



Window Space

Xpace Cultural Centre
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Natalie Mark and Sharon Ma

Bai Sun

July 5 - August 3, 2019

Situated in the Chinese-American restaurant are undocumented histories and mythologies that have affected entire generations of immigrants, but are often unacknowledged when one goes in to pick up their orange chicken take-out and fortune cookies. Generations of stories not memorialized in history textbooks reclaim the space, and are embedded everywhere in its atmosphere: in the languages harshly spoken in the kitchen, in the local radio station lightly playing in the background, and in the oil stained pages of a well-used Chinese calendar. The stories of love, loss, trauma, and family that the restaurant space holds are honored through Natalie Mark and Sharon Ma's installation, *Bai Sun*.

Roughly translated from Cantonese, *bai sun* means 'to honour the gods'. The act of honouring happens through an altar, typically flourished with incense and mandarin oranges, used as an offering to the gods and ancestors of one's family for luck, good fortune, and respect. Through handmade modeling clay oranges, baos, eggs, and other foods, the artists have created their own altar complete with fragrant incense. The illustrated calendar scroll, the main piece in the installation, references the scrolls often seen decorating Chinese-American restaurants. For the artists, the scroll holds plenty of

personal meanings, with memorabilia of their family's history of immigration, and of their lives as poor farmers in China and restaurant workers in Canada.

The prevalence of Chinese restaurants in North America stems from a long history of immigration. Though the history of Chinese immigration to Canada can be dated back into the late 1700s, the first major wave of Chinese immigrants came from parts of Southern China to build the Canadian Pacific Railway in the mid-1800s¹. After the completion of the railway, systemic barriers would later be put in place to discourage Chinese immigration to Canada, which forced poor Chinese labourers into ethnic enclaves (better known as Chinatowns) where they would start their own businesses- many of which were laundromats and restaurants since they required a low start-up cost.

Like many other children of immigrant parents, Mark and Ma grew up in a restaurant environment having worked in their uncle's Chinese restaurant as children in Winnipeg. Family is a central part of Chinese culture (a lingering effect of the prevalence of Confucianism in Chinese history²) so as with most Chinese owned small businesses, restaurants are typically family-run. Additionally, with childcare and daycare being expensive this often meant that children would go to work with their parents after school. Working in a Chinese restaurant meant families would spend much time together, furthering its importance.

Filial piety, another concept stemming from Confucianism, is the concept of deep intense respect for one's elders and ancestors. This concept of respect extends into religion and traditions as well. For example, in Chinese folk religion dead ancestors' spirits are considered to still exist in the living world³. As such, honouring them was still required as part of fulfilling filial piety. For this reason, it was common for houses to

¹ Yee, Paul. "History of Canada's Early Chinese Immigrants." *Library and Archives Canada*, April 19, 2017. Accessed June 25, 2019. <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/early-chinese-canadians/Pages/history.aspx>.

² Confucianism is a philosophy that centers on the importance of family and social harmony. Popular in ancient China, Confucianism's influence affected the way many East Asian countries shaped their cultures and traditions.

³ Nadeau, Randall (2010). "Divinity". In Nadeau, Randall L. (ed.). *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*. ISBN 9781444361971.

have altars, as a reminder of the presence of the deceased's spirits and the duty required to honour them.

But for the artists and many other Asian-Canadian children, *family* can be a sensitive topic to approach. Perhaps it is the culture clash, or the result of intergenerational trauma with roots in systemic oppression that causes conflict within Asian families, making honouring one's family a difficult task. Indeed, in a cozy tea shop in Toronto's own Chinatown, Natalie and Sharon explain to me that not many people they know *bai sun* anymore, and they believe it is a dying tradition⁴. Yet as a settler in this country, the artists find value in honouring their family and the labour they've worked, as it provides them with a sense of connection to their culture and history- one that isn't remembered in Canadian school curriculums.

It is worth noting that the Chinese restaurant lives as an oxymoron being both inauthentic for serving a mediated version of Chinese culture to non-Chinese people⁵, and completely authentic in its emergence from a long history of collective Chinese immigrant trauma and hardship. Parallels can be drawn to the way 2nd generation immigrant children navigate their identities, being a product of their two cultures. *Bai Sun* is the same: it may be a symbol of traditional Chinese culture, but it was made from the immigrant's perspective, one that is distant from China. It is this perspective who recognizes the importance of honouring the immigrant experience, so that the sacrifices made by the generations before them would be acknowledged and unforgotten, and so that they may hold onto a piece of culture as well.

- Amanda Low

⁴ Natalie Mark and Sharon Ma, in conversation with the author, June 21, 2019

⁵ Many foods served in Chinese-American restaurants are inspired by Canton Chinese cuisine, but had to be adapted to better suit Western palates. Dishes like fried rice and chop-suey are American inventions, and are not traditional Chinese foods.