

Section Three

The Far East Café: A Proud Legacy in Little Tokyo

By Raymond Douglas Chong

Raymond Chong is a fifth generation Chinese American born in Los Angeles. As part of Generations, his creative enterprise, Raymond has published Gim Suey Chong: His Life from Hoyping to Gum Saan (GSJ 2009) and My Kaiping Journey: From Gold Mountain to Hill of the Flying Swan. With brother Michael George Chong, he also has produced a documentary film on Far East Café. Raymond has worked for various municipalities in California and Texas as a traffic operations engineer and a transportation planner.



Raymond Chong.

Introduction

In the heart of Little Tokyo in the City of Angels, the Far East Café stands as a glorious landmark. Memories of chop suey, historic red-colored wood booths, and its iconic neon sign are clearly etched in many hearts of four generations of Japanese Americans. From 1935 to 1994—for 59 years—the Jeong (Zhang) clan from Guangdong Province happily served their customers. The Far East Café at 347 East First Street was a unique place for the Nikkei and others; they gathered for weddings, birthdays, graduations, parties, and funerals. The chop suey joint served their popular China-Meshi dishes (Japanese version of chop suey).

In 1935, ten Jeong cousin partners opened the Far East Café during the heyday of Little Tokyo. They were Chinese immigrants from Hoyping (Kaiping) County. Anna May Wong, the famous Hollywood actress, was present at the grand opening. Later, she had several family dinners in the mezzanine.

Originally, the Jeong cousins leased the storefront commercial space from the Italian Dondero family. Finally, on March 29, 1963, Look Mar, Shang Ging Jeong, Ott Ming Chong, and Hoy Young paid \$70,000 to the estate of Josephine Gallo Dondero for the property. Far East Café Inc. was incorporated on February 28, 1978, with four partners: Shang Ging Jeong, So Wun Mar, Mario Chang, and Ott Ming Chong.

On January 17, 1994, the Northridge earthquake severely damaged the Far East building and forced its sudden closure. For 12 years, the Nikkei community patiently waited for the resurrection of the Far East Café. On Thursday, August 10, 2006, the new Chop Suey Café and Lounge had its grand opening. James Hong, the Hollywood actor, was present at the event. The eatery served the classic signature China-Meshi dishes again. Chop Suey Café has a dining room with lounge in front. The Far Bar with its private alley patio is in the back. Banquets are held again in the mezzanine.



An older photo of the Far East Café.
(Photo courtesy of Visual Communications.)

Chew Young Village

The men and boys of the Jeong clan originated from Hoyping, in Wuyi (Five Counties; ed. note: the district was formerly comprised of four

counties and known as Sze Yup), in the fertile land of the Pearl River Delta. They were from Chew Young village. The Jeongs had lived and worked in the rich rice fields and abundant fish ponds. The village was a cluster of simple brick houses sandwiching narrow alleys. About 100 people lived among the 30 homes. In this tropical paradise of bamboo groves and piney woods, people eked out a simple and basic life.

The village gate proclaimed, "Chew Young Village, Facing the Sun." The Jeong ancestral hall was the center of life in their close community. As children, the Jeongs were taught in the village by a male teacher. They shopped in Sew Gew Market near Chek Hom, along the Tan River. Banyan trees stood between the village gate and the ancestral hall. The Diaolou, or "Tower in the Sky," protected the villagers from bandits. Nearby, their ancestors were buried in holy graves.

Their founding forefather was Zhang Che Zhu, dating back to the Tang Dynasty. Their most famous ancestor is Zhang Jiuling, a poet of *300 Tang Poems*. He was of Generation 8. According to Zhang Zupu, "In the Zhang family, there were 18 Zhuang Yuan (the scholar level who scored the highest on the imperial examination) and 3 Zai Xiang (the prime minister level in feudal China) during the Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties. There were 70 Jin Shi (former third degree candidate in the national civil service examination) and 9 Gong Hou (duke and marquis) amongst our forefathers."

Gum Saan Journey

With the Qing Dynasty in steep decline near the turn of the century, the Jeong forefathers joined successive waves of desperate emigrants who sought their fortune on Gold Mountain. From Hong Kong, they traveled on sailboats and steamships. In crowded living quarters and subject to foreign foods, they endured a one month journey. They had deep regret to leave their loved ones. They felt anxiety for the new land. With their fellow brothers, they shared hopes and dreams of Gum Saan.

The men and boys arrived in the port of San Francisco where immigration officers immediately placed them in detention barracks on Angel Island. They were interrogated. If credible "paper sons," they were issued Certificates of Identity.

Upon their arrival, other Jeong clan members gave them sanctuary along Dupont Street's (now Grant Avenue) cramped buildings. They searched for jobs in hand laundries, chop suey restaurants, and grocery markets. Or they ventured out to the rich farms of Central Valley, gold mines of Sierra Nevada, and railroad tracks of the West.

The Jeong cousins always lived under a dark shadow as "paper sons." They feared sudden arrest and quick deportation back to China. They faced a world of racial prejudice, legal discrimination, and economic ghettoization. Away from their wives and children, they endured miserable lives in a bachelor society. Many sought comfort in the three vices: gambling, opium, and prostitution.

By the 1910s, some Jeong men and boys settled in Mason City, Iowa, and stayed for about two decades. "River City," in Cerro Gordo County in north central Iowa, was the world capital in the manufacturing of cement, bricks, and tiles. The Jeong cousins operated the "Le Chung Brothers Chinese Hand Laundry" in downtown, first on Washington Avenue, later on Federal Street. "We Guarantee All Our Work" and "All Work Done by Hand." With a successful business, they invited other Jeong cousins to join them.

The Jeongs returned to Chew Young village for short stays to marry their women and to raise children. They built "Gold Mountain houses." They raised funds to build the Diaolou in Chew Young village for protection against bandits. But sadly, they were not able to bring their wives and children to America, which led to long years of separation. Their "Gold Mountain wives" were "living widows."

Far East Café (aka En To Low)

The Iowa laundry business gradually declined during the Depression years. So the Jeong cousins decided to move to California. In 1935, the "Year of the Pig," ten Jeong cousins opened the Far East Café or "En To Low." It was the golden era of Little Tokyo, with vibrant stores, restaurants, and theaters before World War II. In this bustling community of 30,000¹ people, Lem's Café, San Kow Low, and Yet Quong Low Chop Suey Café (aka Nikko Low) also served China-Meshi.

1 Editor's note: According to the 1930 census, there were about 35,000 Japanese Americans in Los Angeles County.



Jack Chick Cheong.

(Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.)

Jack Chick Cheong, allegedly born in 1876 in San Francisco, was a cook in San Francisco Chinatown. His wife was Jew Shee. He was blood father to Goey Yee Chong. Goey Yee Chong arrived in San Francisco on May 10, 1909, aboard the S.S. Korea and was admitted on May 30, 1909. He became a laundryman in Mason City. He married Hoo Shee on September 3, 1920, in Chew Young village. Ott Ming Chong, his blood son, arrived in San Francisco on April 11, 1934, aboard the S.S. President Coolidge and was admitted on May 28, 1934. He married Hong Shue Quan in 1947 in Chew Young village. Dr. Andrew Chong is the male descendant of Ott Ming Chong.

Andrew Chong said, “I remember working at the Far East Café from [the ages of] 11 to 22. And it was fun. Not work at all. At that time, we enjoyed ourselves as kids. We broke a lot of dishes and drank a lot of soda, but you learned to work hard and to know values of hard work.”

Jim Suey Chong, my father, was a proud weekend waiter at the storied Far East Café. He worked for his Jeong cousins. He served those popular China-Meshi dishes from 1950 to 1974. When he did, he talked, joked, and played with his fellow waiters, busboys, and cooks. Their world was a close-knit fraternity filled with many arm wrestling matches—which he always won—and other games. This eatery was a vital part of his short but vibrant life (1922–1979).

George Wakiji fondly recalled the Café:

“In my younger [pre-war] days when I lived in Pasadena, it was always a treat to go to Little Tokyo in Los Angeles to eat “China Meshi,” the popular Cantonese cuisine, at the Far East Café. I can still vividly recall the dark cherry wood panels, which covered the walls and booths. Sometimes when we had a family gathering on Sunday, I recall eating in a secluded mezzanine section in the back of the restaurant. Hanhichi Wakiji, my father, held court there. We never

failed to order the same dishes each time. There was always *pak kai* (sweet and sour pork), pea *chow yuk* (Chinese pea and pork), chow mein (with chicken and pan-fried noodles), and *wor shu op* (almond duck). My favorite was *cha su* (roast pork). In the ensuing years, I have eaten in many Chinese restaurants around the world, but have never found *cha su* that matched the Far East Café version. James Hajime Wakiji, my older brother, always had to have an order of *hom yu* (pork hash with salted fish). After our return from internment from the Gila River Relocation Camp in the Arizona desert, I with my good friends played in the post-World War II Nisei Athletic Union's (NAU) softball and basketball leagues. After the games on Friday evenings, we invariably stopped in Little Tokyo and headed for the Far East Café. We gorged ourselves on the best Cantonese cuisine. In those days, they served the steamed rice in large rice bowls, which were mounded high. I remember that in addition to all the Chinese dishes, I would down at least four of those bowls. Nowadays, I would eat an eighth of that amount of rice."

After December 7, 1941, Little Tokyo greatly changed for the Nikkei community. Little Tokyo became "Bronzeville," with African American



Shang Ging Jeong.
(Photo courtesy of Rafu Shimpo.)

residents who came to work in war plants. Shang Ging Jeong, Yook Toy Jeong, and Look Mar were drafted by the United States Army. Shang and Yook fought in the European theater in France and in Germany. Look Mar fought in the Pacific theater across the South Sea Islands.

After the end of World War II in 1945, the Nikkei gradually returned to Little Tokyo. The Jeong clan welcomed their cherished customers and good friends. They offered room and board and meals on credit. Bill Watanabe, former

Executive Director of the Little Tokyo Service Center, wrote,

"After World War II ended in 1945, many Japanese Americans sought to return to Southern California but they found there were few places for them to live. A number of families were housed temporarily at the Koyasan Temple on First Street in Little Tokyo—including members of my own family.

"According to some folks who recall those days, after spending years in the camps and losing most if not all of their possessions, they had little spending money. They would go to the Far East Café across the street from the Koyasan Temple and the Chinese owners of the café, who were familiar with many of these returnees, allowed them to eat "on credit," asking to be paid when they were able to do so. It could truthfully be said that this kind of goodwill helped to make the Far East, along with its famous cheap and tasty menu, the most popular and well-known restaurant in the entire Japanese American community."

From 1945 to 1994, Far East Café continued to serve the vibrant Little Tokyo community with countless dishes of chop suey and chow mein. There were many happy parties. Nisei Week was always a festive annual tradition. The City of Los Angeles redeveloped Little Tokyo around this venerable landmark institution. It was a popular destination of city hall politicians like Mayor Tom Bradley, Hollywood stars like Anna May Wong, sports figures like Mike Garrett, gangsters like Mickey Cohen, and other celebrities. It opened every day of the year from 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. Later, the Far East Café was open from 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

John Matsuda remembers his wedding day on December 28, 1952:

"Marian and I got married at the West Adams Christian Church, officiated by Reverend Kashitani. For us poor students, we could only afford an economical wedding reception so my family and close friends went to the upstairs section and had the usual China-Meshi. When I came out of the Far East Café, my brother gave me \$100 as a wedding present, which was a lot of money in those days. Those are our happy memories from 50-plus years ago!"

At the end of World War II, Congress enacted the Chinese War Brides Act and the Jeong men went back to marry their sweethearts and bring their brides and wives back to America. In the midst of the Cold

War, the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) created the Chinese Confession Program, which offered legal status in exchange for confession of illegal entry into the United States. From 1956 to 1965, the program resulted in about 14,000 confessions. INS was able to bar future immigration of Chinese while other Chinese applied for naturalization.

The Jeong clan gradually assimilated into mainstream America. They were busy with activities of the Lung Kong Tin Yee Family Association in Chinatown and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. For years, the Jeong cousins and their growing families lived in Little Tokyo or around downtown. Gradually, with financial success, they brought homes in Monterey Park and other suburbs of the San Gabriel Valley. Their children continued to learn Chinese and attend public schools. The children graduated from college and universities. The Jeong cousins are buried in East Los Angeles Chinese Cemetery² and Rose Hills Memorial Park in Whittier.

China-Meshi Cuisine

The Far East Café menu promoted its famous brand of Chinese food. Chop suey was a smorgasbord of various fresh vegetables. Almond duck was pressed boneless duck. It was flattened for easy deep-frying, then garnished with almonds. *Hom yu* was salted fish from China that was topped on fatty pork hash; it was cheap food. The tasty *cha shu* was the leanest pork baked with a secret sauce. Chow mein was pan fried and topped with bean sprout, celery, and onion in a sauce. It was topped with *cha shu* and garnished with fried egg slices. Slogans read, "Famous Chinese Food," "Chop Suey," "Try Our Real Chinese Dishes," and "Served in Complete Family Style Dinner at All Hours."

The Chinese cooks of the Far East Café bought their meats from Wai Sang Meat Company on 700 North Spring Street in New Chinatown. Frozen shrimp and abalone were from Mexico; frozen lobster was from Cuba. Later, they brought fresh fish. Fresh vegetables and other cooking ingredients were from Kwong Dack Wo Company grocery store on 702 North Spring Street. This included bean sprouts, onions, celery, bok choy, water chestnut, and Chinese peas. Chinese peas always had to be fresh for a crispy taste. They used canned mushrooms. They cooked in vegetable and peanut oils. They brought 100-pound bags of long grain rice with the usual condiments of soy sauce and mustard sauce. Peking Noodle Company,

2 Editor's note: Chinese Cemetery is on First And Eastern in the Belvedere Gardens region.

Hong Kong Noodle Company, Eastern Noodle Company, and Quon Yick Noodle Company of Los Angeles provided their mein, egg flour noodles, and wonton skins.

Far East Building

The Far East Building is now on the National Register of Historical Places. It was built in 1896, with Beaux Arts elements. Its façade has massive arched windows and a vertical “Chop Suey” neon sign. Before the Northridge earthquake, in addition to Far East Café, the building included Queen Hotel apartments (351 East First Street) with 24 single-occupancy units. Anzen Hardware (353 East First Street) was on the ground floor. That space was formerly occupied by Ninomiya Studio, owned by Ichiro Ninomiya.

On March 14, 2002, Mayor James Hahn with George Takei, the Hollywood actor, led a groundbreaking ceremony. Little Tokyo Service Center spearheaded the effort to restore Far East Building to its former grandeur at cost of \$3.9 million.

Robert Uyeda, architect with Tetra Design, redesigned the new Far East Building, which includes Chop Suey Café, DISKovery Computer Learning Center, and 16 units of affordable housing. The entire three stories of 17,454 square feet—including the basement—was totally restored.

HGTV's *Restore America: A Salute to Preservation* honored the Far East Building. SurveyLA: Los Angeles Historic Resource Survey showcased the Far East Building as a historic place in a video. In *If These Walls Could Talk* (2005), Elizabeth and Ed Asawa share fond memories of the Far East Café.



Far East Building.

(Photo courtesy of Raymond Chong.)

The Far East Café has been featured in Hollywood films, television shows, novels, and stories. Raymond Chandler, mystery writer, wrote the Farewell My Lovely novel (1940) about Philip Marlowe, the tough detective. Moose Malloy engaged Marlowe to find Velma, his missing sweetheart. Marlowe exclaims, "I was having some Chinese food when a dark shadow fell over my chop suey." Robert Mitchum starred in the film version (1975).

In the sentimental *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* film (1993), Bruce Lee, played by Jason Scott Lee, is a new dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant owned by Gussie Yang, played by Nancy Kwan. He becomes involved in a fight with the staff and he beats them away. Yang promptly fires Lee. As well as severance pay, she gives him a loan to invest in his education.

Naomi Hirahara, mystery writer, produced Mamo's *Weeds*, a short film (2007). Mamo Ikeda, a Kibei gardener, battles a destructive weed epidemic. He also is solving a mystery and travels to Far East Café in search of elusive answers. Mas Arai of Hirahara's *Summer of the Big Bachi* (2004) and *Gasa-Gasa Girl* (2005) also uses the café. In *A Day in Little Tokyo* (1986), Hisaye Yamamoto's character, Rose, casually mentioned "a new café called Far East."

Huell Howser featured the new Chop Suey Café in the first television episode of *Downtown* (2006). Ted Tajima with his eldest daughter Pam Praeger were in search of hom yu at the Far East Café. Union Bank sponsored a video, *Community Matters 2011: Elwin Ichiro Ninomiya*; Ninomiya Studio was on the ground floor of the Far East Building.

Far East Café is also featured in Mike Murase's *Little Tokyo: One Hundred Years in Pictures* (1983), *Downtown Los Angeles: A Walking Guide* (2004), and *Little Tokyo Historical Society's Los Angeles' Little Tokyo* (2010). In fact, it has been featured in many oral histories, films, and even songs.

My Far East Café

By Zhang Weiming

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*My Far East Café
Splendidly endures
In the heart of Little Tokyo
In the City of Angels
Among the Nikkei community of Southland.*

*Cooks anxiously prepare
In the chaotic kitchen
Waiters calmly serve
In the noisy dining room.*

*Amid timeless booths
Cherry wood panels
Vintage posters
Shanghai cigarette girls.
Cantonese cuisine of China-Meshi*

*Crispy noodles of Chow Mein
Glistening skin of Almond Duck
Pungent aroma of Hom Yu.
Nostalgic place of fond memories
Hungry farmers feasting on Saturday lunches
Jubilant newlyweds celebrating at wedding parties
Loved ones sharing Sunday meals.*

*Jeong Clan
From Hoyping of China
Happily handing out
Chop Suey dishes.*

*Delightful warmth
Cheerful kindness
My sentimental reminiscences
My Far East Café.*