

## Edith Chu

EC: My family is from--my dad is from China. He was born there, and when he was about 11 years old he escaped to Hong Kong because of the Cultural Revolution. He met my mom there and they were married in Hong Kong. My brother was born there. He was a businessman in Hong Kong. At that time there was a stock market crash; so, because of that he went to France because his uncle was there. He wanted to start new. He kind of hit rock bottom so he sought work in a Chinese restaurant. That's where he could find people who could understand him. He started off by washing dishes and then he worked himself up to working in the kitchen as a chef. I was born there in France, but I'm not French. Everyone asks me, are you French? At that time, even if you're born in France, you're not automatically granted citizenship. Then we immigrated to Canada in '79 to Edmonton, and we've been here ever since.

Q: What kind of jobs did your parents have at that time?

EC: I think because they had restaurant experience in France, they did the same thing. My dad and mom both worked in hotels and restaurants. I remember my dad worked multiple shifts. He would do the breakfast shift in the hotel and then come back and sleep, then go off again and do another shift. He did two or three jobs trying to raise a family; so it was quite hard. Eventually my dad decided to open up his own business.

Q: Your dad opened Szechuen Cuisine in 1984. What inspired him to open this restaurant. Why not a Cantonese restaurant?

EC: I think about that often, because we're not Sichuan people. On a side note, the way people say that word it should be Sichuan, but in Canada if you said that, because they say Szechuan here, and even the way we spelled it was very western spelling, not how Chinese spell it. So anyway, I think the trend then was there was a big trend with Szechuan beef, everyone was making ginger beef, Szechuan beef. Which if you went to Sichuan, it doesn't taste like that. But someone invented this dish called ginger beef, Szechuan beef, so my parents wanted to be trendy and to attract customers. So that's why we named it that. But you're right; we didn't have that kind of spicy food in our restaurant.

Q: Do you have memories of that restaurant as a kid?

EC: When my dad first bought it, we were quite young; I think my brother was maybe in kindergarten. We weren't old enough to work there yet; so we would just hang out there on the So we would make our own cocktails by mixing sodas or whatever. Then later we would work there as a busgirl, busboy. Then, when I turned 18 I could serve alcohol. So then me and my older brother were waiting tables.

Q: There's a side bar in your restaurant?

EC: Yes, because we served alcohol, so there's a bar area where we had the alcohol and ice and coffee maker.

Q: I also heard that you were selling some Chinese tea.

EC: Yes. My mother likes tea. She was trying to be very--my mom is a clever business lady. She's trying to be very current and to kind of spice things up. So she's the one who thought of selling tea. She got in touch with friends we have in Taiwan. So she bought some tea from there; she found a supplier. So then we started selling different kinds of teas.

Q: Did the customers enjoy that?

EC: I think a few. I would say maybe because the majority of our customers were Caucasian, I would say we sold a lot of beer; that was popular, occasionally wine. Tea, I know there were a few customers who really appreciated the different kinds of teas.

Q: Do you know why they chose to open a restaurant on Stony Plain Road? Was there something special about the location?

EC: I don't know. I think maybe the rent was lower. I'm not sure. I'm thinking it was the cost.

Q: Where did you live at that time?

EC: At first we were in Mill Woods and then we moved later to the west end in Laurier Heights. We didn't live in Stony Plain.

Q: So your school wasn't in Jasper Place?

EC: No, we went to Laurier Heights for elementary and then Parkview and then Ross Sheppard. I did go to Jasper Place High School for a track meet there, but that's about it.

Q: Can you describe the Jasper Place neighbourhood around your restaurant?

EC: It was very diverse. Like I said earlier, we had Ebony and Ivory, which was owned by someone from the Caribbean; I'm not sure if she was Jamaican or not. That was Shirley, her business. Then there were a few Chinese restaurants beside us, like Chin Kee, Moon Palace, and then there was a Singapore restaurant. There was the flag shop, the tailors--they were Chinese. Chin Kee was Chinese. So it was different; it was like a community. We all knew each other in the same strip mall.

Q: You had connections with other Chinese businesses around that area?

EC: Yes.

Q: Can you describe a typical day at the restaurant?

EC: I think my dad would wake up around 7 and he would go swimming. They used to go swimming every day at Coronation swimming pool, which is now called Peter Hemingway. They would go swim for about half an hour or an hour, and then my dad would be at the restaurant around maybe 10 or 11 and he would start prep, chop all the vegetables. All the food prep would be done and then we would open our doors around 11 for the lunch rush. My mom

would come before we opened. My grandmother used to also help out at the restaurant too; so she would be in the kitchen helping. We had some regular customers who would come in. My mother, another innovation she did was she made these lunch combos, which would have a spring roll or appetizer or soup; then you'd have ginger beef and fried rice. It would all be included, so you could order combo number one or ginger beef combo. There were some customers who would eat the same thing every day. They would come in and my mother would be, okay I know what you want, you want this, kung pao chicken, or whatever. I used to work there when I was a student, because in university we would be off for the summer. If I was helping out, I would be there taking orders, filling their water glasses. It was quite busy until 2 or 3 we would take like a siesta. I think my parents had this routine because in Europe they have a siesta and in the afternoon they kind of close their doors for two or three hours. So we would close and then we would open again around 4:30; then 4:30 until about 10 would be our evening shift. My dad had a little mattress rolled up in his back office, and he would take it out and put it on the floor, and then him and my grandma would take a nap after lunch hour. He didn't eat much. He would have a beer and a few bites of food. I think he cooked so much that he didn't want to eat his own cooking anymore.

Q: So your dad cooked Sichuan food, but it was a compromise.

EC: Yes. He cooked Asian food, let's say Chinese food, southern style. That's what he cooked. He did make a few dishes that you can't find at other restaurants. He had a chef's special chicken, which is like this crispy chicken with this different sauce, like a sweet soy sauce. Then we had this soup, it's called wo ba, and it looks like Rice Krispies; it's like puffed rice. When you pour the tomato soup in it has this snap crackle pop sizzle. It's really cool. I've never seen that at other Chinese restaurants.

Q: Do you remember some of the regular customers?

EC: My mom has a very good memory and sometimes when she's out in Edmonton she'll meet a customer. Sometimes she can still remember their names, which is really cool. My memory is, there was one time I was working and a customer wanted a white Russian to drink. It's a drink,

and I had no idea. I asked him, what is that? Then he told me and he said, okay, this is how you make it; you add this and this. So I tried. I went behind the bar and I did what he said, and I served it to him. I thought that was interesting. I think it's milk and vodka or something like that.

Q: So your mom was good at building relationships with the customers?

EC: You got it. Her role was she was on the floor managing the workers, relating to the customers, making them feel comfortable, remembering their names. Then my dad took care of the kitchen, the finances, ordering the food, repairs. My aunt also worked there; she was one of the main waitresses. Both of my brothers worked there as waiters. My grandmother was in the kitchen. Then we had a few workers who were not family, but we still have good relationships with them.

Q: Were those staff Chinese?

EC: We did have one or two non-Chinese, but most were Chinese.

Q: What motivated you to do this work of the Sweet and Sour Memories Exhibit?

EC: I guess first of all my father passed away in 2019; so I feel like a lot of this work is a way to commemorate his legacy or to say thank you for his sacrifice. The other thing is that with food and culture the relationship is intertwined. I feel like as I get older I really want to know more about my Chinese heritage, my culture. I think one of the main ways of me connecting is through food and my memories of food, Chinese junk food, food we ate growing up, and places like restaurants that we used to go to in Edmonton.

Q: Could you share a few pictures from the exhibit and the stories behind them?

EC: I have some watercolours and those are like pictures of the restaurants we used to go to. They're kind of painted in this fuzzy way that sometimes your memories are fuzzy; so that's how they look, like kind of nostalgic memories I have of going there with my family. Then I have

some, how do I say this, they look like little guest checks. When customers used to come in we would take their orders on these guest checks. I wanted to tell a story somehow about these are the people who cook your food; so I sketched little photos. I sketched from photos of our restaurant, like the people who used to work there. We had this waiter named Ken. So there's a scene of Ken eating food. He's just caught in the scene, has food in his mouth. We used to joke around with him a lot when we were kids. That event I think was a staff appreciation where we took that photo of Ken. I made takeout boxes because first of all I really like those kind of takeout boxes. We used to use the Styrofoam clamshells, and I always wanted to eat Chinese food out of a takeout box like that. So that's partly why I chose that design. The other thing was to just tell my story of every food dish. I chose a dish from every section of the menu like a meat, a rice, a soup, appetizer. I think there are nine takeout boxes in total, and each of them has a little story written on it. Then lastly are these photographs of stories written on napkins. I think that comes from when we were kids before we had phones. These family dinners would sometimes take hours. You'd be bored to death; so you would just play tic-tac-toe on these napkins or draw pictures on the napkins. So that's kind of a memory I have. I wrote little stories of restaurants like my memories working at the restaurant on the napkins.

Q: Has the process of making this art helped you better understand your parents and their sacrifices?

EC: This art project was part of my Masters of Fine Arts. As part of the Masters program we also have to write a thesis. We had to do a lot of research, and through the research I looked up a lot of authors who are Chinese-American, Chinese-Canadian writing about similar experiences, like the Chinese restaurant experience. It was really enlightening. I learned a lot about immigration, Chinese food, and Chinese restaurants, and how Chinese came here and they found community in Chinatown. They've had so much hardship, because they came here and their English wasn't good. They really struggled. That's where they had the community. Because they couldn't find jobs, they started restaurants, laundromats, grocery stores. I do appreciate my parents and the people who came before us, their sacrifice. It's huge and admirable. I wish I had that kind of strength that they had. I don't think they complained; they just did what they had to do for the family. It's great. I admire that.

Q: As immigrants and Chinese-Canadians, did you or your family ever experience racism or discrimination?

EC: Yes. Nowadays hardly; it's pretty good. Edmonton is so diverse now. But back then I can remember in elementary school it was maybe like five Asians or Chinese in our school, hardly any. Sometimes they would call you names at recess or make fun of your eyes or something. It was a bit hard. But I think after junior high we had a wave of people come from Hong Kong, and it became better. I could say that as I got older I came to embrace my identity as Chinese. Before, I was kind of embarrassed about speaking Chinese or being different, because I just wanted to fit in. But that has changed.

Q: What language did you speak with your family?

EC: My parents speak Cantonese but my grandmother spoke it's like Ningbo Ha, because she comes from this island off the coast of Ningbo. So my dad also speaks that; so we can understand it but we can't speak it back.

Q: So you speak Cantonese with your mom?

EC: Sometimes. Definitely we spoke Cantonese with our grandmother, because she can't speak English.

Q: How did your experiences growing up shape your sense of identity?

EC: Like the restaurant business?

Q: Or communicating with other Chinese ethnic groups who helped you, and also the restaurant experience.

EC: I would say having the restaurant background has allowed me to connect with other immigrants who went through the same thing. Even now, the Chinese who come now are very educated. Some of them have Masters degrees, PhDs. But I find still it's very hard for them when they come, even if they're educated. Because still it's like a different culture; still the language is hard for them. I feel like my growing up experience has allowed me to have more empathy and compassion for newcomers to this country. I have to admit when I was a teenager part of me rejected being Asian. It was kind of being uncool; it wasn't cool to be Chinese. We even had this segregation, like we're not from Asia because we're born here. There's something called CBC, Canadian-born Chinese, and then there's the Chinese Chinese from China or Hong Kong. We didn't want to be affiliated with them. At the end of the day we're all people. There shouldn't be that divide. We're not better than anyone else.

Q: Do you remember how you acquired that change of perspective?

EC: In 2010 I worked overseas. I worked in China for five years. I think that's what changed me, just being in a different country. I'm Chinese but they call us bananas, because we're yellow on the outside but white on the inside. I think the role was switched: I was the foreigner in China. I had to learn the way of doing things. I had to learn the language and culture. I think that experience really helped me understand my parents more and helped me to understand Chinese people more.

Q: You've had that experience of being in between cultures.

EC: Yes that's very true. You're in Canada but you're Chinese.

Q: What are you most proud of about your family's journey?

EC: I think my parents were very hardworking and they took a big risk coming to Canada out of their comfort zone in a land where they're not familiar and they don't really know the language. Then they started a business, and that's a big risk too. They did really well. My dad had a good

restaurant business and he did other things too on the side. They put us all through university and I think they were very hardworking. They did their best raising us.

Q: What did the restaurant mean to your family and the community?

EC: It was our source of livelihood. I think it was a favourite for a lot of the people who lived around the community, especially for the people who used to be the staff and students at Grant MacEwan. They used to go to our restaurant quite often. There's a TV show called Cheers; it's like the local bar that everybody goes to and they feel at home there. It's like a local hangout.

Q: And to your family?

EC: It was, I guess it was important. It's a place that we went to every day almost. Everything revolved around the restaurant. When you do your own business you're thinking about it all the time. Even on the weekend you're there, every holiday you're there.

Q: I read in your other interview that sometimes you wanted to do other things as a child, but you had to hang out in the restaurant a lot.

EC: It's true. During junior high and high school all my friends would hang out at the mall every summer, and I'm working. Or they're going to camp, and I have to work. I remember I think it was even my birthday and I was working. I was so upset. But I really appreciate it, because life is like that. In real life sometimes you have to make sacrifices, and that's exactly what my parents did. There are things that you need to do if you want to obtain a goal.

Q: Did your family have any leisure activities or holidays together?

EC: We did. It wasn't that bad. We did go on family vacations. We would close the restaurant sometimes during the summer. We went to Disneyland. So it wasn't bitter all the time. I think my parents knew when to have fun too. But you can't have fun all the time; you have to do work too.

Q: How have others, especially those with immigrant backgrounds, responded to your exhibition?

EC: It was well received. The St. Albert Gallery collected all these slips of paper with comments from the viewers. A lot of them said it brings back memories. Even if they're not from Edmonton, like rural Saskatchewan or something, they have fond memories of the local Chinese restaurant. I think somebody was saying that his mother or grandmother grew up in a restaurant, and she had similar memories and similar experiences as me. I think a lot of them could identify with what I shared in the art.

Q: What do you hope the viewers experience or learn from your work?

EC: I guess I just wanted to share my story with them. I wanted them to kind of understand the immigrant struggle, maybe see that when you go to a restaurant there's something else going on behind the scenes. When you're impatiently waiting for your food, maybe there's something happening that you don't know about. I think maybe a deeper appreciation and understanding for people.

Q: Do you have any further thoughts about the neighbourhood or the restaurant, or any other stories you'd like to share?

EC: I would just say I think they're trying to revitalize it now; so that's good. I think it needs that. There's a lot of potential there.

Q: When your dad retired in 2007, did you go back to Stony Plain Road or still have some connections with this community?

EC: I don't go back often. Sometimes I drive by. When we sold it, the second owners after us were also Chinese; it was some Chinese restaurant to sell dumplings. Then after that, now it's

Aachys, I think; it's an Indian restaurant. My cousin goes there; he likes to eat Indian food. But I have not gone there.

Q: If you could say one thing to your parents or to your younger self growing up in the restaurant, what would it be?

EC: Good question. To my parents I would say thank you. To my younger self I would say, if I could go back in time, I think I would try to learn more about cooking or try to make the most of it. I think as a teen I did not have the best attitude. I just worked because I had to. You just do what you need to do on your shift. But if I could go back in time, I think I would've asked my dad to teach me more things.

Q: I have a couple of follow-up questions. You talked about the restaurant as being a gathering place in the community. Did your family create it as such? Can you describe what the restaurant looked like inside? How did you create that atmosphere of a community gathering spot?

EC: We did have a floor plan, a layout, because all the tables were numbered. We would say like, table 14 ordered hot and sour soup. I think it was more of a community because we would be--for example I remember one time Grant MacEwan came and they wanted to do a silent art auction or something. I remember we hosted this private event. There was this painting in the middle of the room and there were a bunch of people interested in art or people affiliated with Grant MacEwan who came and bid on the art. It was a very jovial, happy occasion. So that was one. Then the other thing was there were certain families that came often to our restaurant. They would come for birthdays. There's one family, their grandson had a Bar Mitzvah. Of course we're not Jewish, but they invited my parents to the synagogue. I remember they had a little hat for my dad to wear in the synagogue for the back of his head. We even catered either for the Bar Mitzvah or some kind of event that they had; of course we didn't serve pork. But that's the kind of relationship we built with our customers. I told this story before to this lady on CBC. One of the customers wanted to propose to his girlfriend. So my mom took out something from the fortune cookie and put in either a ring or something so he could propose to his girlfriend with the fortune cookie. So there are those special relationships that we had with our customers that

made them feel welcome and made them bring their families so that they could have their birthdays and anniversaries at our restaurant.

Q: Can you expand on your relationships with the surrounding businesses?

EC: I'll start with the obvious. We would go to each other's businesses for haircuts. Morley from the Western Wear shop would come over almost every day just to hang out with my dad and talk about the news or whatever. Then he would have his bowl of wonton soup. There was Al's, and he had a really good deal with haircuts, really cheap haircuts. So my dad would go often to have his hair cut there. Then with Shirley of Ebony and Ivory, I remember all three of us kids would go over there and get our haircuts and they would come over to us and get takeout quite often. My mom would be, oh, I remember Curtis and he likes to eat this. The pharmacy was on the corner, and I remember sometimes if we didn't have enough cash or we wanted to get coins, we would go over to the pharmacy and get coins. We even had a police station next door for a little bit; I remember that. There was one time we actually needed the police, but when we went there they weren't there. Then there was the tailor upstairs. So they would help us alter our pants or something. So we had this give and take community. If you need help from these people, you can go there.

Q: Why did you need the police on that occasion?

EC: I think we had a customer who tried to rob us. We did have several occasions. This is the other thing about Jasper Place. It's not the safest place. There were a few times people stole things or tried to take things from our cash register. I remember somebody either had like a sharp tool or a gun, and threatened the waitress: I want everything from your cash register. At that time she was so afraid she just gave him what he wanted. But yeah, the police were too late.

Q: Can you talk about the stigma of Jasper Place?

EC: That's why I asked about the angle of the interview. Am I supposed to paint a rosy picture of Jasper Place? Because honestly yes, it wasn't a great place. People have called it the armpit of Edmonton. Even Jasper Place High School also at that time wasn't as good as Shep. People saw Ross Sheppard in a higher light. I don't think people looked down on us for having a restaurant in that neighbourhood. I think my dad definitely looked down on himself sometimes when other people in our Chinese community – he always said, oh they're doctors or they're lawyers, and I work in the kitchen. He had this sort of self-deprecating view. But I don't know. I think that's now not how I see it. Even if people think that, that's not true. Sometimes society or culture sells you these lies, like a doctor is better than a janitor, or certain jobs are better than others, or certain communities are better than others. Maybe if I had young children I wouldn't want to raise them in Jasper Place. But at the same time, it's a part of our city; so it's good. We still need to pay attention to it and put effort and money to revitalize it. Not every place can be sparkling clean and rich. I don't know what to say.

Q: Did you find that there was a distinction between Jasper Place and other parts of Edmonton in terms of poverty?

EC: Yeah, you're right. There are places in Edmonton that are different socioeconomic status. Jasper Place has a lower socioeconomic status. We would have all kinds of customers. We would have business professionals; we'd have truck drivers. We'd have people with alcohol addictions, but we'd still serve them; they're still people. We had a variety of customers.

Q: Can you share some stories of how you treated different customers?

EC: It's almost like being a social worker sometimes. You can tell when someone is impaired. But they still order. So you give them their order. Sometimes they're very nice people. We would have some customers come in and use the bathroom and you're like, oh he's been in there a long time; maybe we need to check on him. Or sometimes my mom had to refuse them service if they were too drunk. It's just like having street smarts I guess with knowing how to treat people and who to let in and where to draw the line.

Q: Do you remember when the police came to your restaurant?

EC: They actually didn't. I think every time we called them, by the time they arrived it was too late. Either the person ran away or the problem was resolved. So they never came in time. But luckily, the situations we encountered were not like murder or anything; it was usually like theft.

Q: Do you remember when the incidents happened?

EC: Not a lot--maybe I can count on one hand the times it happened. Not that many.

Q: Who did your father order the supplies from?

EC: I don't know if this company still exists, but it's called Sunspun. We ordered from Sunspun a big order of whatever we needed in the kitchen. That was for western things. If we needed Chinese things, there's a company called Wings; so we ordered from Wings. I know the fortune cookies came from Wings. Sunspun was big things of ketchup and sauces and napkins. Then there was the Real Canadian Wholesale Club, which is affiliated with Superstore. My dad would just go there himself and shop. Delta is a Chinese company and I think they're in Edmonton. Then make the dim sum things, like the buns and things. He had a good relationship with them. He knew the people in the companies and he knew the truck drivers, the deliverymen.

Q: Were any of them based in Jasper Place?

EC: The Real Canadian Wholesale Club is close; it's on 111.

Q: Did you have any relationships with the Chinese owners of corner stores in Jasper Place?

EC: Not that I know of. I do know a Chinese store owner, but he was in our neighbourhood. So I'm not sure. I don't think so.

Q: That might have been a bit after your years at the restaurant. How did you and your family get around? Was public transit useful to you?

EC: My parents had cars. Me and my siblings took the bus a lot. I haven't taken the bus lately, but I know back then it wasn't great. We did have many times standing and waiting for the bus or running to catch the bus only to have it drive away. It wasn't great.

Q: Was the trolley system in place?

EC: No.

Q: So you would take the bus from Ross Sheppard to the restaurant?

EC: Yes, sometimes I would take the bus from the university to the restaurant if I had to work, or I would take the bus home from work if my parents had to stay. Sometimes I rode my bike, but not often. Transportation was not bad, it was okay.

Q: Are there any differences in the Jasper Place community between now and 30 years ago?

EC: Now they're trying to put in the LRT. So I think that'll change things for sure. I don't know if this is a trend or something, but they put the LRT through Chinatown and they also put it through this. So I wonder if they do that to poor areas to revitalize them? I'm not sure. But anyway, I think it will help people get around better in our city. For now it's so convoluted and it's very hard to get around. But I think it'll probably be better than it used to be.

Q: How does the Chinese population here compare to 30 years ago?

EC: I feel like the Chinese people now don't like to go to Chinatown or Stony Plain Road. They prefer to go to the newer areas. West Edmonton Mall has a T&T or they have T&T and Lucky 97 on the south side.

Q: The new area in which parts of the city?

EC: On Calgary Trail there's a T&T Mart and now there's Lucky 97. They're newer builds and they're on main roads. I think we have a big homeless problem in Edmonton. So I think that deters a lot of people from going to Chinatown.

Q: Do you hardly ever go to Chinatown now?

EC: I do actually; I don't mind it. But I don't have young children, either. I've traveled a lot. For example, New York has a lot of homeless; you can't help it; they're everywhere. I think Edmonton is becoming like that with our homeless. It's a problem. But anyway I'm not afraid. I just go; if I need to go, I go, and it's OK.

Q: What are your projects for the future? Are you planning any other exhibitions?

EC: Nothing booked yet, but yes I have some ideas. I want to do something with writing, like incorporating writing into art, merging text and art together.

Q: What's the topic?

EC: The topic: I have a bunch of old diaries and I don't want to throw them away. So I'm thinking of using the pages somehow with paint or images, like a collage.

Q: Could you give a declarative sentence about the restaurant's name, etc.?

EC: My family's restaurant was called Szechuen Cuisine. We were located on 15525 Stony Plain Road. We opened in 1984 and ran it until approximately 2007.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

EC: No, not that I can think of.

[ END ]