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The Welcoming Table

Constance Chang helped bring regional Chinese cuisine to the world, one buffet dinner at a time

By Pang-Mei Natasha Chang

Pang-Mei Natasha Chang is the author of *Bound Feet & Western Dress* (Doubleday/Anchor, 1995). This is her first story for SAVEUR.

In the suburb of New Haven, Connecticut, where I grew up during the 1970's, there were two Chinese restaurants, and the standard fare offered was egg foo young, sweet-and-sour pork, and barbecued spareribs. If my family ate at one of these places, we talked to the waiter in Chinese, found out what province the cook that night hailed from, and ordered dishes off the menu that reflected the cook's regional background. If we were lucky, the cook was Shanghainese like my father or Sichuanese like my mother. Which meant, that on any given night, we could delight in pickled snow cabbage with shredded pork, or a red-braised fresh fish (Shanghainese), or perhaps double-cooked pork, and Mapo doufu (Sichuanese). Sometimes, non-Chinese families would look over at our table enviously and say as if bored with their Cantonese-style stand-bys, "We want what they're having."

At home, my mother, a tireless hostess who regularly threw dinner parties for ten to thirty, strived to educate our non-Chinese guests about the diversity of Chinese cooking. To fellow Yale professors and a slew of graduate student from my father's academic circle, she introduced hoisin-marinated chicken, Lion's Head meatballs with vermicelli, cauliflower with crabmeat, pickled cabbage, and a range of other dishes. Unlike other traditional Chinese hostesses we knew, my mother didn't like to stay behind in the kitchen cooking, bringing out one piping dish after another as the guests ate without her. So, on one side of our dining room, she had built a dark-stained buffet table complete with electric sockets for warming trays, and hidden piano hinges attached to leaves that doubled its width. In addition to allowing my mother to join her guests at the table, buffet-style dining saved guests from awkward confrontations with huge helpings of unfamiliar food and assured the satisfaction of any appetite, large or small, adventurous or timid. Guests could eat the (safe) fried rice if they wanted it, but they could also try a forkful of drunken chicken or beef tendons to their plate – an appealing proposition for those eager to dip their toes but not quite ready to get wet.

In researching my family's history for a book, I found out that buffet dining has a prominent place in our past. According to family lore, a half-century ago, Constance D. Chang, my father's cousin, invented the all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet – an adoption of the Western smorgasbord that would

go on to change the way both Asian and non-Asian people enjoyed Chinese cuisine.

Born near Shanghai in 1918, Constance studied in Japan before World War II and settled there afterward with her husband, a physician. A consummate cook, she opened a Chinese restaurant, called Mi Mi Sai, in Tokyo in 1955. Located near the U.S. embassy and the Japanese foreign ministry, the establishment became popular with both American and Japanese diplomats. Constance noticed that her customers always ordered the same dishes: sweet-and-sour pork, egg foo young, and boiled chicken—perfectly good Cantonese-inspired fare but hardly the tastiest things on the menu.

Then, in 1956, Constance received an inquiry about opening a restaurant in the Tokyu Hotel, in Tokyo's Ginza district. She knew that, just a few years earlier, the famous Imperial Hotel, nearby, had opened the first smorgasbord-style restaurant in Japan; it was called the Viking, and, with its Scandinavian fare and its one-price menu, it had become a huge success among both foreigners and the Japanese. (Today, the contemporary Japanese word for buffet is viking.) Inspired by that restaurant's success, Constance proposed a unique idea to her investors: a Chinese smorgasbord.

In 1959, Peacock Hall, the first buffet-style Chinese restaurant in Japan or—as far as existing accounts can determine—in China or anywhere else, opened its elegant, etched-glass doors. Named after a hotel-restaurant

on the Bund, the waterfront thoroughfare in Constance's beloved Shanghai, Peacock Hall offered unlimited servings of both cold and hot dishes. More than 40 foods were on display at any given meal: everything from tea-smoked duck, steamed carp belly in ginger and scallions, and lemon chicken to beef in black bean sauce, turtle soup, king crabs, and mussels. Constance labeled dishes—in Japanese, English, and Chinese—with their place of origin: Shanghai, Sichuan, Hong Kong, Peking, and so on. For a single price, diners got to taste a sprawling array of stir-fried, deep-fried, braised, glazed, stewed, and boiled delicacies—the whole, dizzying mosaic that is Chinese cuisine.

Peacock Hall banked heavily on the all-you-can-eat concept. Constance installed two big curved mirrors: one, placed by the entrance, made patrons look thin; the other, located by the exit, made them look fat. The one-price-fits-all policy was put to the test three days after the restaurant opened, when one of Tokyo's best-known celebrities, a 300-pound sumo wrestler named Taiho, and 13 of his similarly proportioned cohorts paid a visit. The men returned from the buffet table six times with plates piled high; in the kitchen, Constance's three chefs worked double-time to keep the food coming. Yet, at the end of the evening, Constance honored the sumo wrestlers by charging them not a yen more than the standard all-you-can-eat price. Word got out, and from that night on, Peacock Hall could not keep customers away.

No one before Constance had thought to open the Asian table to the smorgasbord style of dining, and, for Japanese and Chinese eaters

particularly, Constance's invention was a breath of fresh air. Both Japanese and Chinese ceremonial meals have a highly ritualized presentation and obey a strict etiquette. At a traditional Chinese restaurant banquet, for example, you may not help yourself to a piece of food from the communal plate without serving at least two people on either side of you, and then only in a prescribed manner: the young serve the old, the less important serve the more important. What's more, you must select the right food to place on a given guest's plate—the prized upper tail part of the fish, say, or the coveted wing of the chicken, go to honored guests. Imagine monitoring every mouthful during a two-hour, ten-course meal, and you have an idea of how exhilarating a take-as-you-please buffet was to the Asian patrons of Peacock Hall.

Eventually, Aunt Constance opened three more Peacock Hall restaurants: in Okinawa, in Yokohama, and one in Tokyo's international airport. The culmination of Peacock Hall's success came in 1962, when, on the occasion of his 60th birthday, Emperor Hirohito himself requested that Constance and her staff prepare a buffet-style dinner at the Mitsui Club for 100 guests. That the emperor, still considered a veritable demigod by much of the Japanese populace, would deign to serve himself dinner was nothing short of revolutionary.

In the years that followed, Constance came to be regarded in Japan as a Julia Child of Chinese cuisine; she wrote five cookbooks, opened a culinary school, and, throughout the 1960's up to the 1990's, hosted a popular

television cooking segment. In 1994, she emigrated to the United States to be near her children. Her legacy eventually followed her to America, where plentiful Chinese restaurant buffets, following the model Constance developed decades ago, have proliferated all over the country.

I met Constance for the first time about three years ago in San Francisco, at the wedding of one of my cousins. Open, genial, even girlish, Constance graciously signed autographs for the excited Japanese guests in attendance. When I was finally able to have a moment alone with her, I asked her whether her idea for a buffet-style restaurant was purely a business decision. She laughed and told me that, more than anything, she opened Peacock Hall because she got bored taking the same orders all the time. In a way, though, opening a buffet-style restaurant was also an act of diplomacy, she said. She'd seen China and Japan at war with each other for much of her early life, and the dinner table seemed as good a place as any for a rapprochement.

Now that she was in America, Constance told me, nothing gave her more pleasure than going out to eat and seeing people of both Chinese and non-Chinese descent enjoying their meal with equal pleasure. The best part, she said, is that there's often not a plate of egg foo young or sweet-and-sour pork in sight.