's several current projects is an exploration of Chinese-ness. What is cultural identity, national identity, personal identity?*

This feature was made possible by the Frank Dowding Mirador Fund for Minnesota History.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

#### **Students and researchers**

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

#### **Teachers**

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

#### **About Illustrations**

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).